

**HEALING TONGUES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF  
ORATURE ON LITERARY TEXTS BY BLACK WOMEN**

**by**

**Olubunmi Oyinsan**

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Dated 5 September 2006

Supervisor: Dr. Linda Christiansen-Ruffman

Committee Member: Dr. Azza Anis

Committee Member: Dr. Marjorie Stone

Examiner: Dr. Gugu Hlongwane

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Dedication	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Theory	8
Chapter 3: Phillis Wheatley	34
Chapter 4: Lorraine Hansberry – A Raisin in the Sun	45
Chapter 5: Ama Ata Aidoo - Changes	63
Chapter 6: Buchi Emecheta - The Joys of Motherhood	79
Chapter 7: Toni Morrison – Beloved	93
Chapter 8: Mariama Ba - So Long a Letter	111
Chapter 9: Tsitsi Dangarembga - Nervous Conditions	128
Chapter 10: Conclusion	150
Works Cited	161
Appendix	169

## **Abstract**

Most theories designed to appraise literary works by Africans and people of African descent have acknowledged the major influence of orature, but the concept (or conceptualisation) of orature in these works, mainly by men, has been focused only on limited aspects of orature. This thesis critically examines four theories: boleka criticism proposed by Chinwezu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike (1980); the blues as code and force as explicated by Houston Baker Jr. (1984); the signifyin(g) monkey as proffered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.(1998); and the African imagination which has been put forward by Abiola Irele (2001).

Using a more holistic, feminist conception of orature, this thesis examines the ways in which orature in all its ramifications has impacted the works of seven women writers who are African or of African decent. The writers examined are: Phillis Wheatley, Lorraine Hansberry, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Toni Morrison, Mariama Ba, and Tsitsi Dangarembga. In a bid to examine the relevance of orature to their works, it highlights the presence of dialogic exchanges between their works and oral lore.

This thesis maintains that a dialogue exists between Black women writers and orature in more ways than male critics have acknowledged. It also shows that true to African oral tradition, intertextual dialogue takes place among these women writers.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Jokotola Adekunbi Dada, an astounding repository of oral history who kindled in me a love of history.

It is also dedicated to the memories of my grandmothers: Solabomi Aduke Sowoolu (1900 – 1976) and Dorcas Folashade Dada (1902 - 1992) – inveterate story tellers both, their stories have continued to light my path.

And to the memory of my mother – in - law, Oni Oyinsan (1922- 2004), whose othermothering has been a source of invaluable strength.

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I am grateful to Dr. Marjorie Stone, Dr. Joelle Cauville and Dr. Azza Anis, for supporting me in various ways through the course of my master’s program.

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I also wish to acknowledge Ms. Dolly Williams and her family for ‘adopting’ me as their sister.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner and best friend, Soji Oyinsan for gently nudging me to follow my dream and my children Soji (Jr) and Tobi for understanding and putting up with my need for a “room of my own.”

# Chapter One

## Introduction

As a writer, I know I have been greatly influenced by the stories which I was told as a child by my maternal grandmother. Although I did not have the privilege of growing up in a traditional African setting where moonlit story-telling sessions were part of the daily routine, my grandmother who looked after us when my mother went out to work told the most fascinating stories about the city of Lagos where we lived and where she had been brought to live as a child. Her stories kindled not only a love of that city in me but also a profound love of stories which translated into my love of reading and subsequently writing and film making.

Unfortunately, when I was growing up in Nigeria, women writers did not enjoy the kind of literary attention that their male colleagues did. Like elsewhere in the world, it is only recently that the voices of these literary foremothers have come to be reclaimed and acknowledged. Whilst growing up, I did not have access to the works of any Black women writers except Mabel Segun who wrote a book for children titled My Father's Daughter (1965). The reason was mostly that women writers were never on our school reading list but also that women did not enjoy nearly as much critical or publishing attention as their male counterparts.

