

Old Age in African Literary and Cultural Contexts

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Edited by

Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong

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To
Reverend Timothy Numfor Chiangong
(1928–2016)

What an elder can see sitting down, a child cannot see even if they climb an iroko tree

—West African proverb

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PREFACE

This book emerged from the panel entitled ‘Old Age and Community Dialogue in African Literatures and Cultures’ which I organised at the international conference of the African Studies Association Germany (VAD), at the University of Bayreuth on 11–14 June 2014. The papers presented at the panel explored the manifold complexities of ageing and old age in African literary and cultural contexts.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who assisted in one way or another in the preparation of this volume. I am thankful to my colleague Prof. Dr Susanne Gehrmann for drawing my attention to the possibility of convening this panel at the 2014 VAD conference. Further, I wish to express my deep appreciation to Prof. John N. Ndongmangi and Prof. Shumirai Nyota for reviewing parts of the manuscript and for making insightful comments about specific cultural elements discussed in the volume. I am thankful to Dr Eric. A. Anchimbe for reading through the earlier drafts of the manuscript and for formatting it with Margarita Mestscherjakow. For assisting me in the editing process and for their encouragement, I am indebted to Prof. Samuel Kasule, Dr Obala Musumba, Dr Sola Adeyemi, Boneace Chagara and Edna Olondo.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: OLD AGE IN AFRICAN LITERATURE AND AFRICAN SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS

PEPETUAL MFORBE CHIANGONG

Getting Started

Compiling a volume of critique on old age in African literature and cultures is topical and relevant to critical inquiry today. There is a significant gap in literary and cultural research on the conceptualisation of and theorising on old age in Africa. This book therefore seeks to fill this gap, no matter how minimally, by contributing to research on old age from literary, cultural and linguistic perspectives. Overall, with special focus on literary studies, it seeks to initiate discussions and debates on the topic in academic and research circles. The aim is to draw research attention to the ways in which African literature and sociocultural studies conceptualise old age and the process of ageing. The chapters collected in this volume seek to do this from different disciplinary perspectives. Previous research on old age, especially within Western contexts, includes studies by de Beauvoir (1972), Barrow and Smith (1983 [1979]), Bytheway (1995), Sokolovsky (1997), Nelson (2004), Calasanta (2004), Gilleard and Higgs (2005), Moody (2006), Mangan (2013), Segal (2014), Moreno and Soler (2016), Applewhite (2016), Martin (2017) and Concilio (2018). While most of the research on old age from an African perspective has been published in sociology, anthropology and gerontology works,¹ very little, in my view, exists in African literary studies. Some of the existing critical material inspired by creative African literature deals with the preservation of cultural traditions of African communities (van der Geest 2004, Gomille 2007a, 2007b,

¹ See Aguilar (1998), Erichsen (2008), Hove and Trojanow (1996), Aboderin (2006, 2012, 2017), Ajala (2006), Eboiyeh (2015), Gerold (2017) and Nhongo (2006).

Chiangong 2018), the effect of old age on the body, and ageism and contestations rooted in successful ageing (Pretorius 2015, Lutwama-Rukundo, Kabonesa and Nsibirano 2018, Fondo 2018).

However, research in other disciplines has contributed to a better understanding of old age in both global and African contexts. The contributors to this volume have drawn from this research to portray how old age is conceptualised from literary, cultural and linguistic perspectives. For instance, Nana Araba Apt's (1993, 1996) sociological inquiry into elderly care in Ghana highlights the sociocultural and economic challenges encountered by elderly individuals in a rapidly changing and modernising community. Building on the definition of old age in Ghanaian society, she offers insightful knowledge about ageing, old age, gender and the role of grandparents in traditional Akan (Ghanaian) society. Apt's research on Akan culture serves as the basis for the understanding of Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa*, analysed in Chapter Three. Also from a sociological angle, Harriet G. Rosenberg (1997) explores the connection between care and complaints about older people among the Ju'hoansi in Botswana. She explains that the hallmarks of ageing exist in a continuum that starts with 'infants, children, adolescents and adults', which culminates in 'na', meaning 'old', 'big' or 'great' (1997: 35; see also Bâ n.d. and Apt 1996). Mamvura, Nyota and Masowa's discussion of Shona discourses about the elderly in Chapter Nine can be understood in this light.

