RESEARCH ARTICLE

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AGAINST WIFE-BATTERY IN DANIEL MENGARA'S MEMA.

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Abstract

Women's empowerment, as a process of change is measured in terms of educational, economic and political achievements of women but its effectiveness in eradicating wife battery has not reached its apogee, in contemporary African marital homes, due to malice, individuality and lack of solidarity or union that govern the world of women/wives. Despite the established measure like denouncing violent husbands/men to the police, women/ wives especially in contemporary African women/wives, irrespective of their educational background, still find it aberrant to report a violent man/ husband so that he can duly be reprimanded. In fact, most married women, in Daniel Mengara's Mema (2003), have observed wife-battery and sought for strategic ways to subdue it without separating themselves from their oppressors, men/husbands. The aim of this article is to show how some female characters are endowed to do this. As exuded by the study, these women have proved that change cannot come anywhere but from women through the use of witchcraft, self help/ mutual aids, motherhood and wifehood, sisterhood and dialogue, these are the processes by which women are empowered to curb their men's/husbands' brutality, violence and oppression towards them. This article draws not only on the multidimensional approach, which defines empowerment as individual capacities and collective action to address inequalities, but also on the womanist trend, which advocates the survival and wholeness of all the people (male and female) in society.

Introduction:-
Women, as in wives, are according to time and space, victims of different forms of violence, physical violence especially in their marital home, in the African societies. As Olaifa (2014) notes, violence against women manifests itself in a myriad number of forms, one of the most obvious forms of violence is the category of physical violence. Wife battery is the commonest of the violence of this category. Men batter their wives for reasons ranging from insubordination to outright disobedience. Wife battery inflicts indelible injury on the woman in most cases as she often engages in a defenseless battle against her husband who would employ all available means to shut her up. Another form of wife battery is rape. Some men do rape their wives and they consider this despicable act legitimate (Olaifa, 2014:4).

Indeed, many scholars have identified among other causes of wife battery in poverty, patriarchy, socio-culturally accepted norms, religious belief, illiteracy, forced marriage, sexual inequality etc., and have come up with educational, economic and socio-cultural equality as sources of empowering women against wife battery (see Straus,

1976; Jewkes, 2002; Douki et al., 2003; Ammar, 2007 and Olaifa, 2014).However, the current article argues that measuring women's empowerment only in terms of educational, economic and political achievements of women without addressing the problems they face in their marital homes is limited or incomplete. A popular adage says that charity begins at home, in this sense, it can be put forth that women's empowerment begins with their individual and collective capacities in solving daily problems whether in their marital homes or in their societies at large. A very few research has actually been carried out to show this aspect of women's empowerment both literature and society. Drawing on a multidimensional approach of empowerment and the womanist theory, this article aims to show how some female characters in Daniel Mengara's *Mema* (2003), the novel under study, are empowered through such aspects as witchcraft, mutual aid and self-help, motherhood and wifehood, sisterhood and dialogue in order to curb wife battery and other forms of men's/husbands' brutality, violence and oppression towards them.

Theoretical Framework:-
Many scholars, especially feminist scholars, have pinpointed empowerment of women as the efficient way of eliminating oppressions facing women in the world. In this vein, Whitmore (1988:13) defines empowerment as "an interactive process through which people experience personal and social change, enabling them to take action to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives and the communities in which they live". Indeed, as argued by Luttrell et al. (2009:16), under the multidimensional approach, empowerment is defined in terms of both individual capacities and collective action to address inequalities. In this perspective, Schular (1986) (cited in Waghamode and Kalyan 2014:1) claims that "[e]mpowerment refers to the capacity to mobilize resources to produce beneficial social change". The foregoing clearly exudes that empowering an individual is to endow the individual with the capacity, power or influence over institutions like language, family, religion, school, politics, etc., that affect his/her life or society; s/he is endowed with the ability to act upon such institutions in such a way that inequalities and all forms of discrimination are curbed in society.

Society is made up of two categories of individuals: male and female. Womanist proponents generally contend that the two categories should be empowered to ensure the survivability of the entire society. According to Phillips (2006), womanism is derived from feminism. It is rooted in or draws on the African-American experience. It manifests itself generally in five overarching characteristics: 1°) it is anti-oppressionist; 2°) it is vernacular; 3°) it is non-ideological; 4°) it is communitarian; and 5°) it is spiritualized (Ibid: 26). It ensues to highlight that the multidimensional approach of empowerment and the womanist theory are complementary in that both advocate a balanced society; i.e., a society wherein the survival of both male and female individuals is guaranteed. That is why this paper combines both to explore how female characters are empowered in Daniel Mengara's *Mema* (2003).

Methodology:-
This paper draws on qualitative research method to closely examine how women are empowered against wife-battery in a contemporary literary text, *Mema* (2003). In addition, it draws on the multidimensional approach of empowerment and the womanist theory. From this perspective, the article discusses the processes of empowerment the female characters employ in the novel. The processes are witchcraft, mutual aid and self-help, motherhood and wifehood, sisterhood and dialogue.