I started writing because I was inspired by my grandmother's stories. My writing has also been about claiming a voice or voices for women as the case may be, by creating female characters from a woman's perspective. I did this because the women in my grandmother's stories were very different from the women in the books I had to read. Most of the female characters in the male narratives which I was made to read at school

were either completely silenced or ended up as ornaments or weak and docile victims. A good example of this kind of characterization can be found in Things Fall Apart (1959) by Chinua Achebe, which is the most widely read book written by an African. Where female characters happen to have any distinct character at all, they end up as witches, untrustworthy creatures or prostitutes like the lead character in Jaguar Nana (1961) by Cyprian Ekwensi.

I am in agreement with Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1987), who identifies some major stereotypes of women in the works of African male writers. Ogundipe-Leslie posits that one such stereotype is “the figure of the ‘sweet mother’, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self sacrifice. This figure is often conflated with Africa ...”(6). In addition to this, she also identifies the “sophisticated city girl” who is often contrasted with the rural woman,” and she cites the two female characters in Okot B’pitek’s Song of Lawino (1966), Clementine and Lawino, to demonstrate how these stereotypes have little if anything at all to do with the realities of the lives of women. She decries such characters as reflecting “the mission educated man’s vision of Africa” (7).<sup>1</sup>

Most of my books, stage plays and films have had female protagonists, and I have found myself reacting to orature. Most of my work has developed in response to not only the flat, uninteresting, and often invisible portrayal of women in books but also as a result of the fact that most African societies are still predominantly oral in nature. Although the temptation initially was to create only ‘perfect’ characters, I have tried to acknowledge, where a female character has flaws, the causes of such flaws rather than to propagate the

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<sup>1</sup> For other female characters in the canonical works by the first generation of African male writers that exemplify the mother tropes see Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Weep Not Child (1964). Another variation of this trope is the old woman who is past childbearing age as depicted by Iya Loja, a character in Wole Soyinka’s Death and the Kings Horseman (1975).

assumption that women are naturally weak, evil or devious. I also believe that it is important to show women not only as victims, but as active determinants of the course of their lives as well as active elements in their communities.

My interest in orature and its impact on the works of women writers was also kindled by the realisation that when I sat down to write, I found myself responding to several stimuli. Sometimes it was the lyrics of a song, a particular proverb, the strands of a conversation I had heard somewhere, something I had read or seen in a stage play or on the television which played at the back of my mind. I also wondered about the process of writing for other women writers and began to have conversations with some of them about this process.<sup>2</sup> It was also in a bid to interact with the various elements with which I was determined to dialogue that I ventured into film making. Since the Nigerian society is still largely non-literate, I felt I could better communicate through drama.

It was therefore natural that when I was invited to submit a proposal along with my application for my master's program, I would turn to this area that had held my interest for so long. The purpose of my thesis is therefore to understand the ways in which orature has impacted the works of women writers who are African or of African descent. My aim is to explore the influence of orature on their thematic and stylistic approaches. In a bid to examine the relevance of orature to their works, wherever possible I will explore the presence of dialogic exchanges between their works and oral lore. Finally, I will also investigate the intersections between the way orature affects the works of African women writers and those of African women in the diaspora.

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, I conducted interviews with seventeen women writers from all over African (amongst whom were Ama Ata Aidoo, Laretta Ngcobo and Tsitsi Dangarembga to mention just the three who appear in this thesis) which were serialised in my weekly newspaper column for the Daily Times of Nigeria in 1999.

