

African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender

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By

Sadia Zulfiqar

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INTRODUCTION: *SANI BAAT*—THROWING VOICE¹

If we don't tell our stories, hailstones will continue to fall on our heads,
Thrown by fathers for the children to see—for we are not good women,
Thrown by Imams, by a judge's decree—for we are not good wives,
Thrown by other women in our husbands' lives
As they come in the morning cradling his children
Calling us witch, barren, bitch
And we find something to tie the chest with;
Challenging words to hurl back in battle,
And partners to hold us anyway,
Through the things we struggle against.²

Prominence of Women in African Oral Traditions

According to Obioma Nnaemeka, in African oral traditions women were highly visible not only as performers but also as producers of knowledge, particularly regarding oral literature's educational relevance and moral obligations.³ Researchers in the field of African oral tradition have

¹ I am here referring to the Wolof oral tradition *Sani Baat*, which literally means “throw in.” For Mary Modupe Kolawole, the advent of women's writing is a form of “voice throwing” to counter, disrupt, or problematize a patriarchal flow of discourse. For Siga Fatima Jagne, these disruptive rhetorical strategies bring the speaker into the centre of the discourse. See Mary Modupe Kolawole, “The Context of African Women's Struggle”, in *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), pp. 3-43; see also Siga Fatima Jagne, “Postcolonial Criticism and African Writing”, in *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Source Book*, ed. Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne (London & Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), pp. 2-17.

² Abena P. A. Busia, “A Song in Seven Stanzas for Our Granddaughters”, in *African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices*, ed. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, Paulina Dongala, Omotoya Jolaosho, and Anne Serafin (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), p. xx.

³ See Obioma Nnaemeka, “From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood”, *Research in African Literatures*, 25.4 (1994), pp. 137-157; see also Enoch. T. Mvula, “Tumbuka Pounding Songs in the Management of Familial Conflicts”, in *Crossrhythms*, ed. Daniel Avorghedor and

recorded the active participation of women in the preservation and transmission of oral literature.⁴ According to Nnaemeka, women played a prominent role not only in panegyric poetry but also in elegiac poetry.⁵ Ruth Finnegan further points out that “every Akan woman is expected to have some competence in the dirge, and though some singers are considered more accomplished than others, nevertheless every woman mourner at a funeral is expected to sing—or run the risk of strong criticism, possibly even suspicion of complicity in death.”⁶ This suggests the vital importance of oral performance and female participation as a compulsory ritual in those recitals. Finnegan contends that in some parts of Africa, prose narratives, which are not directly connected to life cycles, are also dominated by women: “In some areas, it is the women, often the old women, who tend to be most gifted, even when the stories themselves are universally known.”⁷

For both Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory, the existence of active and powerful women in African oral tradition has been a vital source of inspiration for African women.⁸ Nnaemeka proposes that, “studies of the content and form of African oral tradition reveal the centrality of women as subjects.”⁹ Nnaemeka discusses the Gikuyu creation myth,¹⁰ which identified women as bold founders and forgers of

Dkwesi Yankah (Bloomington: Indiana University Folklore Publications, 1983), pp. 93-113; Beverly B. Mack, “Waka Daya Ta Kare Nika—One Song Will Not Finish the Grinding: Hausa Women’s Oral Literature”, in *Contemporary African Literature*, ed. Hal Wiley, Eileen Julien, and Russell J. Linneman (Washington, D.C.: Three Continent Press, 1983), pp. 15-46.

⁴ See Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); G.P. Lestrade, “Bantu Praise Poems”, *The Critic*, 4.1 (1935), pp. 1-10; H. Owuor, “Luo Songs”, *Black Orpheus*, 10 (1961), pp. 51-56.

⁵ Nnaemeka, “From Orality to Writing”, p. 138.

⁶ Finnegan, “Poetry and Patronage”, in *Oral Literature in Africa*, p. 103.

⁷ Finnegan, “Prose Narrative II. Content and Form”, p. 375.

⁸ Carole Boyce Davies, Elaine Savory Fido, “African Women Writers: Towards a Literary History”, in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, ed. Oyekan Owomoyela (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 311-346.

⁹ Nnaemeka, “From Orality to Writing”, p. 138.

¹⁰ “In the beginning of things the man Gikuyu, the founder of the tribe, found that the Mogai (The Divider of the Universe) had provided him with a beautiful wife whom Gikuyu named Moombi (creator or moulder). (Gikuyu had no male heirs, a situation which Mogai rectified by providing nine strangers who married Gikuyu’s nine daughters and thus set up nine matrilineages.) It is said that while holding superior position in the community, the women became domineering and ruthless. Through sexual jealousy, many men were put to death for committing adultery or

dynasties, and Aoua Keita, a Bamana-born woman who led a resistance movement for the independence of French Equatorial Africa.¹¹ As Deirdre LaPin notes, in Aoua Keita's autobiography, *Femme d'Afrique*, Keita attributes her moral strength and forcefulness to the lessons she learned from the activities of women in oral tradition.¹² Nnaemeka explores how African women writers have repeatedly acknowledged their gratitude to mothers who were great and resourceful storytellers.¹³ For example, Grace Ogot, a Kenyan writer whose first novel *The Promised Land* (1966) was published in the same year as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, claims that she was influenced by her grandmother: "My interest in writing fiction may have started at a very early age, stimulated by my childhood keenness to listen to my grandmother's folk tales. She was a renowned storyteller."¹⁴ In the same vein, Buchi Emecheta pays tribute to her "Big Mother": "But the Ibo storyteller was different. She was always one's mother. My Big Mother was my aunt. [...] It was a result of those visits to Ibuza, coupled with the enjoyment and information those stories used to give us, that I determined when I grew older that I was going to be a story teller, like my Big Mother."¹⁵