From an anthropological perspective, Maria G. Cattell (1997) surveys care and the culture of respect towards elderly Abaluyia widows in western Kenya, focusing on the impact of fast-changing family and economic structures on elderly widows in this community. How modernisation affects local culture and by implication the role of the elderly is one of the questions raised in several of the contributions in this book. African literature enables one to perceive characterisations, perceptions, interactions and philosophies of old age and elderly individuals in fiction from diverse cultural backgrounds. This volume builds on this cultural diversity in a bid to explain how the elderly individuals portrayed in these literary and sociocultural contexts respond to traditional norms, modernisation, generational conflict, and postcolonial sociolinguistic and post-apartheid realities. This approach highlights the need to integrate the role, status and challenges of the elderly into academic debates to a level similar to that of the integration of race, gender, class and sexuality in the last decades. While I emphasise the necessity of engaging with the subject of old age in contemporary African literary research, I simultaneously touch on a few existing cultural productions to signal that elderly characters abound in African literature and therefore deserve critical research exploration.

The analyses of elderly characters in literary productions carried out in this volume brings me to my central hypothesis, which is that old age is not fixed but can be understood from multiple angles. Old age is socially and culturally constructed, and chronological age should not be the sole determinant of one's age and consequently of one's maturity and wisdom. The famous Malian ethnologist, linguist, poet and storyteller Amadou Hampâté Bâ once said, 'When an old man dies in Africa, it is a library burning'. In a 1969 documentary by French broadcaster RFI, *African Oral Tradition (La tradition orale africaine)*, he further notes that

old age does not necessarily involve someone who is advanced in age. It refers to he who is knowledgeable. Therefore, you have an old person at the age of twenty and you have children at seventy-two. Thus, it is a question of knowledge. An old person is someone who is endowed with knowledge. We should not assume that old age is limited to chronological age. But since it is individuals who are advanced in age that are generally more endowed with knowledge and experience based on their long life, they are therefore considered the *grand initiateur*. (Bâ n.d.; my translation from French)

While the papers in this volume focus on social esteem of elderly people on the basis of their advanced age, they also draw our attention to traits of ambivalence that mark the process. Ambivalence here relates to stereotypes regarding older individuals either because of their presumed transition towards physical and mental decline or because of their neglect by other (younger) individuals who were once cared for by them. The same elderly individuals who are revered for their wisdom and knowledge about society's past are often assaulted through prejudicial discourses.

Ageism in African Literature

Various African writers have focused on masculinity, gender relations, colonialism, old age and tradition but are yet to engage in more invigorating debates on the subject of ageism. For example, Chinua Achebe, in his classic *Things Fall Apart* (1958), sometimes portrays the old in an unflattering manner. An interesting example that might escape criticism of the novel's view on ageism is depicted in the proverb, 'An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb', delivered from an extradiegetic perspective in a scene where Okonkwo is in a meeting with two elderly men and two of the sons of Nwakibie at the latter's home. Nwakibie is a prosperous man from whom Okonkwo hopes to borrow yams in a sharecropping deal. While the men are drinking palm wine brought by Okonkwo, they recount the story of the palm wine tapper who, before

abandoning his trade, goes to consult the oracle about the death of his father. The oracle divines that the spirit of the tapper's dead father requests him to sacrifice a goat in a propitiation ritual in order to prevent the tapper's own death. Disgusted with his father's exorbitant demand, the tapper asks the oracle why his father would request the sacrifice of a goat when in his lifetime he did not own even a fowl. In response to the proverb, the group of men, except Okonkwo, burst into a hearty laughter.