My review of the literature from a feminist perspective reinforces my position that the experiences and traditions of women as story tellers as well as other roles they play within and outside their domestic sphere are crucial to the creation and transmission of knowledge. My study probes how these traditions have made the jump from the oral to the written word and the impact these traditions have had on Black women's writing. In the following chapters I explore examples of oratorical forms such as story-telling, praise singing, creation myths, music and folk theorizing from various parts of Africa and the ways in which women writers have interrogated them. I am convinced that it is imperative to investigate all these influences in order to fashion a critical approach that will do justice to the contribution of Black women writers. I also think that it is important to investigate how these oratorical forms made a leap from the oral to the literal. As Laretta Ngcobo points out,

Oral tales are inclusive and in a variety of ways reach out to as many people as possible, so that ultimately they become the common property of the majority. Writing, on the other hand, is designed for a select class, those who can read. Essentially, therefore, it is exclusive, intended from the outset to reach only the eyes of those who have achieved literacy: the script itself automatically excludes those who do not have it. (quoted in Busby 1992: xxxi)

I am interested in seeing how Black women writers have incorporated the inclusive quality of orature into their writing. While I remain cognizant of the fact that there will be similarities in the ways orature has influenced the literature of other cultures, especially marginalized cultures, my primary area of interest and focus with regard to this thesis is Africa and the African diaspora.

In searching to understand the ways in which orature has influenced writing, I have used a variety of sources: biographies, autobiographies, interviews, secondary

literature, as well as the published works of women. I have used these written texts by African women writers and women writers from the diaspora to help me analyze how Black women writers fuse their role as story tellers within their communities with their role as writers. In my preliminary analysis before beginning this thesis, I had already identified women writers' unconventional use of orthography and syntax and issues of legitimacy of their language even where they write in English in order to make the leap and to create a more inclusive English language. The necessity for this is underscored by June Jordan, who paints a haunting picture when she writes:

Both Black and white youngsters are compelled to attend school. Once inside this system, the white child is rewarded for mastery of his standard white English; the language he learned at his mother's white and standard knee. But the Black child is punished for mastery of his non-standard, Black English: for the ruling elite of America have decided that non standard is sub-standard and even dangerous, and must be eradicated. (quoted in Busby 1992: xxxiv)

The selection of the books I have reviewed has been informed by my desire to work with books with which I was already familiar so as to avoid the pitfall of getting enthralled by the newness of the story. As such, I chose books which I already had in my collection or those which were readily available in the libraries around Halifax which I had read before. I selected texts to represent some diversity in terms of geographic spread, genre and time period. I realize that the works I have chosen do not nearly represent the multiplicity of Black women's writings and I do not by any means wish to represent them as such.

The body of the thesis is organised around texts by seven women. First, chapter two consists of a literature review on women and orature as well as a review of existing theories which have been proffered for the appraisal of literature by Africans and people

of African descent in the diaspora. Primarily, I will be examining four major theories which attempt to trace the impact of orature on the works of African writers and African writers in the diaspora: Bolekaja Criticism proposed by Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike in Toward the Decolonization of African Literature (1980), The Blues as Code and Force as proposed by Houston Baker Jr. in Blues, Ideology And Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (1984), The Signifyin(g) Monkey as explicated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in The Signifying Monkey (1988) and the African Imagination which has been proposed by Abiola Irele (2001) in a book of the same title.

In chapter three I focus on Phillis Wheatley who was captured as a girl from the Senegambia area of West Africa and was possibly the first Black person on record to publish a creative work.<sup>3</sup> I will show that her work illustrates a continuum between Africa and the diaspora in that she was greatly influenced by the traditions of the griots. Chapter four focuses on Lorraine Hansberry whose play A Raisin in the Sun (1959) was the first by a Black woman to play on Broadway. The chapter will show how Hansberry situates herself within orature in order to challenge the major stereotypes of the Black woman. The play also demonstrates the curative power of words.

In chapter five, I analyze how Ama Ata Aidoo in Changes (1991) interrogates orature by challenging major tropes about women and motherhood. In addition, Aidoo's Changes also aligns itself with the oral narrative by demonstrating a disregard for the boundaries of genre as they apply in western literary tradition. In the same vein, in chapter six I look at how Buchi Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood illustrates very vividly the dialogic exchange which takes place amongst women's texts as well as the ways in which women take universal issues and particularize them in domestic stories.

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<sup>3</sup> Please see Appendix for biographical backgrounds of the authors under review.