other minor offences. The men were indignant at the way in which the women treated them, and planned to revolt. It was decided that the best time for a successful revolt would be the time when the majority of women, especially their leaders, were in pregnancy. (The men impregnated the women and the revolt succeeded. Polygyny replaced polyandry.) The women frankly told the men that if they dared to eliminate the names which stood as a recognition that women were the original founders of the clan system, the women would refuse to bear any more children (hence the men agreed to let the nine main clans retain the names of the daughters of Gikuyu)." For more discussion see Margaret Strobel, "Women in Religious and Secular Ideologies", in *African Women South of Sahara*, ed. Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter (London: Longman, 1984), pp. 101-118.

¹¹ Nnaemeka, "From Orality to Writing", pp. 138, 139.

¹² See Deirdre LaPin, "Women in African Literature", in *African Women South of Sahara*, pp.143-163.

¹³ Nnaemeka, "From Orality to Writing", p. 143.

¹⁴ Bernth Lindfors, "Interview with Grace Ogot", *World Literature Written in English*, 18.1 (1979), p. 57.

¹⁵ Buchi Emecheta, "Feminism with a Small 'f'", in *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference Stockholm 1986*, ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), pp.173-174.

Invisibility of Women in African Literary Canon

If the significance of women in the African oral tradition cannot be contested, why are they absent from the African literary canon? Why is it that the field of African literature is dominated by male writers such as Achebe, Ngũgĩ and Soyinka? Nnaemeka posits that as the change was made from oral to written literature, new requirements for rhetorical mastery appeared. The elements that legitimated centrality altered from those based upon sex and age to those anchored in the knowledge of the colonisers' languages—English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.¹⁶ Apart from the colonisers' languages, the ideals of Victorian colonial education became an additional hindrance for African women writers.¹⁷ The politics of publishing further complicated matters for African women writers. Grace Ogot records that politicised publishing houses during the colonial era failed sufficiently to encourage or nurture creative writers:

As far as book publishing was concerned, the East African Literature Bureau was ready to publish anything written in the mother tongue languages. They could also publish material in English, but at that time they did not encourage creative writing at all. I remember taking some of my short stories to the Manager, including the one which was later published in *Black Orpheus*. They really couldn't understand how a Christian woman could write such stories, involved with sacrifices, traditional medicines and all, instead of writing about Salvation and Christianity.¹⁸

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) was the first published novel written by an African woman. However, by the time it appeared, a distinctively male literary tradition was already established in Africa.

¹⁶ Nnaemeka, "From Orality to Writing", p.139.

¹⁷ See Adu Albert Bohen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987); Gail P. Kelly, Carolyn M. Elliot, ed. *Women's Education in the Third World: Comparative Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); and Victor Uchendu, *Education and Politics in Tropical Africa* (London: Conch, 1979).

¹⁸ Lindfors, "Interview with Grace Ogot", *World Literature Written in English*, pp. 58-59.

Male African Critics and African Women Writers

In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton criticises Gerald Moore, Eustace Palmer, and Eldred Jones for inaccurate evaluations of women's novels.¹⁹ According to Stratton, Eustace Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel* (1972) refers only once to a woman writer, labelling Flora Nwapa as "an inferior novelist."²⁰ Stratton further highlights that women are also absent from Palmer's second book, *The Growth of the African Novel* (1979), and Gerald Moore's *Twelve African Writers* (1980). Stratton contends that Palmer and other male critics are using a western or male-dominated canon as a standard for African literature, and completely discounting the fact that their canon excludes women writers. In his introduction to *Twelve African Writers*, Gerald Moore expresses regret, that due to the limited space in his study, he cannot accommodate "such new writers as Nuruddin Farah, Ebrahim Hussein, Kole Omotoso, and Femi Osofisan."²¹ Stratton indicates that according to this list of male writers, it is worth noticing that by the late 1970s there were numerous women writers who could no longer be described as "new", such as Bessie Head and Flora Nwapa, both of whom had three novels and a collection of short stories to their credit.²²

Ama Ata Aidoo also canvassed the ongoing problems faced by African woman writers at the Second African Writers' Conference, held in Stockholm in 1986. In her paper, entitled "To be an African Woman Writer—An Overview and a Detail", she deplores exclusionary practices and the lack of serious attention from both African and non-African male critics:

In March of 1985, Professor Dieter Riemenschneider came to Harare to give a lecture on some regional approach to African literature. The lecture lasted at least two hours. In all that time, Professor Riemenschneider did not find it possible to mention a single African woman writer. When this was pointed out to him later, he said he was sorry, but it had been 'so natural.' I could have died. It had been natural to forget that quite a bit of modern African literature was produced by women? Why should it be

¹⁹ See Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁰ Eustace Palmer, "Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*", in *An Introduction to the African Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 61.

²¹ Gerald Moore, "Introduction", in *Twelve African Writers* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 8.

²² Stratton, "Introduction: Exclusionary Practices", p. 2.

