ABSTRACT

African Women's Lives: Historical Narratives and Literary Depictions in Post-Colonial Fiction

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This thesis analyzes the impact that literary works by female African authors have had on the lived experiences of African people. Most of their works depict life in the early post-colonial and colonial periods in Sub-Saharan Africa. I argue that through their depictions of women's lives, they address themes concerning the individual's relation to the collective. By placing the novels within their historical context, I show that issues of gender equality, class, culture and politics are at the forefront of these works. Their approach to women's rhetoric uplifts, projects and dignifies the voices and lives of ordinary African women. We as readers, historians, literary critics and scholars have much to learn from the deeply complex works of these women. As authors, they invoke the sympathetic imagination within us, as women, they are symbols of history, dignity and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit. This thesis is therefore not just a testament to their characters, but also to their persons.

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AFRICAN WOMEN'S LIVES: HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND

LITERARY DEPICTIONS IN POST-COLONIAL FICTION

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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By

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To the men and women who turn to literature for answers to some of life's most difficult

questions.

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INTRODUCTION

"Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted." – Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter*

Courage is a virtue that is at the heart of every good work of literature. To write about a people means that you must observe them from the outside, you must create distance between yourself and your subjects. To write well about *your own* people entails that you fully understand them before you can step away. To analyze and express the beliefs and traditions of your people in story requires courage and openness. The experiences of African women are varied, and yet authors have captured the essence of being an African woman through specific stories about African women's lives. This thesis is a literary, historical, and cultural analysis of African women's rhetoric. It is primarily focused on the contributions of African women authors to our deepening understanding of Africa's rich historical narratives. Through literature, these women writers are able to make rhetorical appeals that aptly critique their societies, while simultaneously making these critiques more accessible to audiences through storytelling. By doing this, they encourage new forms of community among readers and scholars alike, and they influence contemporary culture. Their works serve as sources of both history and of social critique, while bearing significantly on contemporary circumstances. Their approach to women's rhetoric uplifts, projects, and dignifies the voices and lives of ordinary African women. We as readers, historians, literary critics, and scholars have much to learn from the deeply complex experiences of these women. As authors, they invoke the sympathetic imagination within us, as women, they are symbols of history,

dignity, and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit. This thesis is therefore not just a testament to their characters, but also to their persons.

The African novel is now central to investigating and understand African lives and consciousness. The novel came to prominence during the Victorian era, as it came to bear heavily on the consciousness of many people's lives. Joseph Conrad's accurate description points to the novel's impact. He states, "what is a novel if not a conviction of our fellowmen's experience strong enough to take upon itself a form of imagined life clearer than reality and whose accumulated verisimilitude of selected episodes puts to shame the pride of documentary history?"[1] The novel is therefore an imprint in history, a record of a specific time and space that sheds light on the experiences of others. In relation to the African continent, the novel has had an interesting influence as it only became a mode of expression through colonial interaction. Although oral traditions were the predominant medium for passing cultural traditions on from generation to generation, colonialism introduced the novel as a cultural and historical device that further influenced thinkers and intellectuals on the continent. Susan Andrade states that "the novel has a complex relation to Africa and cultural nationalism, first, because unlike poetry and drama, it is the genre commonly believed to have originated outside the continent and therefore to have become African only as part of the colonial enterprise."[2] Despite this complicated history, the novel has since come to play a vital role in the development of African consciousness and its historical narratives.

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[1] Joseph Conrad, *A personal record*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[2] Susan Andrade, *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011.

Postcolonial Africa has seen an influx of many literary works by African writers. African women particularly, have tackled issues relating to the social, political, and economic struggles of their peoples and I among other scholars argue that they do this through their writings of women's lives. Andrade argues that women's contributions to these literary traditions have been overlooked because of their simplicity and their aversion to openly write about issues of politics. She notes however, that allegorical readings of women's works provide a deeper understanding of the female African experience. Although this thesis is not primarily concerned with allegorical readings of these women's works, Andrade's excellent findings put these women's works at the forefront of socioeconomic and political discourse about the Continent. For Andrade, novels represent the individual's relation to the collective. In the works of these women, there are tensions between individuality and communal or societal collectivity. This thesis will explore these tensions in the following chapters. I will begin by giving a brief overview of feminist-related thought on the Continent as many scholars believe that these authors in one way or another ascribed the ideals of feminism, without necessarily ascribing to feminism itself. Chapter 1 deals with authors' depictions of the tension between society and self, Chapter 2 tackles the experience of cultural isolation in colonial Africa, and Chapter 3 primarily considers the strained relationships between mothers and daughters in these texts. Each chapter will consider the cultural and historical significance of these concepts as they pertain to the lives of African women.

Translating Feminism Across Cultures

When considering the role of feminism in African literature, it is helpful to first consider the role that feminism (or variations of it) play in the lives of African women.

The concept of feminism by western understandings was a foreign one to traditional African societies in pre-colonial Africa. However, there existed many different means through which women in their societies could openly speak about the struggles they faced. These outlets provided African women with the tools needed to assert their collective agency as they actively participated in community life. In precolonial African societies, women usually asserted their agency collectively, as opposed to individually. Although women were active agents of their lives, they sought power in the collective and effected changes that way. One example is the Igbo women of the south-eastern Nigeria. Although men were predominantly the political leaders, women possessed a great deal of economic power because they sold most of the produce in the markets, and could, therefore, set and determine market prices. They formed and participated in female-led alliances that not only gave them a way of voicing their concerns but also gave them political powers that they were able to use to their advantage. However, with colonial interaction, the influence of western individualization and the industrialization of many African cities, tensions arose between women's individual wants and the collective wants of society. These tensions are explored further in the literature, but they also leave room for the development of social movements that prioritized the individual wants of women. Although early African writers and scholars did not self-identify as feminists, they ascribed to the ideals of individual agency, dignity and equality.

Although feminist ideals are universally applicable across the globe, the feminist movement itself has been difficult to translate across cultures. It thrives within individualistic cultures in the West but is deemed callous by more collective societies. The movement has had many different meanings for different people groups, but the

underlying message remains the same: all people have inherent dignity and worth and should be treated as such. However, cultural differences, socio-economic status, geography, race and religion shape the way feminism is received in different parts of the world. In her book *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks highlights the differences between African American understandings of feminism and white bourgeois feminism. She explains that white feminism specifically attends to the struggles of white middle-class women, and therefore excludes the experiences of African American women.[3] Motherhood and wifehood were seen as tools of oppression by the first-wave feminist movement of the 19th and early 20th century, but hooks notes that these realms (amongst others) provided validation for African American women, due to the fact that they were primarily concerned with the racial, social and economic oppression of 20th century America. hooks shows how a movement that liberates some can also be used as a tool of exclusion and oppression for others.

In Africa, direct translation of first-wave feminism produced a complex reaction to the feminist movement. For many African women in the 19th and 20th century, western feminism was not suited to lives of African women. African women's experiences were heavily influenced by colonial rule and this differed from women's experiences in the west. The authors studied in this thesis recognize that western feminism is shaped by western understandings of power dynamics [4], and these dynamics differ from African ones. In reference to hooks' example on motherhood and wifehood, it is the same in African cultures that wifehood and motherhood are celebrated as African markers of

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[3] bell hooks, *Feminist theory: From margin to center*, Pluto Press, 2000.

[4] hooks, *Feminist theory: From margin to center*, 36.

culture and tradition. For this reason (amongst many others), many African scholars and writers have pushed for the development of a movement that is tailored specifically to the experiences and struggles of African women. This leads to the discussion of a distinct form of African feminism.

African women's liberation has taken a very different route from its western counterpart. It has manifested itself in two ways: first in its relation to western colonialism, and first-wave feminism, and second in its relations to African cultures, traditions and communities. For many African women, feminism is treated as a western import. It fails to consider the lives of African women, and therefore alienates women of African descent who desire to ascribe to its ideals. It is important to note that the word "feminism" is itself greatly contested among African writers and scholars. Instead, there is an increasing use of the word "womanist." However, as scholars continue to write about these issues[5], even the word "womanist" becomes associated with a certain expression of African/black women's liberation.[6] This highlights the notion that in its relation to Western understandings of feminism, the issue if naming is central African women's liberation.

Before African interactions with the West, traditional African societies had avenues through which women could air their grievances about issues concerning them

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[5] Shamase Z. Maxwell, "A theoretical exposition of feminism and womanism in African context," *Gender and Behaviour* 15, no. 2 (2017): 9181-9193; Naomi Nkealah, "Internal and External Crises Africa's Feminism: Learning from Oral Narratives," *Gender & Behaviour* 14, no. 2 (July 2016): 7364–72.

[6] Walker, Alice. *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.

and their lives. The fact that the feminism movement was originally exclusive in nature[7]

called for a renaming of the movement that catered to the struggles and needs of African

women. Issues of poverty and racial discrimination were also part of the black female

experience and African women's priorities were therefore different from those of other

feminists. However, it is also interesting to note that female African experiences differ

from those of African Americans. The presence of slavery produced race relations in the

US that may have mirrored colonial social interactions but certainly did not copy them.

According to Maxwell Z. Shamase,[8] there is a womanism that is American based, and

one that is African based. She notes that there is a thorough misunderstanding of

feminism in Africa as many women and men shy away from associating themselves with

it.

This particularity of the African consciousness creates a gap for African writers

and scholars to fill. Although many recognize the efforts throughout history of African

women to empower themselves, they have been unable to associate these efforts with the

same efforts in the west. When speaking of her wariness concerning feminism, Chikwene

okonjo Ogunyemi says,

> [O]ur harping on the embarrassing situation of privileging English over any
> Nigerian language to avoid a language civil war exacerbates psychological
> questions raised by the centrality of Liberty equality and sister hood in feminine
> discourse. Feminism's 1789 roots in the French Revolution tribal with the
> exclusions implicit in colonialism endanger our own ideological foundations since
> historically we have served as the butt of a very bad European joke should we not
> be wary of this bicentennial sloganeering with its theorizing?[9]

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[7] hooks, *Feminist theory: From margin to center*.

[8] Maxwell, "A theoretical exposition of feminism and womanism in African context."

[9] Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The dynamics of the contemporary black female novel in English," *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society* 11, no. 1 (1985): 63-80.

Although Okonjo-Ogunyemi's thoughts point to the somewhat paternalistic and

reductionist nature of western treatment of any African ideals, not all African writers

agree with an aversion to the western feminism movement. Ama Ata Aidoo says,

> when people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I'm a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every man and every woman should be a feminist - especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burden of our own development. Because it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism.[10]

In light of this tension, many African scholars have sought to redefine what feminism

tailored to the African peoples can look like.

African Feminisms and Their Roots

Naming is central to understanding African feminism; therefore, African scholars

have established movements similar to their western counterpart that seek to privilege the

voices of African women. This thesis will be in conversation with Hudson-Weems'

'Africana womanism', Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's 'womanism'/ 'woman

palavering', Obioma Nnaemeka's 'nego-feminism', Akachi Ezeigbo's 'snail-sense

feminism', Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's 'stiwanism', and Catherine Acholonu's

'motherism'. Although these movements differ in their particularities, they are united in

their desire to highlight the struggles of the African woman. According to Naomi

Nkealah, these African feminisms that arose due to the exclusion of white feminism

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[10] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "African Feminist Discourse: A Review Essay," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 58 (2003), 31.

sought to "speak feminism (1) from and African cultural perspective and (2) an African geopolitical location and (3) an African ideological viewpoint."[11] These movements gravitate towards the cultural foundations of traditional African societies. However, to create movements that cater to the incredibly diverse peoples of Africa is no easy task, and it will later become apparent that some of these movements are less inclusive than desired, and some are more specific in their ideologies than they ought to be if they are really for the benefit of all African women.