The image of a decrepit old woman illustrated by the terms 'uneasy' and 'dry bones' in the proverb is of major interest here. Communicated by an omniscient voice, the proverb not only raises concerns about the construction of gender norms, and by implication sexism, in the context in which it is spoken but also informs on the ageist subtext associated with the body of an old woman. The metaphor, rooted in the imagery of a decrepit elderly female, parallels the failure of Okonkwo's father, who was not a 'real man' and therefore not heroic enough in the Igbo understanding and construction of masculinity. Although one may question the motive of the oracle in making such a demand, Okonkwo's unease is not disguised, as he never wants to identify with his own 'effeminised' and 'unsuccessful' father, whose supposed failure leads to his being equated here with an old woman. The subject of ageism should, equally, have dominated African literary criticism since the publication of the novel.

In his classic *Song of Lawino* (2015 [1989, 1972]), Okot p'Bitek discusses the role of the elderly as custodians of the folklore of Northern Uganda, which he seeks to preserve. He equally highlights ageist language in certain stanzas of Lawino's lament. A selection of Lawino's comments on Ocol's (Lawino's husband) treatment of elderly relatives and elders of the community underlines the ageist viewpoints in the song:

He says my old relatives smell horribly.
 And they have terrible diseases
 Leprosy and tuberculosis
 And their bodies itch (94)

The son of the Bull
 Does not allow the children
 To visit my mother,
 He says
 He does not like
 The feeding of grandmothers
 Because the children
 Eat all the time (95)

My husband

Once smashed up the rattle
 Gourd,
 Cut open the drum,
 And chased away the diviner
 Priest
 From his late father's homestead.
 The old man walked away.
 His headgear waving
 His ankle bells jangling
 Rhythmically
 And the large monkey-skin bag
 Dangling on his neck.

People whistled in amazement.
 They asked,
 What ghost has captured
 The head of Ocol? (98)

Lawino and the people in the community raise an alarm over Ocol's attitude towards his elderly mother-in-law and diviner. This confirms Apt's concern about the 'erosion of the traditional role and status of the elderly [due to] major changes in the economic roles, responsibilities and reward systems' (1996: 6).

Another example of ageism, also linked to ableism, is evident in a Bafut riddle in which a nude, elderly and seated female is associated with an already tapped and abandoned palm tree or raffia palm which can no longer produce wine:

Performer: *Nlwin mangyie ta'a jwore yi* (An old woman does not cover her genitalia)
 Audience: *Akwu leng* (A dead tapped palm tree or raffia palm)

Literally, the subject is desexualised in the riddle as she is portrayed as a thoughtless individual who is unable to sit in what is judged as an appropriate way. Further, associating her with a dead palm tree connotes her post-menopausal status in society, which is seemingly ridiculed. Moreover, the riddle refers to the failure of the community in constructing and offering a family/societal support system to some elderly women. Although in Africa proverbs and riddles are communally owned and employed in specific social and cultural contexts to communicate witticisms, entertain, caution, educate and express value judgement in complex situations, they are also expressions of the cultural and social life of the people, as depicted in the examples above. Yet discriminatory elements that are rooted in some of these creative

genres need to be debunked. As Ciarunji Chesaina notes, the metaphorical and aphoristic contents of proverbs, together with riddles, ‘depend very much on the choice of language: in order to leave a vivid impression and hence communicate the message effectively’ (1991: 13). Inasmuch as African proverbs are employed to communicate wisdom that is handed down from one generation to another, some of them communicate ageist and sexist content with regard to gender and old age. Ageist discourses that often punctuate society’s language and utterances about elderly people, particularly from a gender perspective, are also explored in this book – not only to draw attention to them but also to invite researchers to begin a meaningful conversation about the care of elderly people. While the evolution of themes, characters and plot in African literature from the 1950s to the 1970s, as indicated in the few examples above from Achebe (1958) to p’Bitek (2015), centres significantly on elderly characters, they tend to be missing in the literary criticism of these texts. This volume seeks to fill this gap.