‘natural’ to forget that some African women had been writing and publishing for as long as some African men writers?²³

Aidoo noted that the critical material on women writers has appeared rarely, either in special topic books or in so-called “special issues” of a few critical journals, for example, the fifteenth volume of *African Literature Today* on women in African literature, published in 1987. However this academic scholarship, according to Aidoo, is “often absent-minded at the best, and at the worst, full of veiled ridicule and resentment. When commentary on African women in literature is none of the above, it is certain to be disorganised (or rather unorganised) and choked full of condescension.”²⁴ Aidoo argues that as writers, African women have the right to be treated as equals, to expect that “critics try harder to give [their] work some of their best in time and attention, as well as the full weight of their intelligence, just like they do for the work of their male counterparts.”²⁵

Nationalism and African Women Writers

Fredric Jameson’s characterisation of “third-world” literature can also be seen as exclusionary given that he does not mention a single woman writer.²⁶ Jameson’s “sweeping hypothesis,”²⁷ as he himself concedes, positions third-world literature as “national allegory.” He writes that “[t]hird-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*”²⁸ By contrast, he goes on, the First World text is not conscious of its nationalising designs in the same way. Arguing against Jameson, Elleke Boehmer suggests that:

many narratives preoccupied with the social and national imaginary can be understood as inscribing the nation, and [...] these nation-informing stories are by no means exclusive to the Third World. Indeed, many hail

²³ Ama Ata Aidoo, “To be an African Woman—An Overview and a Detail”, in *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 159.

²⁴ Aidoo, “To be an African Woman”, p. 165.

²⁵ Aidoo, “To be an African Woman”, p. 168.

²⁶ See Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, *Social Text*, 15 (1986), pp. 65-88.

²⁷ Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, p. 69.

²⁸ Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, p. 69.

from the First World. If anything, this has become more evidently the case with the 1990s resurgence of nationalist preoccupations in the west and in the former Second World (think only of devolution in the UK).²⁹

The powerful presence of British nationalism during the recent Olympics 2012 in Britain has further demonstrated that nationalism is not exclusively associated with the third-world. For Aijaz Ahmad, Jameson's "national allegory" thesis has a colonialist predisposition:

There is doubtless a personal, somewhat existential side to my encounter with this text, which is best clarified at the outset. I have been reading Jameson's work now for roughly fifteen years, and at least some of what I know about the literatures and cultures of Western Europe and the USA comes from him; and because I am Marxist, I had always thought of us, Jameson and myself, as birds of the same feather, even though we never quite flocked together. But then, when I was on the fifth page of this text (specifically, on the sentence starting with 'All third-world texts are necessarily. . . ' etc.), I realised that what was being theorized was, among many other things, myself. Now, I was born in India and I write poetry in Urdu, a language not commonly understood among US intellectuals. So I said to myself: 'All? . . . necessarily?' It felt odd. Matters became much more curious, however. For the further I read, the more I realised, with no little chagrin, that the man whom I had for so long, so affectionately, albeit from a physical distance, taken as a comrade was, in his own opinion, my civilizational Other. It was not a good feeling.³⁰

According to Boehmer, nationalism is important for once-colonised countries, and the novels of these countries will be concerned to "configure the nation by way of organising (and often gendered) metaphors, if not strictly speaking as allegories in every case."³¹ However, according to Boehmer, the presence of female authors who are more involved with those narratives which cannot be incorporated into the official history, has made Jameson's formulation of the "national allegory" problematic. Women writers utilise their novels to reclaim and reconfigure

²⁹ Elleke Boehmer, "Introduction", in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 12.

³⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'", in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London & New York: Verso, 1992), p. 96.

³¹ Boehmer, "Introduction", p. 12; see also Neil Lazarus, "Fredric Jameson on 'Third-World Literature': A Qualified Defence", in *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Sean Homer and Douglas Kellner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 42-61.

national and other identities: “By conveying a complex give-and-take between public and private spaces, women writers use the novel as a powerful instrument with which to reshape national cultures in a way more hospitable to women’s presence.”³² Therefore exclusion of or critical condescension towards women writers and their complex politics, and the assumption that third-world literature is one homogeneous male commodity which is only concerned with “nationalism”, are both shortcomings on Jameson’s part.

African Women Writers’ Entrance into the Literary Canon

African women writers have struggled to gain literary attention and also admission to the literary canon. Stratton observed that Bernth Lindfors’ “The Famous Authors’ Reputation Test: An Update to 1986”³³ (the statistics in order to establish a writer’s canonical status), and “The Teaching of African Literatures in Anglophone African Universities: An Instructive Canon”³⁴ (the frequency with which Anglophone African universities include an author in their curricula in 1986) reveals an all-male canon. Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and Soyinka occupy the top three positions, while the next seven are occupied by Ayi Kwei Armah, John Pepper Clark, Okot p’Bitek, Christopher Okigbo, Pete Abrahams, Alex La Guma, and Dennis Brutus. Stratton noted that, Ama Ata Aidoo and Bessie Head occupy the fifteenth and eighteenth position respectively, and thus come close to obtaining a canonical status.³⁵

According to Chikwenye Ogunyemi, the 1986 and 1988 awards of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Wole Soyinka of Nigeria and Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt have brought international acclaim to African literature, which has increased pressure for meaningful dialogue along gender lines.³⁶ Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi argued that the increase in scholarly

³² Boehmer, “Introduction”, p. 12.