The role of culture in African women's lives is a particularly interesting one. At times, culture has been used to keep societal behaviors the way they are. However, scholars argue that culture is dynamic and always evolving and should therefore not be used only when it convenient. Obioma Nnaemeka states that "culture should not be dismissed as a negative or neutral factor in development; rather, attempts should be made to find out in what ways culture is a positive force that can serve development well."[12] African scholars are aware of the rich diversity of the different African cultures, and this prevents the creation of a definitive form of African feminism. Instead of trying to define African feminism by one standard, they draw from different aspects of African cultures to buttress their modes of empowering African women.

Community, motherhood and wifehood are some of the themes that are central to understanding African women's lives. Evidence for the celebration of motherhood and

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[11] Naomi Nkealah, "(West) African Feminisms and Their Challenges," *Journal of Literary Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 2, 2016), 62.

[12] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and Her Compatriots." *Research in African Literatures* 26, no. 2 (1995 Summer 1995): 80–113.

wifehood is found in the proverbs and cultural practices of peoples around the continent.[13] For many African communities (albeit not all) motherhood is only achieved through wifehood. As mothers are valued for the purpose of procreation, wives are also valued because of their potential motherhood. It is the ambition of many girls to be married, because through marriage women become mothers.

Although motherhood and wifehood are celebrated in many African societies, there are still challenges that African women face as a result of this cultural fixation on womanhood. Remi Akujobi explains that social acceptance can be dependent on motherhood, and a woman's worth is dependent solely on her successfulness at being a mother, which requires marriage and at times, subservience to men.[14] Women are able to gain social status and power by becoming mothers, with some cultures like the Yoruba believing that women are given certain privileges and powers when they become mothers. This poses a problem for women who are barren or do not desire to have children, as they are ostracized by society and are sometimes portrayed as sexually deviant. Patricia Hill Collins argues for culturally specific themes that can be refashioned in response to the changing contexts of black women's lives as opposed to a rigid view of motherhood and wifehood that most people seem to hold. She states, "just as culture itself is dynamic and changing, the enduring themes characterizing a Black women's

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[13] Itai Muwati, ZlFIKILE Gambahaya, and Tavengwa Gwekwerere. "Africana Womanism and African Proverbs: Theoretical Grounding of Mothering/Motherhood in Shona and Ndebele Cultural Discourse." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1–8.

[14] Remi Akujobi, "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2011), 2.

standpoint become shaped in dialogue with actual social practices."[15] In African women's lives, motherhood and wifehood have the potential to be rigid sources of social control that dictate what women in society ought to be doing. However, they have also been avenues through which women have garnered social and political power. African writers and scholars have acknowledged the importance of these themes in African life, and some have come to include motherhood and wifehood in their philosophies as they propose new forms of feminism that are tailored to the lives of African women.

Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism affirms the dignity of motherhood and wifehood as women in these societies are free to exercise their roles as nurturers, wives and mothers. Weems uses the word "womanist" as opposed to "feminist" to dissociate her ideology from its western counterpart, and she states that African womanism is specifically tailored to African "considerations and sensibilities."[16] Weems describes the Africana womanist as "self-namer, a self-identifier, family centered, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert the African man in struggle, whole, authentic, a flexible role player, respected, recognized, spiritual, male-compatible, respectful of elders, adaptable, mothering and nurturing."[17] Catherine Acholonu, a proponent of motherism, explains that motherism is anchored in motherhood, which is a central part of many African cultures. Nkealah notes that Acholonu's motherism entrusts "the rural woman with the task of nurturing society."[18] There is a strong sense of worth that comes from the African

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[15] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, Routledge, 2002, 174.

[16] Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana womanism: Reclaiming ourselves*. Routledge, 2019.

[17] Nkealah, "(West) African Feminisms and Their Challenges," 63.

[18] Nkealah, "(West) African Feminisms and Their Challenges."

woman's role as wife and mother. African women exercise agency as women who are in total control of their homes, and this differs from the western view that the roles of wife and mother can be used as tools for female oppression.

Wifehood in isolation is not as important as considering the importance of including men in African women's liberation. As opposed to some strains of western feminism that portray men as 'the other' or the oppressor, many African scholars and writers agree that African men ought to be part of African women's liberation. Co-operation with men through the institution of marriage (and other means) is central to many women's idea of what it means to be African and a champion of women simultaneously. In her argument for Nego-feminism[19], Obioma Nnaemeka calls for a movement that seeks to negotiate with men. Her form of feminism is more collaborative and seeks to include the voices and lives of men. She states that, "the language of feminist engagement in Africa (collaborate, negotiate, compromise) runs counter to the language of Western feminist scholarship and engagement (challenge, disrupt, deconstruct, blow apart, etc.)."[20] She bases her understandings of African women's liberation on a foundation of shared values that binds the African peoples together.

Akachi Ezeigbo in her argument for snail-sense feminism goes further to assert the need for African women to consider gender equality as a battle that requires caution, flexibility, and negotiation with patriarchal forces in society. She states that the snail-

[19] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," *Signs* 29, no. 2 (2004): 357–85.

[20] Nkael Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," 380.

sense feminist "negotiates her way around patriarchy, tolerates sexist men, collaborates with non-sexist ones, avoids confrontation with patriarchs, and applies diplomacy in her dealings with society at large." [21] It is borne of a tendency to cooperate with men, and this is different from the default disposition that Western feminism operates from. Mary Ogundipe-Leslie advocates for the word "stiwanism" to represent African women's liberation thought and movement. She argues for the coinage of a new term so that this new term will deflect some of the animosity for the word "feminist" and bring men into the conversation. Ogundipe-Leslie states that men are not the enemy, but rather the subjugation/ oppression of women is. At the root of these movements is the recognition of the fact that men and women share the world and should therefore share in the joys and suffering of their fellow human beings.

Community is another central aspect of African life and it influences African women's liberation movements. In many African cultures, the relation of the individual to the collective differs from Western cultures where the individual is more prominent. In communistic cultures, the inclusion of all is central to any belief or ideology that affects a part (for eg. Women) of the whole (society). It should therefore come as no surprise that women in pre-colonial Africa expressed their discontent with existing social norms collectively. In precolonial Africa, women's powers were manifested in different ways. There were collective avenues through which women interacted with their societies. One example is the anlu practices of the Kom women in Cameroon. The Kom women would wear men's clothes and at times strip naked to voice their unhappiness about social, political or economic issues. This shows that individuals in these communities sought to

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[21] Akachi Ezeigbo, "Snail-sense feminism: building on an indigenous model," in Nkealah, "(West) African Feminisms and Their Challenges," 68.

act as part of a unit prior to colonialism. The same applies to men in these communities as the village meetings held by men in Igbo cultures tells of a disposition towards the collective. Therefore, ideologies that privilege the individual story over the collective are less likely to be widely accepted by African women. Angela David states, "I think that this is an era where we have to encourage that sense of community particularly at a time when neoliberalism attempts to force people to think of themselves only in individual terms and not in collective terms. It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism."[22] There is a gravitation towards the collective that is distinctly African, and this is important as scholars consider thought, identity and gender on the Continent.

As African women exercise their collective agency, individualistic ideologies seem threatening to the structures that already exist. However, the concept of collectivity is not always beneficial to all as Nkealah points out. She argues that many versions of these feminisms exclude other groups due to their specific nature. She states, "one of the contradictions of African feminisms is that each brand is conceptualized for a particular segment of the gender-conscious human population to the exclusion of other segments."[23] This creates a problem of not just exclusion but also credibility as the feminist movement is based on the founding principle that women ought to be included in the processes that determine their lives. This sort of exclusion therefore chips away at the credibility of the feminist movement and undermines it. One example is the exclusion of some African women based on sexual orientation as Kolawole states, "to the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a nonexistent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is

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[22] Angela Y Davis, *Freedom is a constant struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the foundations of a movement*, Haymarket Books, 2016, 49.
[23] Nkealah, "(West) African Feminisms and Their Challenges," 64.

completely strange to their world-view."[24] Nkealah argues that any valid African ideology must include all African women, irrespective of sexual orientation, and she claims that this should be especially important considering the stigmatization and oppression that African lesbians face.

Issues of geography are also important when considering the focus of many feminisms that exist. Most of the scholarly work on African feminism that has come from the continent has favored West African women's voices, particularly Nigerian women. The question of whether or not West African women can speak for all women must be considered, and if they can, what checks do they put in place to ensure that the experiences they put forward are not specifically tailored to West African women, but all African women? This discourse also raises the question of whether feminism should be particular to a certain group or be broad enough to encompass the whole. This is at the root of renaming feminism, but it also comes to play in the details of *African* feminism.

Scholarly discourse is also tailored toward a certain educated class that does not account for the majority of African women. When we think of continental penetration, we must consider how many ordinary women on the continent have access to these works, and more importantly, whether or not these works actively re-shaping the ways that they navigate the spaces they inhabit? Nkealah wonders if the highly intellectual language of these theorists considers the language constraints of the literate but not intellectualized populace, and she mentions the fact that many of these theorists seem to live outside the continent. Does their geography affect the way they understand what it means to be an African feminist? And can their solutions be effectively applied in a

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[24] Nkealah, "(West) African Feminisms and Their Challenges," 65.

particularly African context? Or are they more applicable to African women living in the West?

The following chapters of the thesis will be as follows: the first chapter considers the individual's relation to the collective as it is portrayed in the works of these women. I analyze the approach to rebellion that older authors such as Flora Nwapa in *Efuru,* Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter,* and Ama Ata Aidoo in *Changes* use. These women's approach has historical ties to the growing appreciation for African women's perspectives. The second chapter focuses on the urban space and the effect is has on gendered expectations and relationships in colonial Africa. I analyze Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood, Changes* and Tsi Tsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions.* I argue that the urban space altered the ways women could interact with their traditional institutions such as marriage and motherhood in ways that furthered their individual agency. The third chapter highlights the strained relationships between mothers and daughters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Nervous Conditions.* I show how the mothers of these works are agents of their destinies, despite the societal expectations that pressure them into conformity. In all these works, the relationship between the individual and the collective is complex and has been masterfully rendered by these women authors.

Understanding African women's lives and consciousness is extremely complex and equally as rewarding. History has taught us that women on the continent, with or without scholarly theorizing are asserting their dignity and agency and will continue to do so. The authors of this thesis portray the lives of women in their works to prove this exact point. As I consider the relationship between the individual and the collective, my hope is

that the reader will again be reminded of the fact that bestowing dignity and equality to all is at the heart of these women's works. They show that it is possible to love a culture's traditions even when you are critical of them.

CHAPTER ONE

Self and Society in *Efuru, So Long a Letter* and *Changes*

This chapter will consider the genealogy of literature by female writers that has

come out of the continent, particularly Flora Nawapa's *Efuru,* Mariama Ba's *So Long a*

Letter and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*. All these authors explore issues concerning the

individual's relation to the collective. Specifically, it will consider the tension between

individual agency and societal expectation. This could also be referred to as 'rebellion' or

'resistance.' By highlighting the specific ways older female writers have approached

resistance in their works, this chapter will show that the older approach, which is of an

acquiescent and subtle nature, provides solutions to these tensions that are felt locally.