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that contemporary African fiction writers are beginning to engage with old age as a dominant theme in their works, thereby highlighting the relevance of the subject to today’s society. Sara Ladipo Manyika’s *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* (2016) is a notable example. While her 75-year-old protagonist attempts to surmount all of the challenges of advanced age, she also acknowledges the inevitability of physical decline. She critiques the implicit and structural intersection of ageism with old age, gender, sexuality and class. From an African diasporan perspective, Antoinette Ellis-Williams, in her poem ‘Letter from Mama Olewagi’ (2008), equally interrogates the notions of migration, identity, home, belonging, memory, and entanglements of age, gender, race and class, through the voice of an almost 90-year-old female speaker who is abandoned by her children in a nursing home. Still on old age, Antjie Krog, on the other hand, explores body disintegration and ‘decay’ in her collection of poetry entitled *Body Bereft* (2006).

The Role of Elderly Individuals

This book also explores the role of the elderly as custodians of their community’s history and culture. Further, the chapters examine their function as keen observers of the transformation of societal values. To inform on the role of elderly characters in society, I use ideal excerpts from literary texts that illustrate the esteem accorded elderhood by African writers as they comment on, for instance, the devastating consequences of Western colonisation on African cultures. Storytelling is the strategy that

Mbuya, grandmother, employs to talk about the colonial history of Southern Rhodesia – today Zimbabwe – to Tambudzai, the protagonist in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* (2004 [1988]). Through Tambudzai, Dangarembga informs the reader about the value of elderhood in Shona orature, a topic examined in detail in Chapter Nine from a linguistic anthropological perspective. Tambudzai learns about gender normativity, resilience and history from her grandmother's story. The storytelling scene is designed by the novelist as an educational process which creates the backdrop against which patriarchal gender relations are eventually, vehemently, challenged by Tambudzai. Her grandmother Mbuya not only chronicles the history of the migration of the family's ancestors to its current location but correspondingly conveys the trauma of colonialism to young Tambudzai, utilising metaphorical images that depict the British colonisers as 'wizards well versed in treachery and black magic [who] came from the south and forced the people from the land' (2004: 20). The 'wizards', Mbuya declares, 'were avaricious and grasping' (20). Not only does Tambudzai's grandmother communicate lessons in history but, as Tambudzai admits, it is a quality of history 'that could not be found in textbooks' (17). Her use of images and suspense in the story sustains the girl's interest, which she employs to prompt her grandmother to proceed with the narrative: 'what happened after, Mbuya, what happened?' (17). The old-age wealth of Shona orature and the history of today's Zimbabwe is conveyed by Mbuya to the younger generation based on her experience of the transformation of Southern Rhodesia into a British settler community whose fragmenting, hybridised aftermath Tambudzai is currently experiencing.

While Mbuya, the grandmother, refers to the colonialists as wizards, Chege, the renowned elder and spiritual leader of Kameno in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965), warns his people about British invaders, whom he calls 'butterflies ... [who] are there, beyond the ridges, putting up many houses and some taking the land' (7). Certainly because of his age and spiritual status, Chege is 'feared and respected ... for he knew, more than any other person, the ways of the land and hidden things of the tribe. He knew the meaning of every ritual and every sign. So, he was at the head of every important ceremony' (1965: 7). After Waiyaki's second birth, Chege escorts him, his only son and the protagonist, to the sacred grove to prepare him for the leadership of his community. As Chege bequeaths sacred ancestral knowledge of the land to Waiyaki before his circumcision, the latter affirms that he is 'drinking from a calabash of trust and responsibility', because 'the hidden things of the hills were being revealed to him' (14). The role of the elderly in upholding the value of African cultures is also accentuated in Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God*