³³ Bernth Lindfors, “The Famous Authors’ Reputation Test: An Update to 1986”, in *Semper Aliquid Novi: Littérature comparée et littératures d’Afrique: Mélanges Albert Gérard*, ed. János Riesz and Alan Ricard (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), pp. 131-43.

³⁴ Bernth Lindfors, “The Teaching of African Literatures in Anglophone African Universities: An Instructive Canon”, *Matatu*, 7 (1990), pp.41-55.

³⁵ See Stratton, “Introduction: Exclusionary Practices”, p. 3.

³⁶ See Chikwenye Ogunyemi, “Firing Can(n)ons: Salvos by African Women Writers”, in *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 2.

inquiries on, by, and about women in the mid-1980s was another important factor in changing the status of African women writers.³⁷ In university curricula, the writings of African women are still dominated by well-established and important African male authors, such as Achebe (Nigeria), Ngũgĩ (Kenya), and Ousmane Sembène (Senegal). However, as Nfah-Abbenyi has commented, this situation is gradually changing, as many scholars of African literature in the west are now including African women writers in their courses. This change, according to Nfah-Abbenyi, has also affected many African universities, where curricula have traditionally been “Eurocentric and/or African male-oriented.”³⁸

African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender

In Charlotte Bruner’s critical opinion, African women writers are practising their craft under challenging circumstances. In her preface to *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* (1983), she notes that:

[t]he African woman writing fiction today has to be somehow exceptional. Despite vast differences in traditions and beliefs among African societies, any female writer must have defied prevailing tradition if she speaks out as an individual and as a woman. In order to reach an international audience directly, she often has had to cross linguistic barriers. She may well have confronted the dictates of societies in which the perpetuation of a tradition submerges the contribution of the innovator, in which the subservience of the individual to the community is reinforced by group sanctions. In such societies, the accepted role of any artist is to commemorate custom, in words, in song, and in the selection of the details that validate the accepted ethics of that society. Generally, then, the perpetuator is preferred to the creator. To be outstanding is to court rejection.³⁹

The work of African women writers in this thesis demonstrates that they are not perpetuators but rather creators. Their work strives to create a more

³⁷ See Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, “Introduction”, in *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 4.

³⁸ See Nfah-Abbenyi, “Introduction”, p. 4; For some of the reasons why the teaching of African literature in Africa has not gained as much ground as might have been expected since 1963, see Chidi Ikonne, “African Literature in Africa Twenty-Five Years After the Dakar and Freetown Conferences”, in *African Literature, 1988: New Masks*, ed. Hal Wylie, Dennis Brutus, and Juris Silenieks (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1990), pp. 97-105.

³⁹ Charlotte Bruner, “Preface to the First Edition”, in *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1994), p. vii.

egalitarian culture and challenges the narrow-minded and patriarchal ethics of their respective societies. Despite being underscrutinized by readers and academic scholars, African women novelists' writings are numerous, inventively eclectic and insightful. This thesis examines, through a series of close readings and careful contextualising, the work of a cluster of African women writers who have emerged over the last forty years. In the work of authors such as Mariama Bâ (Senegal), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), and Leila Aboulela (Sudan), there is a clear and robust attempt to complicate or subvert the tradition of male writing in which female characters are often relegated to the margins of the culture, and confined to the domestic, private sphere. This body of work has already generated a significant number of critical responses, including readings that draw on gender politics and colonialism; but it is still very much a minor literature, and western feminism has not yet engaged with it. Western feminism here refers to the movement inspired by writers such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, Simone De Beauvoir and Kate Millet with their principal focus on the social and existential problems confronting European and American women. Germaine Greer's pioneering work, *The Female Eunuch* (1970), criticises traditional family structures and argues that the nuclear family suppresses women both emotionally and sexually; rendering them eunuchs. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan argues in a similar vein, excoriating the family system as the pivotal factor in women's oppression. According to Friedan, for the sake of the survival of the American nation, women can no longer ignore the voices in their heads: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home."⁴⁰ Shulamith Firestone also claims in her work *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) that "unless revolution uproots the basic social organization, the biological family—the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled—the tapeworm of exploitation will never be annihilated."⁴¹ I am not suggesting here that western/white feminism is one monolithic movement. The first wave of modern western feminism began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and concentrated on women's right to vote and their participation in the public sphere. The second wave of western feminism commenced in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s. This phase of feminism was focused on women's reproductive rights, and their

⁴⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1963), p. 32.

⁴¹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 12.

repression under patriarchal society, and critiqued women's roles as wives and mothers. The third phase began in the mid-1990s and disrupted the notions of "universal womanhood" "gender" and "normative heterosexuality" and was heavily invested in bisexual and transgender identities.⁴² Rebecca Walker reportedly started this new movement in 1992 when she announced, "I am the Third Wave."⁴³ According to R. Claire Snyder, "third-wavers depict their version of feminism as more inclusive and racially diverse than the second wave,"⁴⁴ but we cannot ignore the class privilege of Rebecca Walker, the Yale educated daughter of Alice Walker and Jewish American lawyer, Mel Leventhal. However, this western feminist ideology does not address the experiences of black women, especially in the context of historical and contemporary racism and imperialism. Elizabeth Stanton, a leading figure in the early women's rights movement in America, wrote in 1865:

The representation of women of the nation have done their uttermost for the last 30 years to secure freedom for the negroes and as long as he was the lowest in the scale of being we were willing to press his claims but now, as the celestial gate to civil rights is slowly moving on its hinges, it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see 'sambo' walk into the kingdom first.⁴⁵

Despite the foundational racism of her argument, Stanton overlooked the presence of black women and also showed her inability to understand how racism affects gender relations. As Filomina Chioma Steady contends,

⁴² See Judith Worell, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Women and Gender: Sex Similarities and Differences and the Impact of Society on Gender* (San Diego, California & London: Academic Press, 2001); see also Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Movement in America 1848-1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay", *Signs*, 34.1 (2008), pp. 175-196; and Martha Rampton, "The Three Waves of Feminism", http://www.pacificu.edu/magazine_archives/2008/fall/echoes/feminism.cfm [accessed 17th April 2014].

⁴³ Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave", in *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement*, ed. Barbara Ryan (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 80.

⁴⁴ Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay", p. 180.

⁴⁵ Cited in Valerie Amos, Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperialism Feminism", *Feminist Review*, 17 (1984), p. 5.

“[[f]or the black woman, the enemy is not black men but history.”⁴⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay “French Feminism in an International Frame” and bell hooks’s book *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* throw into sharper relief the differences and difficulties with western feminism.

This book proposes that African women writers are not writing against the grain of western feminist theories. The work of African women writers in this book underlines African women’s specific problems and their emancipation and empowerment within their own particular cultural positions. In their diverse discussions of women’s oppression, they also critique the part played by older women (usually mothers-in-law) and younger women (sisters-in-law and co-wives). However, by speaking for other African women, these writers do not appropriate women’s experiences, but rather speak “out of concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved”, as Linda Alcoff puts it.⁴⁷ African women writers impugn patriarchal/nationalist values and also western misreading/misunderstanding of their cultural practices. Therefore their work and their characters are struggling against patriarchal values at home and persistent Eurocentrism abroad. Against this background, their characters are negotiating identities which are neither essentialised nor unified but rather multiple. African women’s negotiations of motherhood, feminism, marriage and religion (Islam in the context of this thesis) need to be gauged within their own cultural and material realities; otherwise, there is a danger of producing misrepresentations.

⁴⁶ Filomina Chioma Steady, “The Black Woman Cross-Culturally: An Overview”, in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), p. 35.

⁴⁷ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others”, *Cultural Critique*, 20 (1991-92), p.24.

Chapter Overview

My first chapter canvasses the institution of polygamy and the negotiation between modernity and tradition in Mariama Bâ's novels *So Long a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (1981). I suggest that through failed marriages in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Bâ is criticising the cultural and religious infrastructures of her society, which allow biased and prejudiced traditions towards women to flourish - traditions which inevitably strengthen male interests. I discuss polygamy in Islam and argue that Bâ is condemning the misappropriation of polygamy, but not polygamy itself as a cultural institution. Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Mireille, Bâ's three heroines, have been kept in the dark, as their husbands contracted a second marriage, despite the fact that they themselves chose their respective husbands. Bâ's women are faced with abandonment as a result of the infidelity which their spouses committed.

These issues throw into sharper relief the politics of women's power and familial control. A key concern here is how some women alongside men in Bâ's work (mothers in the roles of mothers-in-law) become accomplices of patriarchal structures, and are held responsible for the isolation, neglect and madness of women in relatively weaker positions. Bâ's work exhibits in great detail social injustices, the weight of unjust traditions, and selfish and abusive interpretations of Islam. I propose that Bâ's struggle for female emancipation and equality against myriad forms of oppression takes place within the locus of Senegalese culture.

The second chapter explores the changing concepts of marriage and motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's fiction. I address *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1975), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Double Yoke* (1983), *Gwendolen* (1990), and *Kehinde* (1994), and suggest that Emecheta interrogates the glorifying images of the African Mother created and propagated by male African writers. Emecheta argues that motherhood should be a choice, not an imposition. Rather than presenting an idealised view of motherhood, she supplies a nuanced and challenging account of the experiences of motherhood. I examine how in Emecheta's work marriage and motherhood contain, police and domesticate the child-bearing spouse, and how important it is for the Nigerian society to reconstruct these institutions.

I examine Emecheta's difficulties with the label of feminism which African writers and critics have named womanism, stiwanism, motherism, and negofeminism. I suggest that a distinctively African brand of feminist critique is unique in amalgamating a commitment to intellectual,

educational and economic progress for women with the retention of an emphasis on home and those indigenous traditions which are not subsuming women's humanity. Emecheta recognises the need for a balanced, mature and equal relationship between male and female within the socio-cultural structures of Nigeria.

My third chapter begins with a brief overview of the Nigerian civil war, which lasted for three years (1967-1970), and claimed approximately two million lives. I calibrate how different ethnicities in Nigeria were affected by the war, especially the Ogoni people, who live in the Niger Delta where most of Nigeria's oil is located. This chapter considers representations of the civil war in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). I contend that these war narratives arise from a sense that Nigerians have not fully confronted the effects of Biafra's legacy. I indicate that, apart from the politicisation of ethnicities, colonialism and neo-colonialism were the major causes behind the war. The creation of Nigeria, by putting together people of different ethnicities and religions with no shared sense of civic identity, is the result of western economic interests. After the independence of Nigeria, British political interests showed more regard for securing a lucrative share in Nigeria's oil resources than maintaining the peace and stability of a newly created independent state.