They therefore place the tools for societal change within the communal sphere. Older

writers captured a shift in African cultures that on one hand recognized the restrictions

that traditional and colonial society in Africa placed on women, and on the other hand

sought to deconstruct these societal assumptions within an African framework. Kamene

Okonjo notes that since Nigeria's independence, there had been a "visible and deliberate

move to resuscitate those roles that women traditionally played in public life."[1] Although

Okonjo's argument mainly shows the ways colonial rule upset the traditional structures

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[1] Kamene Okonjo, "The dual-sex political system in operation: Igbo women and community politics in midwestern Nigeria." *Women in Africa: Studies in social and economic change* (1976), 57.

that granted Igbo women power and dignity, her statement points to the re-inscribing of global concepts such as feminism and individualism within a local framework.

Many scholars recognize the patterns of literature that have emerged from the Continent's rich literary history. There may be a temptation to stereotype the older authors as markedly passive compared to younger ones, but that does no justice to the rich literary traditions of these women. Uzo Esowanne notes that the tradition/modernity, past/present dichotomy produces an erroneous understanding of the genealogy of female African writers. He notes that it makes for "periodization of African women's writing into a non-feminist "old guard" and (Grace Ogot, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa) and a corps of rebellious young renegades (Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta and Nafissatou Diallo).[1] Those characterizations are arbitrary as many scholars such as Kamene okonjo, Nick T. Lu and Obioma Nnaemeka have noted that the genealogy of female African writers has always worked towards the same goal: the empowerment of the African woman. This chapter will therefore show the ways these authors have inscribed resistance within African tradition through their characters. My primary questions are the following: what can be said about their approach to rebellion and its differences with contemporary approaches? What can we learn from this approach to rebellion? How does our knowledge of these women's works change the way we understand African women's liberation in literature?

In considering the genealogy of literary texts that have come from the continent, there exists a phenomenon that is worth considering, and it concerns the different approaches to rebellion between older era writers and younger ones. Although there are

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[1] Uzo Esonwanne, "5 Enlightenment epistemology and" aesthetic cognition." *Politics of Mothering* (1997), 83.

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nuances to these differences, it can be argued that the cultural and philosophical traditions

that produced writers like Ba and Nwapa informed the ways that they approached

important issues concerning women. The protagonists of their novels usually find

themselves in situations where they must navigate tensions between their individual

agency and the societal expectations placed on them. There is an inclination to

compromise in the works of earlier authors, and this is expressed through characters like

Efuru and Ramatoulaye. Despite this inclination, these women assert their individual

agency by question the existing societal norms, and successfully do so with their local

communities.

Efuru and the Struggle for Individual Independence

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, one of the first published books by a Nigerian woman, is

one of the oldest books in the long tradition of female African writers. The novel tells the

story of Efuru, a strong, beautiful, resourceful woman from the Igbo town of Uguta.

Throughout the novel, Efuru greatly desires to be a mother. She first marries a poor man

(Adizua), even though he is unable to pay her bride price and is loyal to him. He ends up

leaving her for another woman, and she is left with his mother and his aunt (both of

whom she is very fond of). After the death of her first child by Adizua, she returns to her

father's home, but only after she has searched for her husband and failed.

Efuru then marries Gilbert, a man from her age group who follows the traditions

and asks for her hand in marriage. During their marriage, Efuru is unable to conceive, and

she encourages Gilbert to marry another wife. Although she is kind to the other wife,

there is contention between her and the new younger wife and she struggles to be a good

and faithful wife to Gilbert, despite his new strange behavior. Gilbert disappears for a few months, and even when Efuru's father dies he does not come to show his respects to her family as her husband. Efuru begins to worry and trust Gilbert less, and when he returns, she falls deathly ill. Gilbert accuses her of being unfaithful to him, and Efuru is deeply hurt, but also decides to leave him once she is well. She is eventually chosen to be a worshipper by the goddess of the lake, a goddess that is known for her beauty but does not have many children. Efuru decides to leave her second marriage, and therefore serve the goddess.

Although Efuru does not actively challenge the traditions of Uguta, she navigates them in ways that benefit her. Lu defines tradition as "a dynamic and incorporative process that exerts pressures on individuals in noticeably different ways rather than a fixed system of archaic values and practices."[2] Efuru's sense of selfhood is therefore magnified through her choice to either adhere to or deviate from tradition throughout the novel. By making Efuru marry Adizua who cannot pay her bride price, even though Igbo culture looks down on such a man, Nwapa displays that the power to choose and make important (and selfless) decisions is not merely reserved for men, but is central to the lives of women. Obioma Nnaemeka notes that Efuru is constantly at crossroads between negotiating and accepting culture, so that her individual preferences are met.[3] Nick Lu goes further to argue that societal acceptance of Efuru's decision shows the dynamic nature of tradition as it is actualized in the lives of people, noting that Efuru's decision to

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[2] Nick Lu, "Between Tradition and Modernity: Practical Resistance and Reform of Culture in Flora Nwapa's Efuru," *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 2 (2019), 128.

[3] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Feminism, rebellious women, and cultural boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and her compatriots." *Research in African Literatures* 26, no. 2 (1995): 80-113.

delay her dowry payment demonstrates the flexibility of her society's marriage customs.[4] Efuru therefore challenges societal expectations by asserting her individual agency and does so from within that society. Even after Adizua abandons her, Efuru is willing to wait for him even though it is not her duty to do so any longer since he has failed to fulfill his duties as a husband. Her choices are therefore not dictated by societal law, but by her individual preferences.

In her second marriage to Gilbert, she endures the cantankerous nature of his new wife without complaining, and when she and his new wife Nkoyemi realize that Gilbert has a son with another woman, Efuru treats the child kindly and is not angry because Gilbert had an affair, but because he kept it from her.[5] By contrasting Efuru's reactions to the events around her with Nkoyemi's, Nwapa solidifies Efuru's disposition as one of constancy, faithfulness and compromise. After Gilbert's absence, Efuru confronts him about the rumor that he went to jail for theft (something that is considered very dishonoring in the Igbo society). He denies this claim and Efuru willingly believes him, without asking what exactly he had gone to jail for. The narrator states that "few women would be satisfied with this. But Efuru, good natured as she was, did not even find out what the foolish act was. Since her husband did not steal, she was at peace."[6] Efuru goes on to defend Gilbert in the face of Nkoyemi's fear for their family's honor, and at every moment she is sure to preserve her nobility and the respect of others.

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[4] Lu, "Between Tradition and Modernity", 129.

[5] Flora Nwapa, *Efuru*, London: Heinemann, 1966, 196.

[6] Nwapa, *Efuru*, 210.

Nwapa makes no mistake by emphasizing these qualities of Efuru, and in fact she states that it is these qualities that make Efuru a good and virtuous woman. Mbah notes that Efuru therefore represents an ideal that is to be aspired to because of her patience (with her cowife), perseverance (with Adizua's behavior), benevolence (with her community), and her strong-mindedness.[7] Although Efuru's virtue is praised by the author, her actions are not solely dictated by her adherence to tradition, but by her own strong self-determination. Naana Banyiwa-Horne states that Efuru is willing to step out of traditional structures once they stifle her individuality.[8] Efuru is therefore willing to deviate from tradition when it does not suit her individual preferences. At the same time, her quest for self-determination does not in any way hinder her adherence to cultural traditions, and vice versa. Efuru therefore surprises the people of her community by making decisions that have no traditional backing even though she is regarded as an ideal woman of Uguta. Although the women of Nwapa's novel are geographically fixed, they invoke the universal experience of self-determination as each decides how to live her life.

Efuru's power lies specifically in the fact that she is highly active in her local community and can therefore challenge norms from within, by adhering to them and deviating when they do not suit her. Lu notes that the novel could not have been a rejection of existing cultural values, but rather "an experimental attempt to adapt and reinterpret those values in ways that reflected a slowly but surely emerging attitude among women toward issues that concerned them most immediately and intensely, such

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[7] Emmanuel Mbah, "Gender Power Relations: Efuru as an Ideal Type." *Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000): 371.

[8] Naana Banyiwa-Horne, "African Womanhood: The Contrasting Perspectives of Flora Nwapa's' Efuru'and Elechi Amadi's' The Concubine'." (1986): 119-129.

as motherhood and marriage."[9] She is therefore an agent of cultural change, and also an adherent to Igbo tradition. Lu notes that *Efuru* gave a voice to "an emergent structure of feeling among a new generation of women who came of age in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria."[10] The novel functions not just as a literary tool to better understand the lives of Igbo women, but a historical imprint on the literary traditions of the continent. At once utterly specific in its rendering of Igbo traditional beliefs, and at the same time universal in its portrayal of the individual's quest for selfhood. *Efuru* is a testament to the depth of understanding and experience that reading works by female African writers provides.

Ramatoulaye and the Tension between Self and Society

Mariama Ba's protagonist Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* also navigates the tension between cultural expectation and individual agency. Although her decisions are guided by tradition and culture, she is by no means limited by them. Rather, she finds that she too must deviate from tradition in order to thrive, and her deviation encourages cultural reformation that could otherwise not have occurred. The book tells the story of Ramatoulaye, an educated, middle-class, Senegalese Muslim woman who struggles with accepting her husband's decision to marry a second wife. The novel, which uses an epistolary format, is constructed as a letter to her friend Aissatou who lives abroad, but will soon return to Senegal. After Ramatoulaye learns of her husband's (Modou's) betrayal, she realizes that his new wife is actually her daughter's friend. However, Modou

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[9] Lu, "Between Tradition and Modernity", 135.

[10] Lu, "Between Tradition and Modernity", 133.

dies before Ramatoulaye can face him, and she is drawn into both a physical struggle for her home, and an internal struggle within herself.

Ramatoulaye has a range of experiences after her husband's death that strengthen her convictions, but also elicit deeper questions about the roles that culture, and religion ought to play in one's life. Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have experienced the betrayal of their husbands (by taking second wives), but they self-actualize in different ways. Dubek states that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are "sister spirits who have similar life experiences but choose different methods of salvation."[11] Prior to Modou's death, Ramatoulaye is faced with the difficult decision to either leave her him after he has taken a new wife or to stay with him (which is what is expected of her). She eventually decides to stay as Modou's wife, but only after she seriously considers leaving him as she writes to Aissatou, who previously left her own husband for the same reasons. Although the women make starkly different decisions, both women are supportive of each other's decisions. Ramatoulaye says her friend is "an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life;"[12] when Moudu abandons his first family forcing Ramatoulaye to fend for them, Aisssatou buys her friend a car when she learns of Ramatoulaye's struggles with public transportation. Both women are deeply hurt by the betrayal of their husbands, and the cultural expectation to simply accept polygamy encourages them to question the legitimacy and equality of such cultural practices.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou each represent a different aspect of resistance to the colonial project that points to tensions even between women who wish to challenge

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[11] Laura Dubek, "Lessons in Solidarity: Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ on Female Victim(Izer)s," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 30, no. 2 (April 4, 2001), 213.

[12] Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter,* Waveland Press, 2012, 15.

patriarchal authority. Ramatou is aware of the inequality of a system that automatically

expects women to agree to polygamy, and she voices her discontent with the situation she

is in. She sticks to her convictions about marriage and refuses to be swayed by societal

pressures or expectations. She resists the desire to conform or be comfortable and

chooses instead to forge a new path for herself, thereby asserting her individual agency.

Ramatou's approach is different to her friend Aissatou's, who decided to leave

her husband after he took a second wife even though both women face the same struggle.

According to Omofolabo Ajayi, Ramatoulaye deals with her pain within a cultural

setting, while Aissatou refuses to compromise and creates a new path for herself.[13]

Aissatou's reaction to her husband's decision is also an act of resistance, however she

displaces herself from her community in the process of exercising her individual agency.