(1980). Against the backdrop of the dawn of the Christianisation of Nso land in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, Tansa the child narrator is raised by his parents in a strict Catholic home. Contrarily, Yaya, Tansa's grandmother, is deeply suspicious of the Christian dogma, which coerces the Nso people to shame their local culture and in doing so relate with the Christian God through a white European ancestor, Jesus Christ. For Yaya, Jesus Christ is not versed in the concerns of the Nso people. When Tansa's mother severely punishes him for partaking in a rite of purification performed by the Fai (lineage head), Yaya, in full support of Tansa, warns her thus:

You cannot break away from the past like that and live. You cannot ... And who can talk better on your behalf to God than the spirits of your ancestors? And when you break away from him as you want to do, how do you expect to receive your own favours from God. You follow this new way of the white man. He leads you to beg God through his own ancestors and you just accept it and carry all the children there. What is wrong with your own ancestors?
(32)

Yaya serves here as a bridge to the pre-Christianisation past in which Nso ancestors rather than a white ancestor took care of the people's problems. She plays this role because it is part of her lived experience. Her age grants her access to this knowledge. The negative perception of Africans is what Yaya draws attention to. She projects the ancestors of the Nso people, as opposed to the white European ancestor, as the better choice when she rebukes her daughter thus: 'What is wrong with your own ancestors?' (32). Tansa, who represents the new hybrid post-Christianisation generation, eavesdrops on the conversation between his mother and an embittered Yaya. Though not addressed directly, he gets to understand the important role that Yaya plays in safeguarding the culture.

The role of elderly individuals in African societies abounds in African literature. The illustrations above only testify to this role and are intended to provide a platform from which to understand the analyses in the chapters collected in this volume. Although the chapters focus on different locations, cultures and languages in Africa, the underlying role and conceptualisation of the elderly are similar.

Contributions to the Book

While this volume is mostly made up of the papers that were presented at the panel on 'Old Age and Community Dialogue in African Literatures and Cultures' at the African Studies Association Germany (VAD) conference at Bayreuth University in June 2014, it also includes four other contributions

that provide different enriching contexts to the discussion of elderhood. Two of these four chapters are sociological and anthropological-linguistic in perspective and the other two discuss old age in an Ethiopian novel and the question of respecting elderly people raised during an applied theatre workshop. The chapters engage with the ambivalences of old age as they highlight not only the challenges of the ageing process but also the sociocultural and political situations that demand that reverence be shown towards the elderly.

This book is separated into three main thematic parts. Part I deals with old age and elderhood in literary creations, Part II engages with elderhood in performance and film, and Part III investigates the place of age in language usage.

Part I, 'Old Age and Elderhood in Literary Creations', consists of four chapters which deal with representations of old age and elderhood in literary creations, precisely novels, plays and short stories. In Chapter Two, Naomi Nkealah applies the concept of 'feminist empathy' used to de-stereotype older women in Reneilwe Malatji's debut collection of short stories, *Love Interrupted*. Her invocation of certain African male authors' mythologising and reformulation of the identity of women in their early works permits Nkealah to assign 'multiple identities' and agency to the older female characters that she examines in the short stories. In Nkealah's analysis, she employs the concept of 'de-stereotyping' to debunk the binarity of credible/dishonest and peaceful/aggressive older female subjects who are entangled in post-apartheid drama. In Chapter Three, I explore ageism in two plays, namely Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Although the understanding of old age is culture-specific, I employ a number of global research perspectives to demonstrate that ageism operates through a universal language that creates prejudices against elderly women and men. I explain that ageism embedded in specific discourses and paralinguistic features effectively affects the agency, self-worth and esteem of the elderly people discussed in the plays. Hannah Schild, in Chapter Four, also engages with ageism as she discusses the role of Emama Seble and Melaku in Maaza Mengiste's novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. While the characters examined show bodily traits of chronological age, complicated by the community's discourse, they enact aspects of 'responsive ageing' in spite of the implicit ageism played out in the novel. That notwithstanding, the elderly characters, as Schild illustrates, not only ignore such challenges but also impose themselves in the community as the custodians of Ethiopian traditions and values, which they often employ to coerce their interlocutors into enacting acceptable social behaviour.