Witchcraft as a Female Force:-
Post-colonial African women cannot be compared with pre-colonial African women in terms of reaction to male oppression. Indeed, immeasurable exposure of contemporary African women to male oppression in their marital homes has made most of them find out one way or the other to subdue the fatal situation without separating themselves from their oppressors, men/husbands. One of these ways is witchcraft. As Akujobi (2011:5) observes, "It is known that in life as in literature, the woman has been known to carry a lot of power within her, from personal explorations of the world of women's history [...]". Indeed, Mengara, in *Mema*, depicts witchcraft as women's prerogative. According to Nyabwari and Nkongekagema (2014:14), witchcraft is a powerful deterrent against evil intentions like stealing, incest and murder. It also has an educational function in that it keeps the norms and values of society alive. Unfortunately, in contemporary African society, the notion of witchcraft is most of the time attributed to evil due either to the influence of imported religions (Christianity, Islam, etc.) or lack of profound knowledge about its functioning power. There are actually positive and negative aspects of witchcraft, but the negative aspect of it is what present age Africans are exposed to. Mazrui (1993)(cited in Nyabwari and Nkongekagema, 2014:15) clarifies the role of the two types of witchcraft as perceived by some African communities in the following way: "In some African communities there is even a talk about positive and negative witchcraft. The

belief is that positive witchcraft is used to do good, cure diseases or solve problems, and negative witchcraft is used to do evil".

In this sense, there is urgent need to highlight the power of witchcraft in order to bring to limelight both its advantages and disadvantages to present age Africans. By the way, Mengara has underscored the positive and negative effects of witchcraft in African societies. In his fiction, he delineates two groups of human beings, largely women, who possess a supernatural power called witchcraft. These people are called '*beyem*'. While one of these groups uses their power to do good, the other group uses theirs for evil:

> The *beyem* themselves were divided into two groups. There were the good beyem, those who did not want to use their mystical might to harm others. Because they were good, their job was to protect the mimimyè [innocent people/ ordinary people] against the evil *beyem* (p. 58).

In the above, it is obvious that the owners of witchcraft use it for their own advantages. Witchcraft is considered as a trait of black womanism. As Ogunyemi observes, "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom"(Ogunyemi in Phillips, 2006: 28). It ensues to note that a literary work on black women should include this social practice otherwise such a work would not be complete. Witchcraft is a process of empowering women in literature; it is meant to operate a social change. Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) (cited by Lord and Hutchison, 1993:3) asserts that "[…] empowerment is being understood [by contemporary African communities] as a process of change". The quest for change will forcefully bring about challenging or dismantling the status quo or the set of established norms or taboos (Allagbé and Allagbé, 2015) or social practices, attitudes, perceptions and relationships as well as the ways they are represented. For instance, domestic violence is one of the problems women have always faced. To cope with the advert effects of this social practice, some women in *Mema* make recourse to witchcraft; they use it to tame and subdue their husbands' will or manhood:

> It was customary, […] for women to use witchcraft to control their husbands' will in order to prevent them from looking at other women or marrying themselves a second wife. If the husband dared to go to another woman, his manhood would refuse to stand up to perform its duties. It would stand only when used with the woman who controlled it with witchcraft (p. 33).

It should be noted that, through the use of witchcraft, the women in Mengara's novel are able to help their men/husbands control their exposure to sexual transmitted diseases like AIDS, gonorrhea, herpes etc., which may result from men's/husbands' infidelity to their women/wives. In addition to this, the married women in the novel use witchcraft to reduce psycho-affective problems, which are the corollaries of divorce whose repercussions on men, women and children are highlighted below:

> Les problèmes psychoaffectifs que pose le divorce ont des répercussions négatives sur les enfants et leur éducation. Les enfants peuvent devenir des délinquants, la femme peut devenir une femme de mœurs légère et l'homme peut se mettre à passer d'une femme à une autre (UNFPA, 2005:41).

> Psycho-affective problems that divorce causes can have negative repercussions on children as well as on their education. The children can become criminals, the woman can become weak manners and the man can develop the bad habit of moving from one woman to another (Translation ours).

As can be seen above, through the married women's use of witchcraft, Mengara has empowered the married women in his novel in order to expose such patriarchal practices as the infidelity of men/husbands and their adverse effects on women as well as children. However, while he does this, he actually makes the woman/wife the man/husband of the marital home. An instance of this is shown through Mema, the female protagonist whose name the novel bears. She is fore-grounded in the marital context at the expense of her husband:

> My mother […] ran every single thing in the hut with heavy hand and a big
> mouth. Pepa [father] […] had been turned into a mere woman in his hut. He
> had become an empty shell. A soundless tom-tom. A lion with broken legs
> who could no longer bounce and pounce (p. 32).

The use of witchcraft by women in the novel has helped them control their men's/husbands' manhood; they use it to engineer or dismantle their male-counterparts' source of authority and, by so doing, they subtly avert the agony of patriarchal behavior and practices. Unlike Mema, old Akouma negatively uses her mystical power to do evil (p. 60), which is deplorable anyway. From the foregoing, it is obvious that witchcraft, as a force, is neither good nor bad, neither positive nor negative; it is the usage an individual, who possesses it, makes of it that really determines its nature. Indeed, Mengara has revealed, through the aforementioned women, that witchcraft can help women solve their (marital) problems. However, the solution may be positive or negative depending on the user's intention. So the use of witchcraft by women in the novel denotes their empowerment in a multidimensional way. Also, the fact of using witchcraft in a multidimensional way confirms that witchcraft is a reliable source of power. Kabeer (1994:229) claims that "Multidimensional nature of power suggests that empowerment strategies for women must build on 'the power within' as a necessary adjunct to improving their ability to control resources to determine agendas and make decisions".