Irene D'Almeida characterizes this this tension between isolating and ethnographic

rebellion as one that arises from the situation where women want to adhere to tradition,

and also reject the aspects of traditional expectations that tie them down.[14] In speaking of

Aissatou's decision, Ramatoulaye states:

> You are advised to compromise: "You don't burn the tree who gives
> fruit." You were threatened through your flesh: "Boys cannot succeed
> without their father." You took no notice. These commonplace truths
> which before had lowered the heads of many wives as they raised them in
> revolt, did not produce the same desired miracle; they did not divert you
> from their decision. You chose to make a break, a one-way journey with
> your 4 sons…[15]

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[13] Omofolabo Ajayi, "Negritude, Feminism, and the Quest for Identity: Re-Reading Mariama Bâ's 'So Long a Letter,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 3/4 (1997): 35–52.

[14] Irene d'Almeida, "The Concept of Choice in Mariama Ba's Fiction." *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (1986), 167.

[15] Ba, *So Long a Letter,* 32.

Ramatoulaye does not condemn her friend's decision, but rather characterizes it as brave. She supports Aissatou's decision and is in full solidarity with her. Aissatou's decision to rebel is therefore expected by feminist readers and is praised as a true exercise of female individual agency.

On the other hand, Ramatoulaye's decisions are not always viewed as completely feminist. Ajayi notes that her decisions are not liberating enough, and as she matures into adulthood, she grows into a life of compromises. She paints Ramatou as a woman who in her youth sought to challenge societal traditions and expectations, but thirty years later is the guardian of those same traditions. Irene D'Almeida goes on further to say, "it is even likely that Ramatoulaye has become more than simply a 'guardian' and "has internalized a number of stereotypes about women and women's behavior."[16] These authors bring new insights to that decisions that Ramatoulaye takes as Ajayi notes that Ramatoulaye's decisions do not disrupt the system, even though she successfully recognizes the sources and forms of her oppression.

However, I argue that Ramatoulaye is indeed perpetuating feminist ideals, but she does so within her cultural context. It is important to consider the fact that Ramatoulaye is Ba's protagonist, and her decision to stay reveals a nuanced approach to rebellion that captures the complexity of Ramatoulaye's position. Ramatoulaye's decision to stay, is representative of a proclivity to compromise, and this consequentially places her in a position to better reform the societal institutions that restrict her individual freedom. Through the individual workings of her life, Ramatoulaye actively works to change her

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[16] d'Almeida, "The Concept of Choice in Mariama Ba's Fiction", 167.

community. Lisa Boyd notes that "she is not lacking in the courage of feminism" but instead seeks to transforms feminism and society in her own way through herself and her daughters.[17] Like Efuru, she positions herself locally so that the effect of her resistance is magnified. Aissatou's departure automatically distances her from her home, she experiences cultural isolation and her act of rebellion though brave and shocking, leaves little room for subsequent discussion about the matter. Once Aissatou leaves, most of the conversations had are *about* her, and very few are had with her. She has few opportunities to engage with the people in her community, and even fewer to explain the pain she felt after being betrayed. Through her act of resistance, Aissatou dislodges herself from her local community in ways that make it more difficult (though not impossible) to effect cultural change.

Ramatoulaye on the other hand wrestles with a nuanced approach to rebellion. She considers leaving Modou, but the thought of beginning again deters her. "Leave? Start again at zero after living twenty-five years with one man, after having borne twelve children? Did I have enough energy to be alone the weight of this responsibility, which was both moral and material?"[18] Aissatou also considers the hardships that accompany her decision to leave, but she is resolute in her decision to rebel in this way. Ramatoulaye's decision to stay opens new scenarios she would otherwise not have encountered. After Modou's death, a marriage proposal from Daouda Dieng shocks and pleases her. Daouda has loved her for many years and has been a true friend. However,

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[17] Lisa Boyd, "To be a Woman! To Live the Life of a Woman!: The Transformation of Feminism in Mariama Ba's' So Long a Letter'." *Camel Tracks: Critical Perspectives on Sahelian Literatures* (2003), 269.

[18] Ba, *So Long a Letter,* 41.

Daouda is married and he wants Ramatoulaye to be his second wife. She wrestles with the hope of material comfort, whole also considering her implicit acceptance of the same practice (polygamy) that hurt her first marriage. Her decision to reject a rich, well-educated man who loves her is an extremely difficult one to make, and it shows the depth of thought and complexity that surrounds her new position as widow of Modou. She exercises her agency, and is true to her convictions, thereby preserving her dignity.

She is also offered a marriage proposal by Tamsir, Modou's brother who seeks to inherit Ramatoulaye as his wife (this was the expectation of her Muslim society); in rejecting him, she actively resists the pressures of societal propriety. Her refusal of Tamsir is an outright challenge to the traditional institution of marriage. She resists cultural expectations of her by rejecting both men, and these decisions are consequentially felt by more people in her community. Edris Makward notes that although Ramatoulaye decides to stay with Modou, she still expresses her individual agency by refusing to marry Tamsir which is in accordance with Senegalese Muslim traditions.[19] Ramatoulaye is therefore just as feminist in her decisions as Aissatou as she successfully navigates the tensions between self and society, and goes further than Aissatou by doing so with her cultural context.

Like Efuru, Ramatou periodically clashes with tradition, as when it does not suit her individual preference, she deviates from it. Makward notes that Ba did not ascribe to tradition blindly, but also sought to express her dissatisfaction with certain abuses of

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[19] Edris Makward, "Marriage Tradition and Woman's Pursuit of Happiness in the Novels of Mariama Ba." (1986): 271-281.

tradition that impede progress.[20] Ba's work is not specifically challenging all traditional

practices, but rather the fabric of society that pressures women to forsake their individual

preferences for the sake of propriety. Ajayi notes that the feminism represented in Ba's

work advocates an ideology that is specifically tailored to the African experience. She

states, "it is a feminism that combines the quest for African identity with personal

independence, a responsible individualism committed to a responsive collectivity. It

supports self-fulfillment but not self-centeredness; celebrates motherhood, but not as the

flag of identity."[21] This reading of Ramatoulaye's decisions aligns with Ajayi's thoughts

in a way that affords Ramatoulaye the agency to actively change her own life and still be

an included member of her local community.

Both Ramatoulaye and her friend are convinced that a husband's decision to

marry a new wife is an act of betrayal. For both, it is reprehensible, and it highlights the

unequal expectations society has of men and women. However, these two women differ

in their decision to rebel against these societal expectations. Aissatou's decision

ultimately leaves her culturally isolated, and unable to actively engage with her

community. She leaves for a different country and Ramatoulaye expects that her return

will show the ways in which she has lost touch with their culture. Ramatoulaye's

resistance is characterized by an arduous, patient labor than has strengthened her

convictions, while still placing her at the center of her traditional community. Ba's novel

is simultaneously ubiquitous and particular in its portrayal of the female African

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[20] Edris Makward, "Marriage Tradition and Woman's Pursuit of Happiness in the Novels
of Mariama Ba", 274.

[21] Ajayi, "Negritude, Feminism, and the Quest for Identity", 48.

experience. Boyd notes that by choosing the epistolary form to express the female consciousness, Ba links herself to the "innovators of women's literature," while connecting herself to Senegal.[22] She therefore draws from the universal female experience, while tailoring her story to the specific experiences of Senegalese women. Like Nwapa, Ba's depiction of the individual struggle for self-determination draws from the long tradition of writers who have gone before her, while simultaneously placing the tools for change in the hands of individual women.

Esi, the Urban Space and the Quest for Individuality

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* tackles issues of self-determination amid changing socio-economic norms in post-colonial Ghana. *Changes* tells the story of Esi, a modern woman working in Accra, Ghana. She falls in love with an attractive, wealthy man named Ali, and is willing to become his second wife. Ali who is married to his childhood friend Fusena (who gives up her career to be his wife) tries to convince Esi that being his second wife is beneficial to both of them. Esi divorces her first husband, becomes Ali's lover, and eventually agrees to marry him. At first, things between the two go well, but as they continue their relationship, Ali begins to spend less time with her and more time with his new secretary. By the end, Esi leaves Ali but does not divorce him. The two remain friends, and Ali continues to have relationships with other women.

Aidoo's Esi is a cosmopolitan woman, and she therefore has cultural concerns that differ from those of Ramatoulaye and Efuru. She earns more than her first husband Oko and is not respected by his family; Oko is resentful of the fact that she chooses to

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[22] Boyd, "To be a Woman! To Live the Life of a Woman!: The Transformation of Feminism in Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter'", 261.

pursue her career rigorously. Her life is fraught with tensions between cosmopolitan

desires to advance in her career, and traditional cultural desires (usually voiced by her

mother and grandmother) to yield to the societal forces that uphold community, family

and wifehood. Esi's decision to leave Oko is therefore a break in the traditional thought

concerning marriage. Even though those around her try to convince her to stay with him,

she decides to live alone.

Esi's actions are therefore a source of confusion for both communities she

straddles. The advice from her community (her friend Okopuya, her mother and

grandmother) does not deter her decision to act as an individual. Her decision to become

Ali's second wife is considered rash by those around her, and many people around her

wonder why a modern woman would choose to practice polygamy. Maria Olaussen notes

that the wisdom of Esi's mothers, as they do not support her becoming a second wife, is

not depicted as outdated. Rather, their world view has been influenced by their need for

survival in a world that leaves them powerless.[23] In contrast to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou

who detest this practice, Esi's acceptance of it seems unnatural. As she navigates the

tension between individual agency and cultural expectation, her decisions deviate from

both the traditional and modern norm. According to Jane Bryce and Kari Dako[24],

> Esi takes the extremely unconventional course of refusing to move with
> her husband to his new posting, insisting on living alone in her
> government bungalow in Accra. Esi is a deviant in terms of Akan culture,
> and an eccentric in terms of conventional middle-class behavior. This

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[23] Maria Olaussen, "'About Lovers in Accra'-Urban Intimacy in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story,*" *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 2 (2002 Summer 2002): 61–80.

[24] Janice Liddell, and Yakini B. Kemp. "Arms Akimbo: African Women in Contemporary Literature." (1999).

deviancy is a deliberate rewriting by Aidoo of the text of women's roles in Ghana.[25]

At times, Esi ascribes to traditional practices, and at other times she deviates from the norm depending on her individual wants and needs. It is interesting to note that that Fusena, although not a protagonist also chooses to stay in a polygamous marriage even though she could choose to reject it. Fusena is almost akin to Ba's Ramatoulaye, but these authors have chosen to portray them differently. For Ba, Ramatoulaye's experience is central to our understanding of this tension, for Aidoo Fusena's experience is secondary to the experiences of Esi and Okpuya.

In order to better understand Esi's decision, it is helpful to consider the distance she has put between herself and her culture. Living in modern Accra, without close-knit lifestyle that accompanies village life, Esi usually feels isolated. Her family lives far away in the village, and her only friend Okopuya is also very busy. Modern life has stripped away the natural support systems that exist in villages and homesteads, particularly those that exist in domestic spheres. Olaussen argues that the urban sphere becomes a place where African women are free to challenge male authority, but they are also left without communal support. The next chapter will consider the role of the urban space in the development of an African woman's consciousness.