These women writers position their war narratives within a framework of the Nigerian civil war in order to explore the signal part played by women in healing the traumatised and splintered communities. I contend that these texts, by two women of different generations, are breaking an uncomfortable silence and enabling Nigerians to confront their dark past and achieve closure. In doing so, they reinforce the necessity for new narratives of healing, hope and recovery. Their fictions make the case for a restorative use of the past, a coming to terms with Biafran tragedy in order to move forward as a nation. In concluding, I posit that the war narratives of Emecheta and Adichie represent a different political expression, one of forgiving but not forgetting.

I begin Chapter Four with a discussion of Tsitsi Dangarembga's novels, examining their exploration of the manipulative nature of imperialism, the value of western education, and the risks of cultural disaffection which can be an outcome of such education. I prioritise Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and its sequel *The Book of Not* (2006), and explore how both patriarchy and colonisation work together towards female subservience. Dangarembga's main characters in both novels, Nyasha and Tambu, are influenced by two unique cultures, indigenous and imperial. The colonising culture oppresses them, but it also provides certain

advantages to her female protagonists. Ngũgĩ's *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) condemns colonial education as morbid, and declares it responsible for social alienation and disintegration. However, in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* the colonial education is a liberating and simultaneously an oppressive process for women.

This chapter also discusses Shona patriarchal culture, especially the collaboration of the missionary and colonial system with Shona culture in racially segregated Rhodesia; and how this collaboration oppresses African men in favour of white men, and African women in favour of African men. Tambu's infatuation with colonial education in *Nervous Conditions* is not about the high morals of imperial education, but her freedom and economic success. Class, it is implied, plays an important role in Tambu's reluctance to criticise openly the partialities and discriminations of the colonial educational system that she encounters in boarding school. I evaluate how her privileged education at a racially-mixed young ladies' college has deleterious effects, eroding her self-respect and dignity, with the result that the spirited and optimistic girl of *Nervous Conditions* is listless in *The Book of Not*.

Chapter Four also canvasses the *unhu* philosophy of empathy and compassion for human beings in African cultures, and suggests that Tambu's *unhu* is shattered by the racism she encounters in a multi-racial convent. I also assess the maintenance of colonial hierarchical structures in postcolonial Zimbabwe, where racism continues to influence the present and future in a harmful way, and look at the ways in which Tambu, as a subject of postcolonial Zimbabwe, is still struggling to integrate into this new nation.

Chapter Five considers Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010). Islam has an important place in these fictional works, but the version practised by Aboulela's characters differs significantly from mainstream western representations of the religion. I scrutinise the politicisation of Islam, particularly in relation to Muslim women, and the role of the western media in the propagation of Islamophobia. I argue that Aboulela's work depicts *Sufi* Islam, which has particular significance in the present socio-political context because of its intrinsic opposition to the orthodox interpretations of Islam, and its inclusion of women as equal partners in both spiritual and material endeavours.

I propose that Aboulela's fiction is a response to the stereotyping of Muslims in the western media: through her work, she stresses the importance of dispelling the embedded belief that Islam acts as an impediment to women's self-actualisation. This, Aboulela suggests, stems

from a male-manipulated interpretation of the religion for various political and material purposes. Consequently, she encourages western readers not to think of Muslim women as being oppressed by Islam and misogyny that it supposedly sanctions, helplessly waiting for the west to come and rescue them. Aboulela's interpretation of Islam is multifaceted and unorthodox; her characters do not follow the religion with absolute strictness. Her texts emphasise the inner *sharia* of her characters over the patriarchal versions of Islam, often encrypted in an unexamined official *sharia*. I also evaluate the politics of the veil in Aboulela's work, and her ambiguous attitude towards veiling as a complex and continuing symbol of the otherness of Islam and of Muslim women's suppression.

WHEN A MAN LOVES A WOMAN: BETRAYAL
AND ABANDON(SHIP)
IN MARIAMA BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER* (1980)
AND *SCARLET SONG* (1981)

Take me in a vehicle.
Take me in a vehicle.
I have been sent for from my home.
I have been sent for from my home.
This one who came with her mother,
What does she have that I don't have?
I want a man who is eight feet.
The one who came with her mother,
What does she have that I don't have?
I want a man who is eight feet.¹

**Themes of Abandonment in African Women Writers'
Fiction**

The theme of abandonment and desertion is very prominent in female African writing, including Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Double Yoke* (1982), Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981) and *Efuru* (1966), and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974). In the works of female African writers women are abandoned either by their husbands, fathers or sons. These works exhibit in searching and subtle detail social injustices, an oppressive weight of certain misogynist traditions and self-serving abusive interpretations of religion, which ultimately become the cause of tragedy in the lives of women. According to Bâ:

¹ Loise Kalondu wa Maseki, "Protest Against Polygamy", in *Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region*, trans. Mwende Mutuvi, ed. Amandina Lihamba, Fulata L. Moyo, M. M. Mulokozi, Naomi L. Shitemi, and Saida Yahya-Othman (New York: The Feminist Press, 2007), p. 398.