Mutual Aid and Self-help:-
Lange (2008:3) notes that society's views of women have changed and gender roles are not as strictly enforced [...]. But there are problems such as disputes, individualism, lack of mutual aid and self-help etc., governing the world of women today. As a consequence, the problems being unsettled make many contemporary African women suffer in silence, in their marital homes, from domestic violence, despite their economic and political achievements. Phillips claims that mutual aid and self-help are everyday "do it yourself methods that involve coming together as a group at the grassroots level to solve a common problem. Mutual aid and self-help rely on the principles of strength in numbers, wisdom gained from life experience, self-education and democratic knowledge sharing" (Phillips 2006: 28-29).

Indeed, Mengara has confirmed in *Mema* (2003) that the efficient way to put an end to wife battery or ill-treatment or domestic violence is by mutual aid and self-help. This is shown through two groups of married women in the novel. The first group of married women is composed of Biloghe, Akoma, Nkulanveng's wife etc., and the second group is only Alphonsine. The first group has really understood that the elimination of wife battery, a form of domestic violence, can never be solved if wives do not come together in order to share experience and take actions to solve their problems. In the novel, these women have come together to exert change through mutual aid and self-help. Pretto and Pavesi state that:

> The expression "self-help" actually indicates that a person acknowledges
> that he/she has a problem, and that this person decides to take action to try
> to solve it […]. On the other hand, the type of experience that is made
> within the group is a "mutual aid" experience, that is to say, an exchange of
> help in order to improve one's existential condition. This happens only
> when the members of a group share the same needs in order to solve a
> problem: The exchange of help is possible in this way because all the
> participants can understand what the other is going through or was through,
> and what are his/her needs (2012: 944).

Accordingly, Mengara depicts the aspect of self-help through Biloghe who is ill-treated by her husband, Ntutume and runs to her parents' home. Her determination to put an end to the brutality of her husband on her makes her spend many months with her parents: It has now been moons almost as many as the fingers on both of my hands, no one has budged a finger to go and get her back (p.17-18). In reality, it is commonplace to see women running to find refuge in their parents' home whenever they are brutalized by their men/husbands in African setting. But Biloghe's strength in self-help has outdone the traditional ways in which women suffer in silence without taking any tangible actions because they want to be good women as Fonchingong quoting Emecheta's criticism of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* would put it:

> The good woman, in Achebe's portrayal drinks the dreg after her husband.
> In *Arrow of God*, when the husband is beating his wife, the other women
> stand saying it's enough, it's enough. In his view, that kind of subordinate
> woman is the good woman (Emecheta in Fonchingong, 2006: 139).

Unlike the women/wives in Achebe's representation, the women in Mengara's novel have the sense of mutual aid and self-help. For example, Biloghe, through mutual aid and/or self-help is able to appeal to other women/wives; she is able to gain the support of her sisters to solve her marital spousal ill-treatment. This exudes thus that, via mutual aid and self-help, women/wives have been able to control their men/husbands. Also, it is mutual aid among the women/wives in the novel under scrutiny that has brought Ntutume and his people to go and beg Biloghe to come back home. They are able to do this by observing a protracted strike in their different marital homes:

> And so would fall upon the village a period of doomed silence when wives
> would not want to speak to their husbands. Worse still, at night wives
> would turn their backs to their men or simply leave the conjugal bed to
> sleep on the mat on the bedroom floor. Food would still be cooked, but the
> reluctant expression on the women's faces foretold nothing good (p. 15-16).

In the same token, mutual aid/ self-help has made Biloghe's mother breach and question the traditional custom or norm that holds that mothers should not have a say in issues related to their children. This is shown through her presence in the meeting held for the settlement of the dispute between Ntutume, her son in-law and Biloghe, her daughter:

> Besides, I am the mother of that very woman who was beaten in her body
> and humiliated in her soul by that man sitting over there. So, I will speak. I
> will say to my son sitting over there-she pointed at Ntutume, Biloghe's
> husband- "I will say to him that when I gave him my child, I did not say to
> him, "Take her. I have sold her to you and you can do whatever you want
> with her." No. That is not what I said. I said to him, "Here is my child. I am
> giving her to you so that you can take good care of her as your wife." I
> know that a husband may sometimes get angry and his wife, but who
> declared that this should become a custom of our land? (p.28).

As a matter of fact, men/husbands are disarmed of their patriarchal behaviours vis à vis their wives through mutual aid and self-help among women: "Faced with this womanly assault, the man would simply shut up and look, speechless and overwhelmed, at this woman of his who had obviously elected to turn his life into a living hell" (p.16).Contrary to the first group of women/wives, Mengara, through another female character named Alphonsine, shows how wives/women can suffer if they do not have access to or underrate mutual aid/self-help, which is a source of female power. Indeed, Mengara has shown that one of the obstacles that may hinder women's empowerment is an individualistic life. Alphonsine belongs to working class as her husband, Zula, but this does not prevent her husband from maltreating her: "He [Zula] would push her in the bedroom, lock the door behind him and start whipping…he would insult her, after whipping the poor woman to death" (p.100). In so doing, Mengara actually defies the belief that women's occupation of the same working class as their male counterparts is the only measure of women's empowerment against domestic violence. Moreover, compared to Biloghe, Aphonsine suffers in silence due to her non-adherence to mutual aid and self-help:

> […] within self-help/mutual aid groups, the empowerment process
> represents a true development process by which individuals who are in
> trouble gain a better control over their lives and their environment,
> improving significantly their quality of life with positive effects on the
> group they belong to and the surrounding community (Pretto and Pavesi,
> 2012: 943).