Through the struggles on Efuru, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou and Esi, these authors highlight the struggle for the realization of individual selfhood. The complex nature of their characters mirrors the complex dealings of our own lives as readers, as we strive to make sense of our world. They invoke the universal experience of self-determination,

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[25] Ginette Curry, "Women from Ghana: Their Urban Challenges in Ama Ata Aidoo's Novel *Changes: A Love Story,*" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, no. 1 (2011): 179–98.

while simultaneously tethering these experiences to the African landscape. Although older authors portrayed characters who were more acquiescent in their approach to rebellion, they show that these women still exert their individual agency in culturally specific ways. Characters like Efuru, Esi and Ramatoulaye broaden our understanding of the relationship between the African woman and her society. Through these characters, the authors show that it is possible to preserve the inherent dignity of others even as tensions between self and society persist. Readers and scholars have much to learn from older approaches to rebellion as they consider contemporary solutions to age-old problems that have plagued humanity for centuries. Older authors have struggled with these issues in light of the colonial framework and younger writers and scholars must now do the same as they stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before them.

CHAPTER TWO

Urbanization and Womanhood in *Changes, Joys of Motherhood* and *Nervous Conditions*

      Urbanization has changed the way many women in Africa live their lives as cities have become places of dynamism and vitality. Both in literary works and historically, women have played a central part in the formations of Africa's modern cities. This chapter will consider the role of the urban space in experiences of womanhood by characters, specifically as they pertain to the institutions of marriage and motherhood. How does the urban space change the ways women experience womanhood? How do authors depict these changes? And what could the differences between the rural and the urban tell us about the feminine consciousness in an African context? This chapter will argue that the urban space radically alters the ways women interact with the institutions of marriage and motherhood. These changes produce opportunities for women to effectively challenge these institutions and create new paths and identities for themselves that would otherwise not have existed. However, because of this, women are also left culturally isolated and bereft of communal support in urban spaces.

      I will explore themes of cultural isolation and redefinition of gender roles in the following works: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Tsitsi Dangaremgba's *Nervous Conditions*. I will begin by providing a brief historical introduction of the urban space in post-colonial Africa, and I will then provide a close reading of these works to

show the ways they capture the history and social flexibility of the urban space as it pertains to African women's lives.

Historically, particularly during colonialization, the urban space in African countries functioned as a place of cultural intermingling. As people from different parts of a country (and at times even other countries) flocked to a city, it produced an atmosphere that was characterized by change and mobility. The urban space quickly became a place of economic, cultural and political association as cities attracted a lot of economic and political activity in colonial and post-colonial Africa. Catherina Coquery-Vidrovitch notes that urban spaces existed in precolonial Africa, but were radically altered by the arrival of European Industrial Revolution influences.[1] She states that the industrial revolution (amongst other phenomena) led to cities becoming main political and cultural forces.[2] The formation of western-influenced cities on the Continent saw many different social structures form on the Continent from creolization in Portuguese and Dutch areas, to Islamization in desert ports.[3]

With regards to the lives of women, the urban space provided opportunities for the redefinition of gender roles in. As women migrated for want of better economic opportunities, communal structures changed. Women were separated from communal supports systems, they drew attention from police and other authorities (this was

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[1] Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "AFRICAN URBAN SPACES: HISTORY AND CULTURE," in *African urban spaces in historical perspective*, ed. Steven J. Salm, and Toyin Falola, (Boydell & Brewer, 2005), xv.

[2] Coquery-Vidrovitch, "AFRICAN URBAN SPACES: HISTORY AND CULTURE," xv.

[3] Coquery-Vidrovitch, "AFRICAN URBAN SPACES: HISTORY AND CULTURE," xvi.

particularly the case with unmarried women), and they sometimes deviated from the dictates of traditional norms. Kathleen Sheldon notes that women brought rural skills and retained rural sensibilities as they began new lives in urban cities.[4] She notes that in some cases, women migrated to cities to distance themselves from unwanted aspects of their rural lives, and while some migrated with male kin, others sought to escape abusive or non-supportive husbands.[5] Many unmarried women also migrated to urban areas and this changed the family structures in many African cities. African women authors captured these changes in different ways that encourage further analysis.

All the authors under consideration in this chapter explore the institution of motherhood in light of the African experience. Emecheta's novel talks about the ironic results of pursuing motherhood and the ultimate feminine to the extreme. Nwapa's story, although in praise of motherhood and wifehood, provides a cultural criticism on the ways these institutions exclude those who are barren or unmarried. Dangarembga and Ba talk about cultural isolation and the failures of these institutions alone to afford these women dignity and value, and through Esi's life, Aidoo talks about the new changing social norms that encourage a redefinition of marriage and motherhood. These authors recognize the important role motherhood and wifehood play in African life. However, they go further to prod and analyze the ways in which these important institutions can also function as means of exclusion. Through depictions of the urban space, they show

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[4] Kathleen Sheldon, "Markets and gardens: Placing women in the history of urban Mozambique," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 37, no. 2-3 (2003), 359.

[5] Sheldon, "Markets and gardens: Placing women in the history of urban Mozambique," 359.

that modernity requires a redefinition of these institutions in ways that afford African women their inherent dignity and agency.

The Urban Space and Redefinitions of Motherhood

Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* tells the story of a woman named Nnu Ego, who is the daughter of a local chief. Nnu Ego's mother, Ona, dies within a year of Nnu Ego's birth, and the circumstances surrounding her birth point to the belief that her guiding spirit (or *chi*) is the spirit of a former slave of her father's. When Nnu Ego becomes of marrying age, she is betrothed to a man, Amatokwu, but is unable to become pregnant. Nnu Ego is convinced that being a mother is central to a woman's existence. After the failure of her first marriage, her father betroths her to a man named Nnaife who lives in the city of Lagos. She and Nnaife are happy for a while, she sells cigarettes as he works for an English family in Lagos, and she gives birth to a son for him. However, one day she finds her son dead in their home and attempts to jump off a bridge in Lagos.

As she heals from the pain of her son's death, she gives birth to a second son and decides to stay home and take care of him. However, financial pressure and Nnaife's sudden loss of a job force her to continue selling cigarettes. One day, Nnaife learns that he has inherited his newly deceased brother's wives according to Igbo culture, and one agrees to go to Lagos to live with him and Nnu Ego. Adaku and her daughter arrive in their home, and this produces tensions in the home between the two wives. Both Nnu Ego and Adaku give birth to children for Nnaife, however both women believe they are not given enough money to feed their children and so they go on strike. The women's attempt

is a failed one, as Nnaife does not succumb to their demands, and he soon learns he is being sent to fight in World War II. Nnu Ego gives birth to two sets of twins in this period and Adaku decides to move out with her daughters due to the harsh conditions their poverty has created. Adaku eventually becomes a prostitute and Nnaife decides to bring a teenage wife to their home in Lagos. By the end of the novel, the family moves back to the village Ibuza and Nnu Ego dies alone on the side of the road with nobody to care for her, despite the large number of children she had.

Urbanization and the fluidity of emerging cities reinforces some of the hardships that the protagonists of these works face. Foremost of these hardships is the experience of communal isolation which is common in urban areas. Emecheta portrays the urban space as a place that isolates women from one another, and thereby has the power to redefine gendered relationships. As opposed to Efuru in Nwapa's novel who is surrounded by communal support from the women around her, Adaku and Nnu Ego are in fierce competition for Nnaife's affections and more importantly his money. Maggi Phillips states that in spite of Efuru's suffering, her hardship is offset by women's extended-family networks.[6] Esi in Aidoo's *Changes* also experiences cultural isolation as a result of her geography, and therefore has no female support system in Accra. The urban space therefore acts as a space of cultural isolation for women, but also a place where existing gender norms can be redefined. Phillips describes the urban space as an alienating place

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[6] Maggi Phillips, "Engaging Dreams: Alternative Perspectives on Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Writing," *Research in African Literatures* 25, no. 4 (1994), 93.

that lacks resources[7], and this can create competition between women who would otherwise have cooperated in the rural areas.

Nnu Ego's displacement from her traditional community also ushers in new relational expectations. While she was still in her village, she had a communal support system that consisted of extended family and other women in the community. These women provided Nnu Ego with help at pivotal times in her life. For example, when she returns from her first husband's home to her father's house, his wives mentally nurse her back to health.[8] However, in Lagos she is bereft of the communal ties that exist in rural communities and she even begins to compete with Adaku, someone she would have originally cooperated with back in the village. Harry Olufunwa notes that,

> the ambivalence of a culture on the threshold of momentous change puts
> Emecheta's characters, male and female, in an anomalous position, because there
> is no longer an unassailable certainty about what constitutes appropriate roles for
> men and women. Values that were appropriate to agrarian societies are out of
> place in the city, especially in urban centers like Lagos, London and Calabar,
> where the bulk of the action takes place.[9]

Olofunwa believes that the urban space ushers in a social change that changes gender expectations and relationships. Teresa Derrickson goes further to argue that the new circumstances created by the urban space stripped Igbo women of their agency. As Nnu Ego reflects on her position in the new urban space[10] Derrickson states, "this excerpt is

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[7] Phillips, "Engaging Dreams: Alternative Perspectives on Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Writing," 94.

[8] Buchi Emecheta, *The joys of motherhood*, Heinemann, 1994, 35.

[9] Harry Olufunwa, "Earning a life: women and work in the fiction of Buchi Emecheta," in *Africa and its significant others*, (Brill Rodopi, 2003), 40.

[10] Emecheta, *The joys of motherhood,* 137.

key in locating the source of Nnu Ego's anguish not in her position as a mother per se, but in her position as a woman who is asked to assume the same obligations of her 'agrarian background' within a new cultural setting that confers "none of the booty" normally associated with such labor."[11] The urban space can therefore be a place of hardship for some African women, as Nnu Ego becomes a victim of the newly-imported capitalist culture that exists in the cities of colonial Africa.

Urbanization encourages the deviation from otherwise socially accepted paths in order for people to navigate new identities and experiences. This can have both good and bad consequences. In Emecheta's novel, the urban space strips Nnaife of his dignity as he is forced to do menial jobs for foreigners in Lagos. Amidst the rapid change associated with urban life, Nnu Ego and Adaku are forced to rely on Nnaife for money, a situation that would otherwise have not occurred in the rural village. Maria Olaussen argues that "for the majority of women, however, the lack of established structures often means increased financial responsibility without clear ideas of where conjugal or lineage support is due."[12] Nnu Ego's experience is also economically redefined in Lagos as she grapples with the increasing industrial influences in the city.

Urbanization also alters understanding about traditional institutions such as wifehood and motherhood. For Nnu Ego, the institution of motherhood is deconstructed in the urban space, Nnu Ego can no longer fully glory in the pride of being a mother because she is not in a communal setting where it is conducive to do so. Instead, she is

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[11] Teresa Derrickson, "Class, culture, and the colonial context: the status of women in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood." *International Fiction Review* 29, no. 1/2 (2002), 41.

[12] Maria Olaussen, "About Lovers in Accra": Urban Intimacy in Ama Ata Aidoo's "Changes: A Love Story," *Research in African literatures* 33, no. 2 (2002): 61-80.

now forced to live in Lagos where individualism is prized over traditional beliefs about motherhood. Derrickson notes that Nnu Ego is injured "by the new political economy of Lagos" that no longer recognizes and idolizes the institution of motherhood, thereby rewarding women for being mothers.[13] This also applies to her position as senior wife, as her privileges as senior wife are undermined by the competitive nature of the urban space. Derrickson states that Nnu Ego's situation is worsened by the capitalist forces that operate in urbanized Lagos, even though she no longer enjoys the benefits of being a senior wife.[14] Nnu Ego's dire situation is portrayed as such by Emecheta to highlight the ways in which strict adherence to societal norms can hurt those who are not willing to be open-minded. Nnu Ego refuses to let go of the beliefs she had grown up with. Despite her abject poverty and the many sacrifices she makes, she believes that her children or her marriage will fix everything in the end. Nnu Ego's ironic death points to Emecheta's criticism of the ever-sacrificial wife/mother. Although Nnu Ego is a victim in many ways, she pursues the ideals of motherhood and wifehood in excess and is therefore not a successful character.