I have not dedicated a chapter to Flora Nwapa, the first Black African woman novelist, as I found that her works, more than most of the other women under review here, have been closely studied for the influence of orature.<sup>4</sup> Instead I have used her first novel Efuru (1966) to illustrate the ways in which women's works speak to one another in the chapter on Buchi Emecheta's Joy's of Motherhood (1980).

Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987), which I analyze in chapter seven, is a novel which reiterates in so many ways the importance of story-telling and Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter (1980), which was translated from French, offers a glimpse into ways in which women writers make the leap from orature to literature. Ba also underscores the importance of writing as an important social function as well as the value of reappraising some of the old oral traditions. Ba's work is the focus in chapter eight. Chapter nine showcases Tsitsi Dangaremba's Nervous Conditions (1988), which represents my generation of women writers. It reiterates most of the qualities demonstrated by the other women writers under review and thus shows a continuity of tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Actually, Efuru by Flora Nwapa is one of my favourite novels as it was the book which first illustrated to me the importance of women's voices in literature. I first read Efuru (1966) after having read Things Fall Apart (1959) by Chinua Achebe and could not help being struck by the difference in the representation of women. See Florence Stratton (1994) for an analysis which highlights the influence of orature on Nwapa's works.

## Chapter Two

### Theory

This chapter consists of a critique of some terminology used to describe *orature*, *oral culture* and *oral tradition* in my bid to argue for a broadening of the conceptualizations of these terms which so far have not been sufficiently inclusive of areas of women's prominence. The chapter also consists of a literature review on women and orature in order to show the role of women in the evolution and transfer of cultural knowledge from one generation to another. As well, there is a review of existing theories which have been put forward for the appraisal of literature by Africans and people of African descent in the diaspora. Primarily, where applicable, I will examine what various feminists have said about the four major theories which have been proffered to explain the relationship between orature and the works of African writers and African writers in the diaspora. I will also be offering my own criticisms of these theories.

I will be examining four theories. The first is the Bolekaja criticism proposed by Chinwezu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike in Toward the Decolonization of African Literature (1980). I will also look at the adequacy of the blues as code and force as explicated by Houston Baker Jr. in Blues, ideology and Afro-American literature: A vernacular theory (1984) and the Signifyin(g) Monkey as proffered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.(1998) in his book of the same title. As well, I examine the African imagination which has been proposed by Abiola Irele (2001), also in a book by the same title. Finally, I explain my theoretical approach.

## Some Terminology Used

For the purposes of my thesis, I am resigned to using the term *orature* interchangeably with the terms *oral tradition* and *oral culture*. This is mostly for the purpose of ease and convenience because I do not find the definitions of oral tradition and oral culture and orature in common use encompassing enough for my purpose. In an analysis of the relationship between oral tradition and the contemporary theatre in Nigeria, Joel Adedeji (1971) provides a definition of oral tradition detailing its purpose and mode which I find inadequate. He suggests that oral tradition is the “complex corpus of verbal or spoken art created as a means of recalling the past.” According to this definition, oral tradition is “based on the ideas, beliefs, symbols, assumptions, attitudes and sentiments of people.” However, the definition of oral tradition provided by Adedeji only recognises two main categories, namely literary and historical. In his classification, he gives the impression that the literary category for the Yoruba is limited to poetic genres such as *oriki*,<sup>5</sup> *Ifa*<sup>6</sup> divination poems and traditional songs (134). Furthermore, the historical category only lists such forms as narratives based on myths, legends and historical assemblage such as the epic. A similar classification is made by Harold Scheub (1985) in his article “Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature,” where he gives the major divisions of oral traditions as “the riddle and lyric poems, the proverb; and the tale, heroic poetry and epic” (29). I find these definitions too limiting in that they have left out the more informal aspects of oral culture and what Wanning Harries describes as “complex” tradition. Both Adedeji and Scheub prioritize the formal literary and disciplinary forms which are areas in which, over time, men have come to dominate.