As a result, Alphonsine is limited in her decision of defending herself against Zula's ill-treatment of her due to the fact she does not get mutual aid anywhere. As the homodiegetic narrator observes,

At times she would gather her courage with both of her hands and leave
him. But then, after a few weeks, she would always come back. Zula would
not even bother to go and beg her back since she always came back on her
own when she realized that he would not come. And so she suffered in
silence (p.100).

Motherhood and Wifehood as Female Power:-

Women play an indubitable role in the life of men in particular, in the continuation/multiplication of human species
and in the harmonious function of the world. Indeed, without women, there would not be equilibrium in terms of
procreation, first-hand education of children and feeding. In this vein, this paper aims to show how women rule the
world of man because in one way or the other, a boy who has grown up to become a man is being given birth to,
given first-hand education and fed by a woman. This female power, in the life experience of man, continues at three
phases as man relates with women as a mother/wife before and during his marital life:

> In each phase, female power is established over him [man] through his peculiar
> weakness in that stage of his life. Motherpower is established over him while he is a
> helpless infant. Bridepower holds sway over him through his great need for a womb
> in which to procreate; if he didn't feel this need, he wouldn't put himself into the
> power of any owner of a womb. Wifepower is established over him through his
> craving to appear as lord […] (Chinweizu, 1990:12).

In this way, Mengara has empowered his female characters by focusing on female power as mother and wife in
order to subdue patriarchal violence against women in his novel, *Mema* (2003). The female power he has used lies in
what Chinweizu has pointed out as motherpower: the power a mother has upon her infants whether male/female.
Notably, the biological and African context meaning of the word 'mother/woman' is considered here. Biologically,
women are the ones who bear in their womb and give birth to infants. By so doing, this wonderful birth power gives
them authority over humanity. As Capo-Chichi notes, "La femme est le symbole de la vie, puisque l'humanité tout
entière est engendrée par la femme. Porteuse de vie, elle a le prestige d'être appelée Nneka; ce nom signie: "la mère
est suprême" (2008:54). Woman is the symbol of life since the whole humanity is begotten by woman. As the
bearer of life, she has the prestige to be called Nneka; this name means: "Mother is supreme" (Translation ours).

Mengara, as a womanist writer, has shown the aspect of the supreme power of mother which is a true African
cultural reality through old Meleng (Mother of Biloghe's mother. She is a grandmother to Biloghe) and Biloghe's
mother. Mengara has used the supreme power of mother to correct distorted image African women. He has used it to
re-establish women into their right to decision-making in the patriarchal setting of the Gabonese society. For
instance, old Meleng's speech is considered as the final and uncontestable when she counter-attacks Nkulanveng
during a dispute-settling sitting for the return of Biloghe, her grand-daughter. Though Nkulanveng, the speech
master, tries to dominate old Meleng with his charisma of "male power"(Chinweizu, 1990:22), Meleng actually uses
her female force as a mother to undo the riddle of Nkulanveng. As the homodiegetic character narrates, "His pride
[Nkulanveng's pride] had to be put aside, above all because he had been vanquished, not by a peer, but by an old
mother who still had a lot to teach people of his generation"(p. 25). Through this portrayal, Mengara has confirmed
what Chinweizu further says concerning female power: "…female power is like the sun–steady, quiet and
uncontestable" (1990:22). In fact, not only can Nkulanveng contest what old Meleng has said but the entire people,
who are present at the meeting, also attest what she has said:

> A roar of voices saluted her last words. Ah! These old women …No one can
> be cleverer than they are. Where did they learn all these tricks of knowledge?
> Well, you know, never play with those old people. After all, didn't they give
> birth to us? Yes? So why expect younger people to surpass them in wit?
> (Ibid).

In the same way, Biloghe's mother exercises motherpower on her son in-law, Ntutume, by warning him never to ill-
treat her daughter anymore. During her reproach of her son in-law, she threatens to return the dowry he has paid for
her daughter and motherly opens his eyes on the fact that he can never provide her daughter if he kills her with his
brutality. As a reality, the motherpower is uncontestable power over men because the particularity of this female
power branch is to make men reason about the consequences of their brutality over women. As observed in the

novel, when mothers speak in the gathering, their words are uncontestable and profound. Akujobi (2011:6) argues that "With motherhood, a woman is considered blessed, she acquires a higher status in society, she is respected and mythologized". Accordingly, this is shown through Biloghe's mother when she warns her son in-law in the gathering of Biloghe's people and Ntutume's people who come from different two communities: "As the two communities parted that day, everyone went away pondering over the words of Biloghe's mother, words that symbolized the respect that men and women used to show to one another […]" (p. 29). The foregoing exudes a balanced portrayal of both male and female powers. Through this balanced portrayal of the male and female powers, Mengara has confirmed Nwapa's argument that "the lives of man and woman are interdependent; there must be mutual understanding and respect between them" (Nwapa in Akporobaro, 2010:372).

Accordingly, through Mengara's ardent desire to correct "the social structure in a male-dominated environment" (Koussouhon and Dossoumou, 2015:132), he has shown the reality about another branch of female power which lies in a wife's roles. Indeed, wives are female human beings who are married to men. They are legally married to men and may choose to have children or not. By the way, Mengara has portrayed in some of his female characters as those who are traditionally married. That is, their parents are informed and have collected the pride-price from their husbands. Since this is an African cultural reality which gives values to married women, they do not allow themselves to be carried away or to be enslaved with this esteem. An instance of this is shown in the novel when women married to the village decide to put an end to men/husbands' ill-treatment of their wives. The women agree to go on a protracted strike in their different marital homes. In the novel, as a mode of strike, a wife called Akoma cooks and serves her husband's food without water. Though she normally serves food and water to her husband on his dining table, the strike has made her not to serve food with the water. When the husband wants to claim his lordship role over her, she clearly lets him know that the fact that a man has paid the dowry of a woman does not make the woman a slave or an object: "Ah! You think I am your slave? I do not remember my father telling you when you paid the marriage n'sua to my people fifteen mimbuh ago, that he had sold me to you as a slave. If you want to drink, go and get your water yourself" (p.16).