Although women like Nnu Ego are negatively affected by urban redefinitions, others thrive in this place non-conformity. The urban space provides an opportunity for the determination of self, due to geographical isolation. Adaku decides to leave Nnaife's home and fend for herself, the same way Esi decides to marry Ali in Aidoo's *Changes*. Olufunwa states that Emecheta's characters initially seek to fulfill their traditional roles

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[13]Derrickson, "Class, culture, and the colonial context: the status of women in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood," 45.

[14] Derrickson, "Class, culture, and the colonial context: the status of women in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood," 46.

as wives and mothers, but they gradually begin to self-actualize and consider their own

wants and desires instead of always putting others first.[15] Like Esi, the women in *The*

Joys of Motherhood are welcomed to redefine the institution of marriage as they find the

traditional pillars that hold this institution up cannot hold the same way in the urban

space. The urban space therefore becomes a site of redefinition for both the institutions of

motherhood and wifehood.

Individual Agency in Changes and the Young Female Experience

Aidoo's *Changes* takes these redefinitions further through her protagonist Esi.

Her novel explores the redefinition of modern wifehood amid the changing social norms

in urban Africa. Esi's decision to become Ali's second wife may seem almost culturally

backward to the reader. Urban Accra is a place where women are freer from societal

pressure to occupy more public roles. It would therefore come as a surprise to see

Aidoo's protagonist opt-in to a polygamous marriage, as polygamy becomes less popular

in modern spaces. However, I argue that Esi's decision to become Ali's second wife is an

exercise of her individual agency, and the urban space facilitates her decision-making

process. Bryce and Dako state that,

> Esi takes the extremely unconventional course of refusing to move with her
> husband to his new posting, insisting on living alone in her government bungalow
> in Accra… Esi is a deviant in terms of Akan culture, and an eccentric in terms of
> conventional middle-class behavior. This deviancy is a deliberate rewriting by
> Aidoo of the text of women's roles in Ghana."[16] Her ability to break convention is

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[15]Derrickson, "Class, culture, and the colonial context: the status of women in Buchi
Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood," 46.

[16] Ginette Curry, "Women from Ghana: their urban challenges in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel
changes: a love story." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, no. 1 (2011): 179-198.

made possible by the rapidly changing gender norms and expectations of urban Accra, a process Anna-Leena Toivanen describes as a "paradigm of itinerancy, mobility, and displacement.[17]

Esi dynamically challenges the institutions of marriage and wifehood, she feels her monogamous marriage to Oko is stressful as he requires too much of her time. This does not stop her from agreeing to be a second wife; in some ways, she ascribes to traditional practices and in other ways, she deviates from them.

Esi exercises her individual agency by taking decisions that best suit her preferences; however, not all scholars view Esi's decisions as expressions of her intellectual and societal freedom. By considering the role of the domestic, Toivanen believes that Esi's decision to sleep with and cook for Ali facilitates a newfound captivity that is still tied to the institution of marriage. She notes that Esi is complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchal gender roles as she agrees to cook and sleep with Ali, thereby solidifying her own captivity.[18] For Toivanen, although Esi is able to divorce herself from societal expectations and leave her first husband Oko, her marriage to Ali subsequently puts her in a situation where she must again wrestle with the institution of marriage. Irrespective of the differing views on Esi's second marriage, it is difficult to ignore the fact that many of her decisions are taken of her own volition. Either for good or bad reasons, she is isolated from the communal support she would originally have in the

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[17] Anna-Leena Toivanen, "Anxious Mobilities in Accra and Beyond: Making Modern African Subjects in Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story," *Matatu: Journal for African Culture & Society* 49, no. 2 (July 2017), 309.

[18] Toivanen, "Anxious Mobilities in Accra and Beyond: Making Modern African Subjects in Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story," 319.

village; this encourages her to redefine marriage and motherhood in ways that would otherwise be unthinkable in the rural space.

The theme of cultural and communal isolation is also prominent in Tsi Tsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions.* The novel is a bildungsroman (or coming-of-age story) about a teenager named Tambudzai (Tambu) in rural Zimbabwe during the national struggle for emancipation. After her brother's death, she is allowed to go to the mission school where her uncle Babamukuru is the headmaster. He and his family have just returned from England, and Tambu lives with him and his family. As Tambu lives with her comparatively affluent uncle and cousin Nyasha, she begins to learn about the realities of her uncle and aunt's lives. She grows close to her cousin Nyasha and the two experience variations of Babamukuru's controlling behavior. As Tambu becomes more aware of herself and the world, she begins to assert her point of view to the point where she defies Babamukuru's wishes one day, something she had never thought she could do. Her cousin Nyasha becomes more rebellious in the face of Babamukuru's authority, and she eventually develops bulimia. Tambu is accepted to a prestigious convent school where she is one of only 5 black girls in the school. We learn at the end of the novel that she has grown intellectually despite her continual struggle to make sense of the two worlds she now inhibits intellectually, the western and the African.

Dangarembga explores issues of cultural isolation due to geographical differences through the differences in Tambu and Nyasha. Although her characters are adolescents, their lives are still able to reflect the tensions that exist in African women's lives (both young and old). It Their experiences mirror the societal and individual tensions that African women in many of these novels face. Nyasha is born into a wealthy Eurocentric

world and is alienated from her traditional culture during her childhood years in England.

She suffers a loss of cultural history, language and even a gap in identity. When she

moves back to Zimbabwe, she does not live in a rural village, but rather in the city with

her father where she interacts with different people groups. Due to these circumstances,

Nyasha's life has been greatly influenced by western ideals of family and social structure.

Although she has contact with her extended family, she does not interact with them as she

lives in the city. She therefore lacks the sort of communal support that would have

existed if she lived in the village. Liz Gunner states, "Nyasha, whose simpering,

'civilized' mother is unable to help her, cannot survive the confrontation with her

'civilized'-and thus doubly patriarchal father and lacks the rootedness in Shona

community and place which might, the text hints, give the individual the strength to

survive."[19] Due to Nyasha's physical and cultural isolation, she is unable to successfully

find her own voice amid the noise of colonialism and civilization.

 Tambu on the other hand, is better equipped with the communal ties and support

needed to navigate the changing terrain of urban Zimbabwe. Maggi Phillips states that

Tambu's family although poor, maintains a direct link with the traditional subsistence

farming and customs, and this provides her with a strong foundation upon which to base

her feminine rebellion.[20] She absorbs the culture and tradition of her people as she works

on her grandmother's farm awaiting her time to fully assert herself. According to Phillips,

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[19]Liz Gunner, "Mothers, Daughters and Madness in Works by Four Women Writers: Bessie Head, Jean Rhys, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ama Ata Aidoo," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 14 (1994), 145.

[20] Phillips, "Engaging Dreams: Alternative Perspectives on Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Writing," 94.

these practices that are steeped in tradition are invaluable tools for Tambu. In comparing the two cousins, it becomes clear that Tambu is more successful than her cousin at navigating a life that is traditionally African, and western-educated. Nyasha's cultural dislocation causes a psychotic break she is unable to heal from, while Tambu has flourished despite her physical limitations (poverty). Gunner states that Tambu skillfully negotiates the tension between self and societal pressure because of her rootedness in Shona ways, while Nyasha fails to do so. Tambu's cultural upbringing help her to skillfully negotiate "both familial patriarchy and the subtle mental dominance of the colonial system."[21] Tambu's rootedness in Shona culture prepares her for the difficult ideological struggles she must overcome.

Despite the different outcomes of the two girls, their experiences in the urban space encourage a redefinition of values especially for Tambu. As Nyasha becomes bolder and more vocal in her approach to rebellion, Tambu's silent rebellion in refusing to attend her parent's Christian wedding is a testament to the freedom partly granted by their living in the city. On Nyasha's rebellion, Elizabeth Stone suggests that Nyasha's resultant bulimia is a product of her decision to rebel in the wrong spaces. She states,

> she chooses the wrong spaces to perform her rebellion, spaces so overlaid with patriarchal dominance that her protests are easily dismissed. Unlike Nyasha, who performs the good daughter's role by eating at the dinner table, only to reject that role in secret by vomiting in the bathroom, Tambu disrupts the patriarchy undergirding her oppression without causing herself the undue bodily harm that Nyasha's bulimia causes her. By refusing to go back to the village and prepare the food for the wedding feast – a kind of domestic labour that keeps women subservient to men – Tambu is not only rejecting Babamukuru's shameful

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[21] Gunner, "Mothers, Daughters and Madness in Works by Four Women Writers: Bessie Head, Jean Rhys, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ama Ata Aidoo," 145.

construction of her parents' marital status, she is also refusing to be replaced in peasant space as a domestic laborer.[22]

Tambu's rebellion is therefore viewed as more constructive, as it avoids harm to herself even as she defies the patriarchal links to Shona culture. Dangarembga shows through the unique stories of young girls the strength of individual will the exists in the lives of many African women. As these women inhibit new spaces (the way Tambu goes to the city for example) they exercise their individual agency in ways that complicate our understanding of the female African experience.

Aidoo, Emecheta and Dangarembga have portrayed the complex circumstances that surround the female experience of the urban space. Without denying the central role womanhood (motherhood, wifehood) plays in the lives of African women, they have utilized the urban space to effectively challenge the societal institutions that govern the lives of African women. Their literature touches on these issues in ways that are deeply rooted in African culture, and their tales complicate our views of African cultures and their women. Through Esi's unorthodox decisions in urban Accra, Nyasha's intense cultural isolation and Nnu Ego's extreme approach to womanhood, all these authors argue for a redefinition of community that adjusts to the wants of contemporary life. As more African women experience geographical or psychological dislocation, these women's works remind them of the importance of community. However, community should not limit, but promote the flourishing of all its members. Community is about

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[22] Kim Stone, "In the Bedroom: The Formation of Single Women's Performative Space in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41, no. 1 (March 2006), 122.

becoming, and as African women interact with these works, they are encouraged to form new communities that uplift them and cater to their needs. The next chapter will consider the relationship between mothers and their daughters in the works of women writers as these relationships lead to insights about the institution of motherhood and the experience of the young African woman.

CHAPTER THREE

Passive Mothers and Dissatisfied Daughters in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Nervous Conditions*

African women's rhetoric is concerned with different aspects of female consciousness. In all these texts, mothers and daughters are portrayed in different ways. This chapter will analyze the strained relationships between mothers and daughters in these texts by highlighting the distinct approach African literature takes to mother-daughter dynamics. Daughters tend to view their mothers as passive acceptors of patriarchal pressure. Although these women's actions are physically passive, I argue that their silence and inaction (because that is really what differentiates them from their daughters) is borne from an older approach to resistance that has been corrupted by western influences, particularly western gender roles. I postulate that the complexity of mother-daughter relationships reveals the workings of mothers' individual agency, despite the societal pressures that render them (mothers) as passive in their disposition. This chapter will be exploring these themes through analysis of Tsitis Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. I will begin by giving a brief overview of the role that female support plays in the lives of African women, and how it is portrayed through these texts. I will then shift my focus to the strained mother-daughter relationships in these texts to highlight the societal constructs that limit African mothers.