Umma Aliyu Musa, in her exploration of anger expressed by older individuals in Hausa women's novels, interrogates the existence of generational conflict in Chapter Five. In examining the concept of *pulaaku* (etiquette), she looks at how culture and religion intersect with morality in the relationship between older and younger characters in Hafsat Abdulwaheed's *So Aljannar Duniya* (1980), Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's *Wa Zai Auri Jahila?* (1990), Zahra'u B. Yakasai's *'Yar Tsakar Gida* (1997) and Rahma A. Majid's *Mace Mutum* (2006). Using the Hausa/Fulani culture as a backdrop against which *pulaaku* is examined, she equally explores terminologies in Hausa culture that describes old/older men and women, such as *Dattijo* (old man), *kafa gemu* (to keep the beard), *Gyatuma* (an older woman) and *tsohuwa* (a very old woman). Significantly, Musa applies varied understandings of ageing and old age to discuss marriage and engagement, in order to articulate the nuances of anger in the selected novels.

Part II, 'Elderhood in Performance and Film', is made up of two chapters which deal with the representation of the elderly in applied theatre and video films. In Chapter Six, I explore the question of the community showing respect towards the elderly as discussed during a social theatre workshop for the elderly in Bafut, Cameroon, on 18–22 September 2013. The chapter argues that although respect for the elderly is rooted in Bafut cultural, religious and social values, it is gradually being eroded as a result of external influences. I explore these influences as I analyse the first scene of a play that was created during the workshop and performed at three open-air venues in Bafut. The chapter's critique of the value of respect illustrates a disruption of a societal value that should support elderly individuals. It is along this line of thought that the chapter equally interrogates the attitudes of younger individuals and of institutions from which such values are, generally, expected.

Musa, as seen, dwells on the concept of shame for the most part in Chapter Five, and Yusuf Baba Gar employs a similar Hausa context in Chapter Seven in order to explore behaviours that illustrate verbal and physical assault employed against elderly people. He weaves his analyses around the notion of 'granny battering' to illustrate how young characters in *Allo* (n.d.), *Dan'auta Ango* (n.d.), *Dan'auta Goyon Kaka* (n.d.), *Daso Makauniya* (2009) and *Da Kishiyar Gida* (2013) endorse disrespect towards elderly characters. Gar highlights utterances that young people employ to celebrate the drinking of alcohol, a taboo, in the presence of their elders. He equally examines acts of extortion by young people in the community that rid elderly people, particularly those who are disabled, of their personal belongings.

Part III, 'Age in Language Use', is made up of two chapters which adopt a linguistic perspective on discourses produced by and about the elderly. In Chapter Eight, Eric A. Anchimbe examines the place of age in offers and offer refusals in two postcolonial communities: Cameroon and Ghana. Using data collected from a discourse completion task questionnaire, he analyses the strategies used by younger interlocutors to make offers to older interlocutors and the strategies used by the older counterparts to refuse the offers. He employs the postcolonial pragmatics framework designed for such societies. The findings reveal that respect for the elderly in these two societies is indeed so strong that respondents preferred to ignore the instructions of the questionnaire rather than construct dialogues in which the older counterpart was not given the amount of respect required by society.

In Chapter Nine, Zvinashe Mamvura, Shumirai Nyota and Angeline Masowa pursue a similar discourse of showing esteem towards elderly individuals. Focusing predominantly on the Shona context in Zimbabwe, the authors use linguistic anthropology as a theoretical framework to explore linguistic interactions in specific social and cultural settings. The Shona language, they argue, is not only a repository of cultural knowledge but also replicates society's attitude towards the elderly, which is generally marked by reverence. As the authors observe, Shona culture is rooted in the notion that elders are leaders as well as indispensable members of their communities. Therefore, they examine the role of *vakuru* (elders), *vadiki* (youngsters), *vanasorojena/majenandebvu* (the grey-haired ones), *ambuya/mbuya* (grandmother; the two spellings represent dialectical variations: this study uses *mbuya* for the sake of consistency) and *sekuru* (grandfather), to name just a few, to illustrate how respect is shown towards elderly individuals in different spaces in society.