The foregoing portrayal really counters first generation male writers' depiction of wives. In early male writings, women are painted as dancing to every clap of their husbands; they are depicted as voiceless and treated as objects and as senseless and incapable of making decision. Merum (cited in Capo-Chichi 2008:71) observes the following as regards the women portrayed byAchebe: "La femme peinte par Achebe n'est rien d'autre qu'une beni-oui-oui qui obéit à l'homme au doigt et à l'œil". [The woman Achebe has portrayed is nothing else than a blessed yes-yes woman who obeys man (husband) at a click of the fingers and at a twinkle of the eye] (Translation ours).It follows from this to note that Mengara has shown the female power of his female characters, as wives, in order to prove wrong some feminist thinkers who think marriage is a way of enslaving women. For instance, "Emecheta sees the motif of marriage as a form of slavery for woman"(Fonchingong, 2006:140). Although the fact of marrying a woman to man is not everything, it gives the married woman a kind of power over the man/husband especially when it is well contracted. Chinweizu (1990:22) corroborates the wifepower when he says that:

> […] every man has as boss his wife, or his mother, or some other woman in his life, men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world. Thus, contrary to appearances, woman is boss, the overall boss of the world.

As a matter of fact, Mengara, as a womanist writer, has confirmed the powers of wives in ruling the world of men who rule the world through wives' success, without arms in hand, in bringing their men/husbands who sometimes are authoritarians to summon an urgent meeting for the return of Biloghe. In other words, the outcome of the wives' victory over their men/husbands is what has led Ntutume's family to appoint Nkulanveng, the speech master, to be the speaker of Ntutume's people before Biloghe's people in the negotiation for Biloghe's return. Also, the wives break down the egoism of men/husbands. This can be noticed in the speech of Nkulanveng, the speaker of Ntutume's people before Biloghe's parents: "[…] today, we have braved our fears to appear before you at last. Isn't that the most important thing? We have come to beg back our daughter and wife. And we are doing so openly. Is there any shame in begging for what you have lost in foolishness?" (p. 26).

In a nutshell, through motherhood and wifehood as female power, Mengara has confirmed Ogunyemi's conclusion when comparing the power of the black woman and that of the white woman in a patriarchal society: "The black woman is not as powerless in the black world as the white woman in the white world […]" (Ogunyemi in Phillips,

2006:29). Therefore, the female power as mother/wife is not used with violence but with calmness and steadiness to suppress male violence against women who are their mothers, sisters and wives. Indeed, the female power should be reinforced in order to reduce patriarchal oppression against women in contemporary African societies. As pointed out earlier on in the case of Biloghe, women's unity is strong weaponry that contemporary African women can draw on to make men comply with whatever requests they have. They then need to act and stop being acted upon. Actually, through the role mothers and wives play in defending Biloghe against patriarchal injustice, Mengara seems to counter Capo-Chichi's observation that: "[…] les femmes sont au courant de ce qui se passe dans leur société même si elles font semblant de ne rien savoir" (2008:62).[women are aware of what is happening in their society even though they pretend not to know] (Translation ours).

Sisterhood as Female Force:-
Empowerment of women is most of the time measured in terms of women's equality in education, working-opportunity, equal rights etc., with their male-counterparts, in a society. But Mengara has shown through his female characters that women's empowerment is not yet complete if there is no space for sisterhood among contemporary African women to end patriarchal injustice. Indeed, the call for women's sisterhood has been a common goal of womanist or feminist scholars even though there are problems of class and race that divide them. As observed by the pioneers of womanist struggle such as Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, sisterhood of women is a collective way of fighting all forms of patriarchal oppression. As Ampadu notes,

> Much of Walker's *Color Purple* prominently displays women who have dared to engage in a struggle for their own self-respect and dignity, a struggle often achieved collectively through the bonding and sisterhood of women.(Ampadu, 2006:8).

Following this, Ogunyemi shows the importance of sisterhood through her definition of the black womanism: "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideas of black life […] Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a 'brother' or a 'sister' or a 'father' or a 'mother' to the other" (Ogunyemi in Phillips, 2006:28).Likewise, one can notice the similarity in the definition of sisterhood of women which is a collective women's struggle against patriarchal injustice in Hooks (2000:15): "Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes". In reality, not all women believe in the principle of sisterhood due to many reasons. Among these reasons, there is a problem of feminist school of thought among contemporary African women. Despite the division among the feminist and womanist struggles, women who stick to the sisterhood principle often succeed in defending themselves in patriarchal setting of their society. In most cases, some of these women are illiterates and, in the other side, some are educated.