Many scholars recognize the central role motherhood plays in the lives of African women. With Catherine Acholonu's argument for motherism, the exultation of

motherhood in many African cultures, and the continued interest in motherhood and womanhood in African literature, it is important to consider the African mother and her relation to society. Itai Muwati notes that "motherhood stands at the center of African life as a major organizing rubric around which life is constructed, sustained and fulfilled."[1] However, in literary works by women African writers, motherhood is not always idealized and is at times scrutinized as a tool for societal control over women. Remi Akujobi notes that in patriarchal societies, womanhood is directly linked to motherhood and can therefore be used as a tool for control.[2] Scholars have also explored the relationships between mothers and their sons. Patricia Hill Collins notes that many prominent African American men praise their mothers, and this creates an archetype of black motherhood that women must henceforth adhere to.[3] Within an African context, the same pressures exist as African societies have placed great importance on motherhood. African women are therefore under pressure to live up to the expectations of womanhood that can impede their individual wants and desires.

In considering the mother-daughter relationship as opposed to other gendered relationships in these novels, it is clear that daughters are at times uneasy with their mothers. As shown in in Chapters 1 and 2, African women are offered gendered communal support through their traditional communities. It could be through the advice

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[1] Itai, Muwati, Zifikile Gambahaya, and Tavengwa Gwekwerere. "Africana Womanism and African Proverbs: Theoretical Grounding of Mothering/Motherhood in Shona and Ndebele Cultural Discourse." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 1 (2011): 4.

[2] Remi Akujobi, "Motherhood in African literature and culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2011): 2.

[3] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 2002).

of older women in the community as seen in *Efuru*, the community between co-wives as seen in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the relationship between sisters (Tambu's mum and her aunt Lucia) as seen in *Nervous Conditions*, or the bond between two young cousins which is seen in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Nervous Conditions*. In all these situations, women form relationships that go on to play central roles in their times of need, as they recognize the need to create community. However, the roles of mothers in the lives of their daughters is more complex than the other relationships of support. In some cases, daughters are frustrated with their mothers, and although they interact with them normally, there seems to be an underlying sense of dissatisfaction that characterizes these relationships. Simply put, these daughters unconsciously think that their mothers are not doing enough to fight societal pressure, and this causes tension between the two.

Society is fraught with expectations of women and mothers, and African mothers are no exception; these pressures can lead to tense relationships between mothers and daughters. African women are expected to raise their daughters according to societal law, bringing them up to recognize and subsequently conform to the dictates of their society. These mothers are also tasked with engaging their daughters on a personal level, and tensions arise between a mother's desire for her daughter's autonomy and her desire to see her daughter accepted into society. Alongside the need to be a perfect mother, these women are faced with the pressure to be a perfect wife, to contribute to the local community, to continually submit to male authority, and to willingly accept the dictates of patriarchal society. Barbara Christian notes that the mother-daughter relationship is central to society's perpetuation of the ideology of motherhood.[4] Carole Boyce Davies

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[4] Barbara Christian, "An angle of seeing: motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood and Alice Walker's Meridian." In *Mothering*, (Routledge, 2016): 95-120.

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notes that the relationship between a mother and her daughter in African literature is one "borne out of conflict and tension,"[5] and argues that daughters are usually a projection of their mothers. She states that mothers usually project their hope for change onto their daughters and goes further to say that a daughter is a mother's participation in the future.[6] Scholars such as Monica Bungaro and Ogaga Okuyade also recognize the strained nature of the relationships between mothers and daughters in African literary texts. These strained relationships point to the dissatisfaction daughters feel with their mothers' inability to cope with societal pressures, and ultimately the roles they see society assuming for them.

The passivity of mothers is therefore a theme that must be explored to better understand African motherhood and by extension womanhood. Why are our young protagonists side-stepping their mothers in search of supports elsewhere? Why is the inadequate or absent mother a trope present in many of these works? I argue that the author's portrayal of mothers in this way points to a failure of society to adequately recognize the pressures that African mothers face, especially as they pertain to African womanhood. Although these women are portrayed to be silent and docile, this chapter will show that their intellectual agency is present even at times when they seem to physically unassertive. They are aware of the societal expectations that exist, and as they try to live up to these ideals, they are subsequently rendered silent at their arbitrariness.

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[5] Carole Boyce Davies, "Wrapping One's Self in Mother's Akatado-Cloths: Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Works of African Women Writers," *Sage.* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 12.

[6] Davies, "Wrapping One's Self in Mother's Akatado-Cloths: Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Works of African Women Writers," 15.

Their struggles, although frustrating to their daughters, paves the way for the younger generation of girls to boldly exercise their agency.

Purple Hibiscus and the passivity of the African Mother

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a bildungsroman about a Nigerian teenager Kambili and her family. The family lives in Enugu, in post-colonial Nigeria, and Kambili's father Eugene is the wealthy owner of a factory and an outspoken newspaper. Eugene is a highly respected member of his community, and a very strict Catholic and he has high moral and social expectations of his family, especially his children. Kambili, her brother Jaja, and their mother live in fear of Eugene, who resorts to chilling acts of violence when he is disobeyed. However, thing begin to unravel in their home when Jaja refuses to go to church, this sets in motion the events that change Kambili's family forever.

Eugene's sister, Aunty Ifeoma, a university professor visits the family over Christmas with her own children, Obiora, Chima and Amaka, Kambili's cousins. After much convincing, she is allowed to take Kambili and Jaja to visit her in Nsukka and for the first time, Kambili experiences a world free of cultural and moral restriction. She compares herself to Amaka who is lively, confident and outspoken, characteristics encouraged by Aunt Ifeoma. As the siblings stay with Aunt Ifeoma longer, they gradually learn more about themselves and Jaja becomes more vocal about his thoughts. Kambili becomes more confident as her aunt's house becomes a refuge for her and Jaja. However, things in the country are tense as Eugene's editor for his paper is killed amid the political struggles of the country. Aunt Ifeoma is fired from the University where she works and

decides to go to America. Kambili is distraught by this news as her only refuge is about to be taken away.

One day, their mother comes to Aunt Ifeoma's house after Eugene has beaten her to the point of miscarriage. Although Aunt Ifeoma urges her not to return to Enugu, she returns with the two children. When the trio return, Jaja becomes more defiant, and he requests that he and Kambili go to Aunt Ifeoma's for the Easter holiday. Eugene agrees and while they are in Nsukka, they hear from their mother that Eugene is dead. The siblings find out that their mother had been poisoning Eugene after she returned from Nsukka. However, Jaja decides to take the blame and ends up going to prison in place of his mother. Three years later, Kambili is thrilled to learn that Jaja will soon be released. She looks forward to a time when she shall visit her aunt in America, and when all the family will be happy again.

In both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Nervous Conditions,* daughters tend to intellectually associate themselves with women other than their mothers, and this is an indication of a strained mother-daughter relationship. Although communal networks in the lives of young women are very important in African culture, communal support provided to young women is at times not inclusive of the protagonist's mother. Young protagonists tend to resist identification with their mothers and instead receive guidance from other women in their communities. Kambili learns from her Aunt Ifeoma more than she learns from her mother and Tambu desires to be like Maiguru (her uncle's wife) more than she does her own mother. Okuyade notes that guidance from a strong network of women is a characteristic of the African female bildungsroman, but that the daughters of these texts refuse to identify with their mothers. She defines the rebellion of daughters in the texts,

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or the refusal to allow their mother's stories to be re-enacted in their lives, as "daughter tongue interference."[7] The same can be said of Nyasha's relationship with Maiguru in *Nervous Conditions*, as Nyasha does not approve of her mother's appeasing behavior towards Babamukuru. With all the girls, it becomes clear that there is something about their mothers they want to avoid, and this automatically creates distance between the two.

Beatrice's passivity in the face of Kambili's abuse distances her from her daughter Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus.* Their relationship is two-fold, as on one hand, they are close and have a shared understanding similar to Kambili's and Jaja's. This is due to the shared experience of abuse that all three members of the family suffer at the whims of Eugene. At times, Kambili is perceptive to her mother's experiences, noticing that whenever Eugene beats Beatrice, she cleans the figurines on the mantle. On the other hand, Kambili recognizes her mother's silence and complicity in Eugene's abuse of the children. Although she is also beaten, there is an underlying tone of dissatisfaction with Beatrice's complicity that begins to grow in Kambili as the novel progresses. Kambili refers to this docility when her mother brings in the clothes she had left to dry. She states, "it was not proper to let an older person do your chores, but Mama did not mind; there was so much she did not mind."[8] This subtle reference points to Kambili's awareness of her mother's perceived passivity. When Eugene finds Kambili looking at the portrait of her deceased grandfather, Eugene beats her to the point of unconsciousness. When she

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[7] Ogaga Okuyade, "Rescinding Orthodoxy, Resuscitating the Mother Tongue: Daughter Tongue interference in African Female Narratives." *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 38, no. 1/2 (2015): 53.

[8] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple hibiscus: a novel*, Algonquin Books, 2012, 19.

wakes up in the hospital, Beatrice is beside her, relieved that she is awake and grief-stricken at the state of her daughter.

> Mama reached out to hold my hand. Her face was puffy from crying, and her lips were cracked, with bits of discolored skin peeling off. I wished I could get up and hug her, and yet I wanted to push her away, to shove her so hard she would topple over the chair.[9]

Kambili is sympathetic to her mother's plight, but she cannot deny the fact that her mother's docility is harmful to her as well; Beatrice is unable to protect her from Eugene's battering, and can only nurse her back to health after the damage has been done. What Kambili fails to realize is that Beatrice is also a victim of both Eugene and of the need to conform to societal expectations, which stifle her attempts at self-assertion. She considers herself lucky to be married to Eugene, and even tells Ifeoma that Eugene chose her out of the many girls that threw themselves at her. Although Beatrice is also a victim, her inability to protect her children (Kambili specifically) creates a gap for female guidance, which Ifeoma fills.

Unlike Beatrice, Ifeoma's unconventional relationship with her society provides her freedoms married women like Beatrice does not have access to. Ifeoma is widowed and therefore a single mother. She does not conform to the societal trope of good wife and mother as both those institutions have been redefined in her case by her husband's death. Her democratic household is the opposite of Eugene's controlling home. She is outspoken and encourages her children's intellectual development. Kambili grows attached to Ifeoma as she is encouraged to find her voice, both physically and figuratively. Ifeoma therefore provides the encouragement and openness needed for

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[9] Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 213.

Kambili to think for herself. As opposed to Eugene's home where nobody speaks of the violent acts done to them, Ifeoma's house is rife with conversations about all things, and she does not shy away from talking about Eugene's abuse of his family.

Beatrice's resistance to tackle Eugene's abuse is partly derived from her notion of what it means to be a good woman in her society. Ogaga Okuyade notes that Kambili's mother's docility is indicative of her subconscious notions of traditional African maternity.[10] For Beatrice, the ideal of a good woman looms over her existence as a woman. In her case, specifically, she feels lucky to be Eugene's wife and therefore wholly ascribes to the role of homemaker. She submits to his male authority over the family, but more importantly she submits to his abuse for most of the novel. Cedric Courtois notes that Beatrice's sense of selfhood is jeopardized as she completely internalizes the patriarchal influences of the society and the family she lives in. He notes that Beatrice adheres to a woman's role in patriarchal society.[11] Beatrice is therefore a product of the patriarchal African society she inhabits. She is pressured into catering for their local community, and she is forced to play the role of "good wife" to an abusive husband. She recognizes the constraints on her behavior, but still strives to conform to society's dictates.

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[10] Okuyade, "Rescinding Orthodoxy, Resuscitating the Mother Tongue: Daughter Tongue interference in African Female Narratives," 56.

[11] Cédric. Courtois, "Third-Generation Nigerian Female Writers and the Bildungsroman: Breaking Free From the Shackles of Patriarchy." *Growing Up a Woman: The Private/Public Divide in the Narratives of Female Development* (2015): 112.