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<sup>5</sup> Eulogistic and totemic chants which are usually family compositions.

<sup>6</sup> *Ifa* comprises the corpus of traditional religious and philosophical knowledge for the Yoruba.

Similarly, according to Jan Vansina, “oral tradition” encompasses both oral history and orature. In his view, oral history “deals with accounts of events” while orature is an “artistic interpretation of experience,” and these and other forms of orature, are “among the main well springs of what we call ‘culture’”(Vansina 1985:13). Whilst this definition, which includes orature, seems more comprehensive than the two previously mentioned (Adedeji and Scheub), Vansina’s conceptualization of the interrelationships of these terms, I believe, is still neither inclusive enough of the crucial everyday interactions amongst women nor is it reflective of their role in the socialization of children. Vansina’s definition also limits orature to “artistic interpretations of experience.” Another definition in Wikipedia which I found on the internet describes orature as that which “corresponds in the sphere of the spoken (oral) word to literature as literature operates in the domain of the written word. It thus forms a generally more fundamental component of culture, but operates in many ways as one might expect literature to do” (Wikipedia, 2005). However, one may ask where all those areas of women’s experiences which are usually not categorised as artistic experiences fall? Indeed as Alice Walker (1974) asks, “What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood” (233).

My discomfort with the limitations of the terms *orature*, *oral tradition* and *oral culture* as conventionally defined stems from the fact that I wish to examine more than the intertextual relationship of those aspects of orature which have correlative elements in literature or any other artistic forms. In addition to the categories covered by Adedeji, Vansina and others, I aim to explore women’s written texts against a backdrop of the

historical, formal artistic forms as well as the more informal -- the domestic such as the story-telling culture and the rich but often neglected dialogical or folk theorizing which takes place in homosocial<sup>7</sup> spaces. I believe that culture is dynamic and I wish to acknowledge the continuous influence of women in the shaping of culture. By my definition, lullabies, story-telling, creation myths, oral theatre, folk epics, folklore, music including folksongs all fall under the rubric of orature, oral tradition and oral culture. I will be looking at the various ways in which women interact with orature in all its ramifications. I am interested in the ways in which they challenge the status quo by interrogating orature. I will therefore be looking for answers to such questions as the following: in the creation of their plots and in the fashioning of their characters do Black women attempt to debunk or do they reiterate existing myths? How do Black women writers interact or negotiate with, revise or borrow from oral tradition? Just what is the relationship between women's writings and orature?

Another term which needs explaining is "Signifying."<sup>8</sup> The term "Signifying" is firmly rooted in orature and has been used by jazz musicians almost as long as there has been jazz music. According to jazz musicians Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, to "Signify" is to "hint, to put on an act, boast, make a gesture" (Mezzrow and Bernard 1946: 281). The novelist Zora Neale Hurston similarly defines it as a "contest in hyperbole" (Hurston quoted in Gates 1988). It is a phrase which is popular in African-American lore, which is why Black theorists have worked towards using it as a main theme in theorizing about African-American literature (Gates 1988, Atkinson 2000,

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<sup>7</sup> I use this to refer to single sex gatherings.

<sup>8</sup> I will be using quite a few variations of the spelling of Signifying because I wish to remain faithful to the way the various theorists I am discussing have spelt it. This is because most writers try to retain the oral sound of the word in African- American dialects.

Smitherman 1994). I find the theory of Signifying which is symbolically represented by the “Signifying Monkey” in African-American lore relevant to my thesis not only because its origin has been traced to the Yoruba God Esu, but also because elements of “Signifying” are present in the works of other groups of Africans in the diaspora. “Signifying,” I believe, will assist me to trace some similarities among works of Black women from various places.