Mengara, through his female characters such as Alphonsine, Mema and other women has questioned the hypothesis that qualifies a woman's educational and economic achievements as the only way of eliminating women ill-treatments in contemporary African societies. Therefore, he has developed the theory of sisterhood as a practical way of reducing/eliminating women's maltreatment in marital homes. To show the limitation of the first hypothesis, Mengara has depicted Alphonsine as a married woman who is educated and belongs to a working class of women. In this domain, she benefits from equal opportunity of employment as her male-counterparts in Beyok (in the city). Nevertheless, with her educational and economic empowerment, she suffers ill-treatment from her husband, Zula who is also educated and works in the city: "He would push her in the bedroom, lock the door behind him and start whipping. '*Salope*'he would insult her, after whipping the poor woman to death" (p.100). It should be noted here that Alphonsine is versed in western ways of doing things but she is limited. Through Alphonsine, Mengara has attempted to show the limitation of western educated and working class women who live an individualistic life. He has depicted Alphonsine's deplorable condition to show how deplorable women will be if they continue to live in division, thinking that they can isolatedly fight against patriarchal oppression. On the other hand, Mengara has proved the second hypothesis which lies on sisterhood as a female force in struggling against men's injustice over women. He shows how married women form a strong shield among themselves in rising against spousal maltreatment in marital homes, and this begins with consciousness-raising: "Before women could change patriarchy we had to change ourselves; we had to raise our consciousness (Hooks 2000:7).

In his novel, Mengara depicts consciousness-raising as well as its power on some of his female characters. These women hold a secret meeting in order to claim the return of one them, Biloghe whose husband, Ntutume has

brutalized and has sought refuge in her parents' home. The outcome of the women's struggle against the injustice of Biloghe's husband towards her is what makes the wives in the novel observe the strike in their marital homes. As the narrator notes, "Women would be spotted holding secret meetings in their peanut fields, and they would return home in the afternoon doing no work at all" (p.16). Unlike Alphonsine, Biloghe benefits from the advantage of sisterhood in terms of justice because the solidarity of wives and mothers saves her from patriarchal oppression coming from her husband. As for Alphonsine, the narrator concludes that she suffers in silence:

> At times she would gather her courage with both of her hands and leave him.
> But then, after a few weeks, she would always come back. Zula would not
> even bother to go and beg her back since she always came back on her own
> when she realized that he would not come. And so she suffered in silence
> (p.100).

The quote above can prompt an informed reader to raise a certain number of questions as regards Alphonsine's suffering in silence: 1) where are Alphonsine's parents?; 2) has Alphonsine really got married to Zula according to the law and custom of her society?; 3) has she chosen to suffer in silence due to her love for her children? In fact, Mengara has left his reader to imagine the answers to the questions above. If one has to answer the question about the whereabouts of Alphonsine's parents, there is a strong tendency that one will end up in an utter silence, and the silence may symbolically imply the death of Alphonsine's parents. But even if one's parents are dead in an African context, there are always relatives to stand in for them. As regards the second question, the writer has left the reader on the roadside. All the reader is told in the novel is that "Zula's wife is a *bilop*, a woman who came from a people who spoke a language different from ours. The rest of the family could communicate with her only in the language that the Fulassi[French] had brought from their land and taught us" (p. 98). Whether Alphonsine is properly married to Zula or not is pending.

But the only aspect on which one can relate the reason why Alphonsine has accepted to suffer is the two children that Zula has got in his "previous marriage which had not worked out"(p. 98). Indeed, it is African reality for mothers to suffer because of their children but Alphonsine's individualistic life gives birth to her suffering and that of the children in the hands of Zula: "And so Zula would get angry, grab his belt and whip us mercilessly for taking a shower without soap. Sometimes, it would be his wife's turn to suffer the wrath of her drunken husband" (p.100). In view of the foregoing, sisterhood, as female force through consciousness-raising, can be argued to help women know their rights in order to eliminate patriarchal violence against them. Hooks (2000:8) observes that "through consciousness raising women gained the strength to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at home". Notably, in the novel, Alphonsine is far from this reality. She is not associated with other women. She only concentrates her strength on her work and suffers in silence. Sisterhood has helped other women/wives in the novel to choose common objectives and mode of action so as to succeed the motive of their strike in their different marital homes. In fact, in the novel, to demonstrate the power of sisterhood, wives have decided to ask their men/husbands if they really love them in order to force them to discuss with Ntutume, a husband who has ill-treated his wife and lags behind in going to beg her back from her parents. The narrator points out the fidelity of each wife in observing the strike in their home as follows: "Night would come again, and from hut to hut the same questions would be asked over and over again" (p. 16).

Through sisterhood principle, women of different age-groups in *Mema* are empowered to stand up against all forms of oppressions coming from their men/husbands in their marital homes. Given the role these women play, they can be labeled womanists. According to Alice Walker, a 'womanist' means a woman who is committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female (cited by Ogunyemi in Phillips, 2006:28).Unlike these womanists who seek for the well-being of their society including children, Alphonsine is unable to defend herself let alone the children, and by so doing, she indirectly participates in her husband's cruelty and violation of the children's right to feeding: "They would leave us with no food to eat while they were away.[…]. When we came home at noon, we had nothing to eat. When school ended in the late afternoon, we came to an empty and foodless house" (p.98). It is obvious in the foregoing that Alphonsine's inability to protect and give a good caring to the children has confirmed one of the weaknesses of measuring women's empowerment in contemporary Africa only through parity between men and women:

> Even in contemporary Africa where most women are now more equipped and empowered, the traditional care-giving, home-making and nurturing roles of women in the African family which formed the basis of their identity as wives and mothers are gradually been abandoned, as they have become increasingly involved in new roles and relations outside the home (Taiwo, 2010:229).