This volume looks at old age through multiple dimensions that cut across different geographical spaces of Africa, namely Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The book tackles the vacillations of conceptions of old age in relation to culture, agency, esteem, prejudice and history. In thus espousing different views on ageing, it allows us to reconsider its definition and our understanding of it, especially in a changing world.

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PART I

**OLD AGE AND ELDERHOOD
IN LITERARY CREATIONS**

CHAPTER TWO

DE-STEREOTYPING OLDER WOMEN IN RENEILWE MALATJI'S *LOVE INTERRUPTED*: RESPONDING WITH FEMINIST EMPATHY

NAOMI NKEALAH

Introduction

Until the 1990s, images of women in African literature, which was dominated by male writers, were replete with stereotypes which reduced women to one-dimensional characters, fit only for particular purposes. This state of affairs moved African feminists and other scholars of African literature to write in opposition to masculinist representations of women, and to centre women's literature that offers more complex images of women. In her seminal book, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, Mary Modupe Kolawole (1997) notes that the novels of Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka have three dominant stereotypes of female characters: masculine women, feminine women and apologetics. She explains:

The masculine group consists of radical domineering women playing the role of conquerors over the men around them. The second group includes idealised females who are feminine to the point of trivialisation of womanhood. The third group is made up of apologetics or subdued women who fall short of total achievement. (Kolawole 1997: 97)

What is common among these three groups of women is that they each represent fixed ideas about being woman: a woman is masculine *or* feminine *or* neutral. There is no room here for women to assume multiple identities at once. In the meantime, we have come to understand that identities are constantly shifting.

This kind of reductionist representation of women is also pervasive in the works of internationally acclaimed writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In her

widely read book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, Florence Stratton (1994) observes that in Ngugi's novels, attempts to replace the traditional female figures of mothers, prostitutes and secretaries with heroic women characters inevitably result in the creation of new stereotypes. She adds: '[Ngugi's] heroine is also required to undergo a transformation in character – to convert stereotypical feminine qualities into equally stereotypical masculine ones' (Stratton 1994: 162). Thus, Ngugi's female characters, like Soyinka's, do not possess the capacity to navigate feminine and masculine qualities simultaneously as their circumstances demand, because ultimately their circumstances, as designed by their creators, are perpetually limiting.

Based on the overwhelming evidence of stereotyping in African men's literature, Maurice Vambe (2010: 100) states that 'African female critics and writers are justified in doubting the capacity of male writers to produce positive images of women'. Indeed, this doubt has led to more African women engaging in fictional writing and using that medium to correct the grossly biased images of women in literature.

From the year 2000 to the present, African literature has experienced an upsurge of women writers writing from within the continent and from the diaspora. These writers have been involved in the task of *de-stereotyping* women – that is, taking women out of the clutches of patriarchal thinking and representing them in ways which speak of their liberated minds. The stereotypes have been rubbished, and in their place has emerged a consortium of female characters that engage our critical minds. Illiterate women have been replaced with learned ones whose education becomes a tool for social criticism, such as Auntie Ifeoma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2009). Sexually timid married women have given way to sexually proactive ones whose sexual autonomy is a mechanism for their own self-fulfilment first and family cohesion second, such as Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2011). Closeted homosexual women have made space for liberated lesbians whose very lives question societal prejudices, as in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015).

These de-stereotyped women characters compel readers to respond to them with what Chielozona Eze (2016) calls feminist empathy, the ability to put one's self in the place of the character and to feel their pain as victims of society's skewed constructions of femininity. Eze (2016: 30) explains:

When African women writers reclaim their bodies from society's (male) narratives, when they write about their bodies that had been misrepresented, abused, or objectified by their cultures, they invite the readers to consider their pain not from an abstract, impersonal perspective, but rather to pay