### **Women and Orature**

Valuable discussions about the relationship between the works of women writers and the oral tradition in various cultures have been provided by several writers: Gunn Allen, 1986; Wanning Harries, 2003; Bourke, 2002; Schipper, 1985; Taiwo, 1984; James, 1990. Gunn Allen (1986) writes about the role of oral traditions in the writings of Native American women and Bourke (2002) discusses the impact of oral traditions on the works of Irish women. In the course of tracing the impact of fairy tales on the works of European women, Wanning Harries (2003) laments the fact that a vital part of European history has been neglected as a result of didactic fairy tales popularised by male writers such as Charles Perrault and the Grimms, which have determined notions about what fairy tales should be like. Wanning Harries argues that alongside the "compact" tales by people like Perrault and the Grimms, there exists another "complex" tradition which comprises tales written in France by conteuses (storytelling women) as far back as the 1690s. She reports that right up to the late-twentieth-century, tales by women writers derived in part from this centuries-old tradition. I am particularly interested in what Wanning Harries calls the “complex tradition” amongst Black women writers because it

is my intention to explore how Black women writers and story tellers have attempted to mould or remould metaphors.

It is my intention to analyze the process of story-telling within the African and African diasporal culture and to explore how it has impacted literary texts by Black women. I think it is significant that most women who are cultural practitioners in Africa as well as in the diaspora testify to the influence of their foremothers' orature on their works. In interviews in both Schipper's (1985) and Taiwo's (1984) book, many of the writers speak of learning their craft from their mother, grandmothers, or older women in the community. For example, Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian writer, remarks that she learned storytelling skills from her grandmother and other community women "in moonlight sessions when she was young" (Taiwo, 1984: 100). The understanding that these writers' craft is something handed down to them from their foremothers underscores their commitment to pass on this cultural knowledge to future generations (Schipper 1985, Taiwo 1984, James 1990).

In discussing the nature of orature, Vansina (1985) sees story-telling as a significant aspect of it and, although he does not expound on the gender of the storyteller, there is evidence to conclude that these undocumented storytellers were women because he asserts that such "cultural contents are transmitted to children in the process of learning the language and learning how to behave" (124). It is my intention to argue that the role of women as mothers, aunts, grandmothers and community mothers remains crucial to the formulation and transmission of existing messages of culture to the children and has influenced the ways in which new forms of cultural expressions such as writing by women have evolved. It is because women writers are cognisant of this that they

actively engage orature. Along with Abena Busia (1987), poet and critic, I see Black women's "herstories" as collective self-definition, a chief strategy being "the incorporation of the folk culture, oral tradition in particular, into written texts" (3).

There is ample evidence both in Africa and the diaspora to show that, in spite of slavery and colonization, the role of women in the passing of communal knowledge from one generation to another was not destroyed. The Black woman has not only played a central role in the Black family organization but has fought to keep any semblance of family together in opposition to racism and oppression (Niara Sudarkasa 1981, La Frances Rodgers-Rose 1980, Elizabeth Thaele Rivkin 1981, Joyce Ladner 1981, Joyce Bennett Justus 1981). Niara Sudarkasa, the renowned anthropologist, and foremost authority on the roles of African women, Yoruba trade and migration in West Africa, and African and Afro-American family structure, illustrates how, under the violent constraints of slavery, many variations of family structures appeared for Africans in the diaspora, since biological families were split apart and sold. She emphasizes the notion of "collectivity," which could be either familial or community-based, as part of an extended family structure. She explains that extended units survived either communally or consanguinally, with the mother as central figure as in matrifocal African cultures. I believe that this notion of collectivity is recognizable in the community of Black women writers and it is reflected in the way they signify on one another's works.

In The Black Woman: A Historical Overview (1980), La Frances Rodgers-Rose also underscores the role of the Black woman in the diaspora in preserving African heritage and retaining African values and practices. She writes that the Black woman "survived the long middle passage from Africa to America, bringing with her many of the

diverse characteristics of her African mothers. ... She gave her children love, cooked for them, protected them, told them about life, about freedom, about survival, about loving, about pain, about joy and about Africa.” (9-10). In a similar study on African-American family life, Ladner (1981) also highlights how “[t]he institution of slavery only acted to reinforce the close bond that had already existed between mother and child in African Society” (279).