Accordingly, Alphonsine's failure to associate her working status, educational and economic achievements with her role as a wife/mother in her family has led her children to be wayward in that they steal people's bottles at night: [...]we [Zula's children and their cousin] would eagerly await the night. Once assured that Zula was snoring deeply, we would sneak out of the house and go and steal the bottles we had located during the day(p. 100). As a matter of fact, it is true that children's first education comes from their father and mother but when parents, especially the mother, fail in this aspect, the children are exposed to danger because they may copy the wrong education of the society in which they live. Both Zula and Alphonsine have failed in educating their children because they are occupied with their works: "Zula and his wife Alphonsine more or less left it to us to survive on our own. They both leave for work in the morning and come back only very late in the evening. They would leave us with no food to eat while they were away" (p.98). The foregoing observation is the savage consequence of modernism in Africa. The children are left on their own because there is nobody to supervise them: "Because Zula's sons and I had no elder to supervise us during those long school days, we had to invent ways of surviving on our own. When it was still daylight, we would tour our neighborhood in search of empty beer and soda bottles to sell to bars" (p.100).

Indeed, it is true that "one of the eight Millennium Development Goals – MDG3 – is to promote gender equality and empower women"(Fielding, 2013:2), but many scholars have suggested to amalgamate women's traditional and modern values as wife and mother in teaching and catering for their children in order to save the children from social vices. As Taiwo (2010:237) suggests,

> The call here is not to go back to the traditional African past where women possessed the power that binds society together, rather there is the need to recast the traditional order by incorporating some viable traditional values with modern realities for the good of contemporary society. In spite of the new increased social and economic empowerment of the contemporary African woman, her traditional roles as wife and mother must not be abandoned or neglected. Such neglects have caused the society with the existence of various social vices. The key role the traditional African women played in teaching of children social, ethical and moral values helped to maintain a high level of morality in the traditional society. It is therefore important that the contemporary African woman braces up to this challenge.

In line with the above, Mengara has incorporated the two settings alongside with two categories of women in his fictional world. He has painted Alphonsine as an empowered woman in Beyok (city). He has shown Alphonsine's weakness of not merging her educational and socio-economic empowerment with her role as a wife and mother, and this is obvious in her children's lack of social, ethical and moral values; they are not educated at all. Unlike Alphonsine, Mema is depicted as someone who has braced both modern and traditional roles, though she is not formally educated. But she knows the good deeds of formal education. That is why she allows her son Elang Sima to go and further his studies in the city, he stays with his tutor Zula Mebiang for a period of five years or so. Notably, Mema, who lives in a village, is empowered in decision-making in her household. She spends more time in educating her children. This is shown when her son, Elang Sima, has to go and stay with Zula in the city in order to start school. Mema keeps on telling Elang, her son that: "I want you to be my Ozuga Zame [the protecting force] [...] will you remember, my son? Will you remember? (p. 84). By the way, Mengara has depicted the limitation of measuring women's empowerment in educational and economic achievements without the aspect of women's empowerment in terms of household decision-making and political solidarity.

Dialogue:-
In the world, especially in Africa, there is a problem of conflict which creates a kind of destabilization of the development and harmonious living of people. In fact, the causes of conflicts in the world may be traced back to "weak institutions, identity-based animosities, and power struggle" (Aall, 2015:1-4). Accordingly, alongside with problems facing Africa is domestic violence against women which if not well-handled can bring about disharmony

between men and women and the relationship with their children. However, the foregoing has been the domain of concern for the womanist scholars such as Alice Walker, Ogunyemi, Hudson Weems, Phillips etc., in social transformation and survival of the wholeness of entire people men, women and children(Walker, 1983; Ogunyemi, 1985; Weems, 1993; Phillips 2006). Dialogue is used by women, as a process among others, in solving the problem of domestic violence. As Orjinta et al. observe,

> When there is complaint, dialogue and settlement is preferred to confrontation. Obviously, this method is social and historically based and therefore, is not contextual. The womanist method is originally African and considers man and women as complementary (2013:11).

Indeed, without dialoguing one cannot read what is in the mind of an individual. Dialogue facilitates problem-solving among individuals and serves a means of interconnecting people. Phillips seems to agree with this view when she writes that "Dialogue is a means by which people express and establish both connection and individuality. Dialogue permits negotiation, reveals standpoint, realizes existential equality, and shape social reality" (2006:27).Mengara actually uses dialogue, as a means of social transformation, among the majority of the male and female characters in his novel, *Mema* with the view of solving domestic violence. Khan states that domestic violence that:

> […] includes violence perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members, and manifested through: *Physical abuse* such as slapping, beating, arm twisting, stabbing, strangling, burning, choking, kicking, threats with an object or weapon, and murder. It also includes traditional practices harmful to women such as female genital mutilation and wife inheritance (the practice of passing a widow, and her property, to her dead husband's brother). *Sexual abuse* such as coerced sex through threats, intimidation or physical force, forcing unwanted sexual acts or forcing sex with others. *Psychological abuse* which includes behaviour that is intended to intimidate and persecute, and takes the form of threats of abandonment or abuse, confinement to the home, surveillance, threats to take away custody of the children, destruction of objects, isolation, verbal aggression and constant humiliation (2000:2).