African Mothers and the Pressures of Society

Conversations surrounding these mother's and passivity have not focused on the cause, but rather the results of their passivity. For many readers and scholars, it is easy to characterize Beatrice as docile when compared to Ifeoma's for example. Susan Andrade notes that the wives of the stern husbands, Maiguru and Beatrice are both silly and lose "some of what would be natural dignity."[12] Mainini, Tambu's mother in *Nervous Conditions* is also viewed as a passive reactor to the patriarchal pressures of the society she finds herself in. Andrade notes that Mainini's personal identity second place to the burdens of her role as a mother and wife.[13] Although these women's actions are physically passive, their silence and inaction is a result of the societal oppression they face. Opposed to the women in Nwapa's and Emecheta's novels for example, who wield societal power through their communal networks, these women in the new Africa are burdened with both the isolation of individualism, and the African societal ideals. Women like Maiguru, Mainini and Beatrice face a different set of struggles compared to those of women in Nwapa's novel.

The struggles of women like Beatrice, Maiguru and Mainini are more akin to the struggles of contemporary African women who are products of both globalization and African cultural traditions. They present a modern approach to the African female consciousness that is represented differently in works by older authors. For example, Nnu

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[12] Susan Z. Andrade, "Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels," *Research in African Literatures* 42, no. 2 (2011 Summer 2011): 97.

[13] Susan Z. Andrade, "Bildung in Formation and Deformation Dangarembga and Farah" in *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011):146.

Ego in Emecheta's novel experiences this only when she moves to Lagos city, as gender expectations are radically altered in the urban space. Nnu Ego therefore occupies a particular position as a woman who experiences the communal support of traditional societies and is also thrust into erratic cosmopolitan life. Like Maiguru and Beatrice, her relationship with her daughters is not always engaging and passionate, but rather dismissive. Carole Davies notes that Nnu Ego's relationship with her daughters is one of "avoidance and indifference"[14], and goes further to state that Nnu Ego "lives mentally and physically in the stuffy room of female passivity"[15]. Nnu Ego cares only for her sons and the ways they shall provide for her in the future. Her transitionary position in the genealogy of literary African mothers makes it difficult for her to successfully navigate these tensions. She therefore succumbs to societal pressure that associates a woman's worth with her child-bearing abilities. However, Maiguru, Beatrice and Mainini have been brought up in an Africa that has absorbed western ideals of womanhood and morphed them with African cultural practices.

These women therefore face affronts on both the Western and the African end, thereby rendering them inactive or passive. This passivity is not merely specific to these individual characters, but rather points to a larger trend where women are not capable of guiding their daughters and therefore create gaps that are subsequently filled by other women. Despite these struggles, these women find opportunities to assert their dignity. For example, Mainini's (Tambu's mother) struggles are amplified by her poverty; unlike

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[14] Davies, "Wrapping One's Self in Mother's Akatado-Cloths: Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Works of African Women Writers," 13.

[15] Davies, "Wrapping One's Self in Mother's Akatado-Cloths: Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Works of African Women Writers," 14.

Maiguru, she is not educated and does not belong to the Zimbabwean elite. Unlike

Beatrice, she is not married to a rich husband and is therefore at the mercy of both

poverty and oppression. However, this does not prevent her from recognizing and

disliking her situation. Okuyade states that, "though Mainini seethes with an inner rage at

her social condition, her fatalistic acceptance of the female condition and status places

her in the category of caged women."[16] Okuyade rightly recognizes Mainini's

dissatisfaction with her social condition. However, in her description of Mainini as

simply an acceptor of her status, she robs Mainini of her agency.

Mainini does in fact exercise her individual agency, but not the same way

Maiguru or Beatrice do. Rosemary Gray notes that Tambu's mother is the only one who

is able to correctly diagnose the cause of Nyasha's bulimia, she notes that it is the

"Englishness" that will kill her.[17] She is therefore perceptive, and is capable of thinking

critically despite her lack of education. When she learns that Tambu will go to the Sacred

Heart school, she does not support it and decides to stop eating. Although her abstinence

only affects her, the pain she inflicts on herself is a reflection of the pain she feels due to

her social position. Mainini is therefore an independent thinker who forms opinions about

matters that concern her. Although she is limited in her ability to change matters she

cares about (due to her poverty), she still strives to identify the root of problems that

arise. She is not simply an acceptor of her fate or a mindless cog in the patriarchal

machine. She shows that she is an individual and asserts her dignity is small ways.

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[16] Okuyade, "Rescinding Orthodoxy, Resuscitating the Mother Tongue: Daughter Tongue interference in African Female Narratives," 61.

[17] Rosemary Gray, ""Unnatural Daughters": Postmodernism and Tsitsi Dangarembga's "Nervous Conditions,"" *Commonwealth (Dijon); Dijon* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 2.

Mainini's position is taken a step further in Maiguru's case, as Maiguru's

dissatisfaction moves her to action. Like Beatrice, Maiguru lives with a stern husband

and therefore bends to his whims. She is just as educated as Babamukuru (Tambu's

uncle) but submits to his authority in the home. She gives him the money she earns, and

she is the woman of the home. Even Maiguru, an educated and elite Zimbabwean woman

is stifled by the patriarchal pressures of the culture she inhabits. Like Mainini, Maiguru

recognizes her position in comparison to her husband, but she takes it further than

Mainini and speaks out about her oppression. When she and Babamukuru have a fight, he

tells her leave if she is not happy and she eventually decides to leave him. It is interesting

to note that Nyasha when considering whether or not her mother will leave after the fight

has a tinge of awe in her voice. Tambu notes that she had never heard Nyasha talk about

her mother that way.[18] Although Maiguru comes back to her family, the act of leaving

points to her agency and her ability for action at times when she feels that her selfhood is

being compromised.

Beatrice takes defiance to the next level in Purple Hibiscus as she not only asserts

herself, but harms Eugene in the process by poisoning him. Like Maiguru, Beatrice also

leaves Eugene after her causes her to miscarry and goes to Ifeoma's house while Kambili

and Jaja are already there. Ifeoma encourages her not to go back, but like Maiguru

Beatrice also returns to Eugene. It is interesting to note that these exercises of individual

agency are followed by a return to the marital home. Coming back, rather than leaving

shows a heightened sense of autonomy for these women. However, autonomy becomes

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[18] Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, Harare, Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Pub. House, 1988, 175.

extreme as after her return, she begins to poison Eugene, and this eventually kills him. Through careful study of the passive mothers, it is clear that their passivity is not merely due to their indifference to their social positions, but rather points to the failures of African society to champion these women's rights to selfhood without isolating them from communal support systems. Unlike Ifeoma, and Lucia who are not married, Maiguru, Mainini and Beatrice must contend with the institution of marriage alongside their motherhood. This leaves room for gaps in their motherly obligations and creates spaces for people like Ifeoma in Kambili's life for example. Okuyade states, "the character of Ifeoma has three-fold effects on Kambili. She is, first of all, the maternal figure that offers guidance. She helps Kambili distinguish between right and wrong through her religious belief, and helps her find her rhythm and balance in a society that is choked by the asymmetric gender configuration."[19] In the same way, Tambu decides to look to Lucia and Maiguru for guidance instead of Mainini.

As readers and the daughters of these women contemplate their mothers' actions, they are encouraged to consider the ways these women's lives and decisions have made room for even bolder affronts to oppression. Both novels are told through the eyes of young girls coming into adulthood and as Tambu, Nyasha and Kambili watch their mothers, they are moved to greater action despite their initial dissatisfaction with their mothers. Even though Maiguru is educated, she is subject to her educated daughter's scrutiny. In the same way Beatrice although wealthy, is scrutinized (albeit subtly) by Kambili, and even Mainini who is limited by her poverty is scrutinized by Tambu.

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[19] Okuyade, "Rescinding Orthodoxy, Resuscitating the Mother Tongue: Daughter Tongue interference in African Female Narratives," 56.

Although their scrutiny may seem unsympathetic, it also moves them to deeply contemplate their position in society and subsequently express their selfhood. Although Okuyade notes that these daughters seldom desire to be like their mothers, their mothers inevitably provide guidance for these girls, albeit guidance of a different sort. They are able to learn from their mother's mistakes, as sometimes learning what not to do is just as important as learning what to do.

These mothers through their "passivity" point to the real problems plaguing African society: arbitrary gendered expectations that seek to limit the agency of women. They are therefore the strongest sources of guidance for these young girls as they come to learn about themselves and the societies they live in. Motherhood has been and will always be central to understanding the African consciousness. As African mothers live out their experiences, their daughters, sons, communities and even nations have much to learn from their struggles towards selfhood.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has tackled the role of literary works in the lives and history of African women. By reading the stories of women from Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria, we are drawn into the lived experiences of the authors and the women they write about. Although their books are fictional in terms of matter, they truthfully capture the challenges and experiences of real women. They use fiction as a more accessible tool to talk about important societal issues. Their works highlight the impact that fiction and literature can have on our lives, even if the subject matter is historical. These women draw on universal themes such as individuality, empathy, autonomy and agency and their books are rich sources of history and social critique that broaden our understandings of contemporary African life. From the political economy to culture and religion, these women (amongst many others) are at the forefront of discussions concerning the modern African woman.

By specifically exploring the tension between individual agency and societal expectation, readers and scholars alike are encouraged to consider the ways we experience and at times perpetuate these tensions. The role of the urban space in redefining gender roles and expectations is central to understanding the lives of contemporary African women. How should women and men interact with cultural beliefs in a dynamic environment? These authors challenge the assumption that the urban space functions in the same manner as the rural. They encourage a new interaction between

Africans and their traditional beliefs, one that recognizes the impact that communal isolation and industrialization have on the female African consciousness. Through exploration of motherhood and wifehood, readers and scholars are challenged to reconsider the institution of motherhood and the gendered expectations associated with being a good mother. Many of these expectations are arbitrary and seek to limit the individual agency of African women. All these rhetorical claims show that literature plays an important role in our lives; these women authors have shown that literature is an effective method of societal critique. As readers, writers and scholars gather to discuss and analyze these works, they create communities of people who are willing to respect and dignify the voices of African women. These conversations serve to open our eyes to the experiences of our brothers and sisters and gives us the empathy to effectively help and uplift those around us.

Although these recommendations are readily made available to African scholars and readers of African literature, the greater challenge is allowing for these conversations to spread to other parts of public (and private life). How do we encourage these sorts of conversations across the continent? How can these women's words influence culture? I think that it begins with the appreciation and recognition of literature. There are direct links between their literature and contemporary cultural phenomena in African countries. For example, many Africans are welcome to the idea of revising cultural beliefs that exclude other members of society. Many countries are revising the laws that prevent women from fully participating in public life, and global events have helped put a spotlight on the ways some of these societies can be doing better. The formation of reading groups, the championing of female African writers (both new and old) and most

importantly, supporting the women around us are some of the ways the legacy of these women will continue to thrive. At the heart of these events is the recognition that we share the world, and responsible to and for each other. As we uplift others, we uplift all of humanity.

Whether or not these authors ascribed to a variation of feminism, the fact remains that their works uplift the tenets of feminism. By writing about African women's lives, they have shown that the stories and experiences of African women matter and should be heard. Although many of their works were about a different time period, the conversations that their works elicit are still relevant today. They have masterfully woven their social and cultural critique into domestic stories about universal experiences such as betrayal, suffering, community, and empathy. They exemplify a feminist approach to literature and history that is rooted in African sensibilities. As contemporary African women strive to make sense of the world, they do so with the help of author such as these.

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