In the same vein, Rivkin (1981) in analysing the effects of apartheid on Black family life in South Africa, points to the central role women played as the major focal point in the socialisation of the children both before and during the oppressive apartheid system of government, whereas the fathers were only marginally involved. Justus’ (1981) ethnographic study on the West Indian family further confirms the centrality of women in the society. All of the aforementioned establish women as primary agents not only for the evolution but also the devolution of their culture.

### **Orature and Black Women Mythmakers**

Although African communities today are no longer exclusively oral cultures, much of this way of life is still present even within the literate population and within literary creations by men as well as by women. What has survived is, in linguist Walter Ong’s (1982) terms, a “participation in a kind of corporate retrospection” as well as a society which “regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving [the culture], who know and can tell the stories of the days of old”(40). Although I do not agree with Ong’s notions of noetics<sup>9</sup> which suggests that the human mind is conditioned and limited by the technological level of linguistic development

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<sup>9</sup> Generally noetics is the body of theory and practice concerned with the dynamics of consciousness. Ong uses the concept to explain how the human mind works in different cultures.

available in that society, his analysis reflects on the collective nature of oral cultures and the respect generated by the wisdom of the elders, including venerable women. Ong further expounds on the relationship between an oral and a collective culture which I believe is illustrated in the works of Black female cultural practitioners.

As Ong points out, a traditional world-view is based on assumptions of a collective nature, and there is a body of expressive knowledge that each community is aware of and, to some extent, abides by. These values are encapsulated in the oral traditions of the culture, and women play a large part by communicating their body of knowledge to their children. Emmanuel Obiechina (1975) also emphasizes the significance of the collective nature of these oral traditions in modern African life.

In the same vein, Eurofocal theorists like M. M. Bakhtin (1981) have also argued that even the traditional European novel incorporates oral antecedents (3-40). However, for much of the literature of Africa and the diaspora, the debt to orature is by far greater. The African short story has been described as an expansion of the African folk tale by African writers as well as critics, and they assert that it clearly retains its oral antecedents. Chinwezu et al (1983) have also suggested that the modern African novel has evolved from the African epic in terms of structure, content, and the world it creates.

Specifically, I am positing that Black women cultural practitioners are concerned with acknowledging and reiterating women's role not only as "custodians of the traditional" but also as agents for revision and change. As Filomena Chioma Steady (1981) contends, "[t]he woman ... represents the ultimate value in [African] life, namely the continuation of the group." Steady explains that the woman's service in continuing the group is intellectual, spiritual as well as physical and that in matrifocal societies, the

woman's place in the community is assessed in terms of "cultural elaboration and valuation as well as the structural centrality of mother roles..."(32).

In her analysis of the works of Toni Morrison, Yvonne Atkinson (2000) attests to the reliance of African-Americans on their orature when she writes that:

When the Africans were brought to America as slaves they were denied the tools needed to create their traditional arts. Without access to these tools, the African slaves found another outlet to express the emotions of their souls: language. The language of the slaves became their canvas and clay. Their voices became the forms through which they practiced their arts. (13)

It is these voices which have evolved into writing for some and because the act of mutation has not necessarily rendered the oral expression extinct, writing continues to engage orature in dialogue. I am in agreement with Atkinson (2000), who illustrates with Morrison's writing, that: "[t]he language of Morrison's texts mirror the oral tradition of Black English. The story being told is defined by the systems of language that are evident in the oral traditions" (14). Henry Louis Gates (1988) also opines: "It is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals" (xix). There is ample evidence in the works of African women writers that this is yet another quality which they share with writers in the diaspora.