[T]he African woman writer has a special mission, given that the African social context is marked by glaring gender inequalities, exploitation, and ageless barbaric oppression of the so-called weaker sex. More than her male-counterpart, she must document fully the African women's condition. Injustices are still evident, segregation continues, despite the ten-year plan for women's development declared by the United Nations, in spite of grandiose discourse and laudable intentions. Discriminations are still abundant inside families and institutions, on the street, in the work place, in political assemblies.²

Bâ argues that women should take full ownership of their lives in order to “overthrow institutions so detrimental to us. We no longer endure them.”³ This is exactly what female African writers are doing: they are questioning those institutions and traditions which have become the cause of women's discarded and abandoned situation.

Mbaye B. Cham describes abandonment through polygamy as a social ailment:

It is the cumulative result of the process that could be referred to as the gradual opening and enlargement of the emotional/sexual circle that originally binds two partners (a husband and a wife) to introduce and accommodate a third partner (a second wife) in a manner so devious and deceptive that a new process is set in motion. This new process itself culminates in a state of mind and body that forces the first female partner to re-evaluate the whole relationship by either reluctantly accepting or categorically rejecting the enlarged circle.⁴

Cham further argues that abandonment in the novels of Mariama Bâ is primarily a female condition and it “transcends race, class, ethnicity and caste.”⁵ However, reading Bâ's fiction as a strong protest against polygamy is a limited comprehension of her work.

Polygamy and Islam

An influential body of critical opinion asserts that Bâ's primary concern is polygamy, which has been sanctioned by Islamic cultural codes, and is

² Mariama Bâ, “The Political Function of Written African Literatures”, in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), pp. 415-416.

³ Bâ, “The Political Function of Written African Literatures”, p. 416.

⁴ Mbaye B. Cham, “Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Mariama Bâ”, *African Literature Today*, 15 (1987), p. 92.

⁵ Cham, “Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination”, p. 89.

thus the direct or indirect cause of women's plight and miserable condition.⁶ Alphy J. Plakkootam argues that "Islamic society is a society of inequality and discrimination and this novel lays bare the truth. [...] As long as Islam propagates and condones multiple marriages, man-woman relationships will not improve."⁷

To view polygamy as an integral part of Islam, which is directly or indirectly responsible for women's desertion and abandonment is problematic. Polygamy is not exclusively associated with Islam. Judaism also permitted polygamy. For example, Sarah, due to her barrenness, offered her slave Hagar to her husband Abraham, in order to bear his children.⁸ In the book of Samuel, Elkanah, son of Jeroham, had two wives, Hannah and Penninah,⁹ and "Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah."¹⁰ This polygamous tradition is also present in some parts of the Christian community, for example, the Mormon doctrine developed by John Smith.¹¹ According to historians, polygamy was also widely practised in pre-Islamic Arabia.¹² Maha Yamani argues that the Prophet's tribe Quraysh was monogamous; however, this trend began to change with the emigration of the Prophet and his followers to Medina in 622 AD where there was a polygamous Jewish culture.¹³ Yamani further suggests that:

the Jewish presence in Medina and their initial interaction with the newly formed early Muslim community should be seen in light of the fact that polygamy did not have an earlier presence amongst the Prophet's tribe, Quraysh, in pre-Islamic Mecca. The Prophet himself remained

⁶ See Emeka Abanime, "Review", *World Literature Today*, 54.2 (1980), p. 327; Lenita C. Locey, "A Woman's Burden in *une si longue lettre*" *La Revue Francophone de Louisiane*, 11.1 (1987), pp. 48-52; and Yakini Kemp, "Romantic Love and the Individual in Novels by Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta, and Bessie Head", *Obsidian II*, 3.3 (1988), pp. 1-16.

⁷ Alphy J. Plakkootam, "The Dynamics of Man-Woman Relationships in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*", *Indiana Journal of American Studies*, 23.2 (1993), p. 89.

⁸ See Gerda Lerner, "The Patriarchs", in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 170-171.

⁹ I Samuel 1. 2.

¹⁰ Genesis 4. 19.

¹¹ See James E. Smith, Philip R. Kunz, "Polygyny and Fertility in Nineteenth Century America", *Population Studies*, 30 (1976), pp. 465-80.

¹² See Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Shari'ah: The Islamic Law* (London: Taha Publishers, 1984).

¹³ See Maha A. Z. Yamani, "Polygamy in General", in *Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2008), p. 11.

monogamously married to his first wife Khadija, in Mecca, until her death. [...] the Prophet Muhammad then contracted a number of marriages for what are reported to have been moral, humanitarian, political, and legislative reasons.¹⁴

Surat-al-Nisa in the *Quran* deals with the issue of polygamy: "And if you fear that you cannot deal justly with orphans, then marry from the women who seem good to you, two or three or four. But if you fear that you cannot do justice (to so many), then one (only) or, the (captives) that your right hand possess. Thus it is more likely that ye will not do injustice."¹⁵ These verses were revealed after the battle of Uhud, where many Muslim men were killed, and there were concerns about the welfare of the widows and orphans. Therefore interpretations of these verses vary among Muslim communities. For example, according to Leila Ahmed, these verses were revealed in order to deal with the specific problem of widows and orphans after the war, and therefore cannot be used to justify polygamy in normal circumstances.¹⁶ In his study of the rights of women in Islamic sharia, Rafi Ullah Shehab observes that Islam permits polygamy but with certain restrictions and conditions: "The main condition mentioned in the Holy Quran for allowing polygamy is to solve the problems of orphans and widows, but it also mentioned three conditions such as justice between wives, sexual capability and equality in meeting expenses. It may be mentioned here that if a person is not in a position to meet the expenses of one's wife, he, according to Islamic law, is not allowed to marry."¹⁷ A man is only allowed to marry when he can afford it: "And let those who can not afford marriage keep themselves chaste until Allah provides them with means."¹⁸ Shehab argues that Islamic marriage has experienced changes as a result of contacts with other systems, and as a result certain rights which Islam guarantees women are denied to them in practice. Amina Wadud argues that the Quranic verse "Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if that were your ardent desire,"¹⁹ is about doing justice to the orphans. Wadud contends that the proponents of polygamy associate the concept of justice between co-wives with financial