It is clear in the foregoing that domestic violence is highly detrimental to all the stakeholders in a family and those of society at large. Hence it needs to be combated, and one of the means womanist scholars advocate is dialogue. In the novel under study, dialogue has been used by majority of married women as a social transformation and this has extended to the men. That is, there are different types of dialogue in the novel: wife to wife dialogue, husband to husband dialogue and mothers in-law to parents' in-law dialogue. Dialogue has been contended to be the locale where tension and connection can be present simultaneously; it is the site for struggle and love (Phillips, 2006:27). In this sense, Mengara has shown through the wife to wife dialogue how married women can build a stronghold for themselves when they put aside malice and face together the oppressing force. This has been shown through the shared grievances wives put forth when one of their fellows is ill-treated by her husband: "[…] the women would stand in silence. On their cheeks would flow the tears of the unspeakable sadness that now gripped them. Together, they would mourn, cursing those evil men who had no honour left in them and who would go to great lengths to ridicule their wives (p. 14).

The wife to wife dialogue has brought about consciousness-raising and has also helped majority of wives, in the novel, to speak and act in a common way in order to address issues of domestic violence in their marital homes. By so doing, this has made each wife in the novel to observe a strike in her marital home in order to claim for the return of Biloghe, a fellow wife whose husband has ill-treated and who has found a refuge in her parents' home. As a modus operandi, each wife with one voice at night asks her husband if he really loves her and this act is observed by majority of the wives in their households (p.16). In this way, Mengara has tried to depict the real ground where traditional African husband and wife use to settle marital problems between each other. As a result, the success of the wives' dialogue has brought about husband to husband dialogue because the voice of the wives has made them win the heart of their husbands. And call for their husbands' intervention in order to speak to Ntutume, for Biloghe's return: "If you really love me like you say, why have you not told all the husbands of this village to go and fetch Ntutume's wife?" (p.17).

Indeed, through the wives dialoguing with their husbands, Mengara is trying to show how important the role women/wives play as mediators is in solving the conflicts facing the African continent. On the one hand, this can be seen in the fact that each husband has to meet other husbands in order to plan and go and fetch Ntutume's wife. On the other hand, it fosters peace among husbands/men because each husband will have to reconcile with others, if there is any offence, before they can go and beg back Biloghe. This cooperative attitude of the husbands is the fruit of relationship building and is identity-based (Saunders, 2001; Kelman, 1996; Aall, 2015). In this vein, dialogue is built on and/or creates interpersonal and peaceful relationship among husbands/men, as seen through Nkulanveng's presence, as a speaker for Ntutume's people. Also through dialogue wives/women have been able to disarm husbands/men of their authoritarian habits before Biloghe's parents (p. 26).Another aspect of dialogue is seen through the mothers' in-law (Biloghe's mother and grandmother) to parents' in-law dialogue. In reality, Mengara has broken the representational myth of ignoring or backgrounding mothers when there is an issue related to their children. In the novel, he has fore-grounded Biloghe's mother and grandmother, Meleng in that they intervene in the medzo (meeting) held between the people of Ntutume and those of Biloghe's, in order to settle the dispute between Ntutume and Biloghe. On one the hand, Meleng, the grandmother of Biloghe outdoes the riddle of Nkulanveng, the speech master and also the speaker for Ntutume's people in an open debate for Biloghe and Ntutume's reconciliation. In reality, the wisdom of Meleng has helped in solving the dispute, as her counterpart, Nkulanveng openly acknowledges this: "We have heard you, mother, Nkulanveng began. Wisdom has spoken through your mouth and we all know wisdom is sacred" (p. 25). On the other hand, Mengara has encoded the womanist ideology and subsequently underpinned the power behind political solidarity through the intervention of Biloghe's mother. Biloghe's mother in her intervention has shown a keen sense of political solidarity towards her daughter by warning her son in-law, Ntutume never to lay his hands on her daughter, Biloghe(p.28).

In a nutshell, dialogue is a powerful social transformation used by the married women in *Mema* (2003) to reduce domestic violence. It is through dialogue that wives have been able to disarm heartless men/husbands like Ntutume and show them that women/wives are not mere objects that can be manipulated anyhow. Indeed, where there is no dialogue there is persistent violence, hatred, malice, conflict, etc. Mengara has engaged women in a social dialogue among themselves and their male counterparts so as to create viable African societies. Also, he has shown how great it will be to end domestic violence if women put aside their egoism and malice in order to dialogue and sensitize one another on problems related to them and their nations. Accordingly, he has given voice to wives (women) and mothers to show how diplomatic they will be if they are associated in conflict management in contemporary African societies. As Olaifa notes,

> Women keep the future of their societies and communities at heart when they participate in peace negotiations. They think ahead and seek to provide a conducive, living environment for their future generations. Their interest in the society is larger and broader compared to their male counterparts whose negotiations predicates on immediate gains in terms of authority and power (2014:5).

Conclusion:-
As a conclusion, through the multidimensional approach of empowerment and womanist theory, we have shown how women/wives have been able to fight against domestic violence, as in wife-battery by using witchcraft, mutual aid and self-help, motherhood and wifehood and dialogue. In the novel under study, Mengara (the author of the novel) has qualitatively shown through his female characters that empowerment of women cannot be achieved only in terms of educational and economic achievements of women but through union and solidarity among women/wives as in sisterhood, so women have to join hands in eliminating negative patriarchal shortcomings in their marital homes and society.

In this vein, he has shown the weakness of women like Alphonsine who have adopted the western individualistic lifestyle and their inability to merge their working status with their role as wives/mothers. Such women are really ill-treated and battered, and they suffer in silence in their world. Besides, Mengara has exuded the beneficial advantages women as wives and mothers can obtain through solidarity, union and sisterhood, if they put aside their differences and join hands together so as to share experience, design a common objective and harness their female power to end patriarchal violence, brutality and oppression.

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