¹⁴ Yamani, "Polygamy in General", pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ *Al Quran*, Surat-al-Nisa, 4. 3.

¹⁶ See Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Rise of Islam", in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 52.

¹⁷ Rafi Ullah Shehab, *Rights of Women in Islamic Sharia* (Lahore: Indus Publishing, 1986), p. 43.

¹⁸ *Al Quran*, Surah Al-Noor, 33.

¹⁹ *Al Quran*, 4. 129.

support. This, according to Wadud, “is an extension of the archaic concept of marriages of subjugation, because fairness is not based on quality of time, affection, intellectual or moral support.”²⁰ According to the Prophet, “a man who marries more women than one, and then does not deal justly with them, will be resurrected with half of his faculties paralysed.”²¹ This suggests a strict code of behavior for Muslim marriage whether monogamous or polygamous. Ramatoulaye’s suffering in a polygamous marriage is a result of Modou’s betrayal of her trust, and his refusal to obey Islamic principles specified for the polygamous arrangement.

So Long a Letter (1980) is the story of two western-educated friends, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye. The period is the 1960s, the post-independence era in Senegal. Initially, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are happily married to the men of their choice. However, both women are then confronted with their husbands taking a second wife, and they react differently to their similar circumstances. Aissatou strongly rejects the polygamous situation and leaves her husband Mawdo, a doctor, for a successful professional career as an interpreter in the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. By contrast, Ramatoulaye, the narrator, remains with her husband Modou in the hope that he will follow the Islamic rule of equal attention and sharing of the husband in a polygamous arrangement. However, Modou will ultimately desert Ramatoulaye and her children in favour of his new wife Binetou. When Modou dies of a heart attack, Ramatoulaye emphatically declines all polygamous suitors who want to marry her.

Modou’s *secret* marriage to Binetou, Modou’s teenage daughter Daba’s friend, with its resultant humiliation brings anguish to Ramatoulaye:

And in the evening of this same Sunday on which Binetou was being married off I saw come into my house, all dressed up and solemn, Tasmir, Modou’s brother, with Mawdo Bâ and his local *Imam*. [...] I sat in front of them, laughing with them. The Imam attacked: ‘There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side.’ [...] ‘There is nothing new in this world.’ [...] I thought of the absent one. I asked with the cry of the hunted beast: ‘Modou?’ ‘Yes, Modou Fall, but, happily he is alive for you, for all of us, thanks be to God. All he has done is to marry a

²⁰ See Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur’an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1992), p. 82.

²¹ Cited in Doi, “Ta’addud Al-Zawjat: Polygamy”, in *Shari’ah: The Islamic Law*, p. 148.

second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place.²²

Ramatoulaye now realizes the reason for her husband's frequent absences which he described as job related. The same excuse is also used by Ousmane in *Scarlet Song* when he secretly marries Ouleymatou, as we shall see later. Despite her initial shock at learning about this new marriage, she decides to stay in the marriage with young Binetou. Ramatoulaye accepts Binetou as her co-wife, and prepares herself to share her husband according to the interpretation of Islamic law, but Modou abandons her: "I lived in a vacuum. And Modou avoided me. Attempts by friends and family to bring him back to the fold proved futile [...] his new-found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot us."²³ Therefore it is not polygamy but rather abandonment which triggers Ramatoulaye's plight. Ramatoulaye does not receive the impartiality and justice which Islam has given to her as her right for polygamous marriage arrangements. Modou has abandoned her and her children: "I was abandoned: a fluttering leaf that no hand dares to pick up, as my grandmother would have said."²⁴ It is also the fear of abandonment which causes Ramatoulaye to reject Daouda Dieng's marriage proposal: "Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family."²⁵ Therefore, focusing on Islam as the only cause of women's oppression, especially in the context of polygamous marriage, limits our understanding of the various causes of women's abandonments and desertions.

The Role of Class/Caste in Polygamous Marriages

Class/caste plays a significant role in the breakdown of Aissatou's marriage. After several years of happy marriage and four sons, Aissatou walks out on her marriage when she discovers that her husband has taken a much younger woman, from an elite feudal blood line, as his second wife, especially selected by his mother. Mawdo's mother, full of her aristocratic pride, never forgave Mawdo for his marriage to a jeweller's daughter and vowed to have her only son properly married; that is, from within the royal lineage. But Aissatou, unlike Ramatoulaye, divorces her husband, leaves

²² Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, trans. Modupe Bode-Thomas (Harlow: Heinemann, 2008), pp. 37-38.

²³ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p. 48.

²⁴ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p.55.

²⁵ Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, p.71.