I also believe that one of the few advantages which Black women cultural practitioners enjoy as a result of their marginalization is a lower degree of pressure to conform to male defined professional and artistic traditions in their work. This is unlike their counterparts from European or Eurocentric societies who have to operate within predominantly male defined literary traditions and who, in order to find a voice are often overwhelmed into trying to "sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view" (Gilbert and Guber 1979: 46, see also Keith Louise Fulton,

Unpublished). Unlike their European and Eurocentric counterparts, African women and African women in the diaspora have their mothers' story-telling traditions as canon, because for them, story-telling from mother to child was never only about entertaining the child but about interpreting the world in which every thing else works to undermine their race. Marginalization, whether through slavery or colonisation, made this function even more imperative and all the writers under review reflect this quality in their works.

In this regard, Black women writers are also somewhat distinct from their Black male counterparts. In reference to African-American male writers, Yvonne Johnson (1998) writes that “[t]he literary texts of males communicate a sense of competition with their literary predecessors.” She suggests that this is in line with “the Western literary tradition” which is based on the idea of a single literary precursor as a result of which it exhibits “a history of anxiety” in which poets deliberately misread or misinterpret their precursors”(1). Mary Helen Washington (1990) also supports the notion of single precursors in male African-American literary tradition. Washington states:

Every anthology of the Afro-American literary tradition has set forth a model of literary paternity in which each male author vies with his predecessor for greater authenticity, greater control over his voice. Thus fulfilling the mission his forefathers left unfinished. (33)

Both Johnson and Washington agree that, unlike this model of competition with a single precursor, African-American women writers exemplify a model in which they willingly embrace multiple predecessors (Johnson 1998:2). Johnson also alludes to the fact that it is this willingness to recognize and validate multiple “foremothers” which “distinguishes the voices of modern African-American female writers” (Johnson 1998:2).

Braxton (1990) also notes the pivotal role of communal precursors when she writes that “by passing along cherished recipes to subsequent generations, by testifying,

by telling the story of their religious conversions, or by singing the spirituals or blues, black women helped to revise and extend this oral tradition” (xxii). This tradition is also evident in the works of Black women in the way they signify on one another’s works.

### **“Bolekaja”<sup>10</sup> Criticism**

In their analysis, Chinwezu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike (1980) identify the cardinal role of orature in the enterprise of “decolonizing African literature” because it is the “incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, esthetics, and achievement of traditional African thought and imagination.” They also propose that it “must serve as the ultimate foundation, guidepost, and point of departure for a modern liberated African literature” (2). However, even as they avow that their aim is to administer “a timely and healthy dose of much needed public ridicule to the reams of pompous nonsense which has been floating out of the stale, sterile, stifling covens of academia and smothering the sprouting vitality of Africa’s literary landscape” (xi), their approach is as rigid as the one which they aspire to challenge. This is reflected in the rigidity with which they go about trying to match elements of orature with genres from literature, an inflexibility that betrays acquiescence to a Eurocentric hegemonic tradition.

In addition, these authors’ analyses are as exclusionary as the ones which they denounce and it is apparent from the onset that there is no room for women writers in their decolonizing project as they start out by dedicating the works only to a select group of male writers. It is therefore unsurprising that, in their explication of the oral antecedents of African literature, their analysis does not even attempt to include the contributions of women. For instance, in the whole book, there are only very few cursory

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<sup>10</sup> A Yoruba word which literally translated means ‘get down let’s fight’. It is an allusion to the touts who operate on passenger lorries who display no sense of reverence for any class of passenger.

mentions of four women writers.<sup>11</sup> Again, they repeatedly refer to master story-tellers which leaves an over-riding assumption that master story-tellers are men.

Overall, the very arguments which Chinwezu et al use in defending African literature against a Eurocentric critical approach, that refuses to acknowledge all the relevant influences which have impacted African literature, can be leveled against their predominantly male criticism, even if it is completely African. Also, as with most attempts to link orature to African literature, there is not enough effort to acknowledge the fact that intertextual dialogue between orature and literature is an ongoing process.

### **The Blues as Code and Force**

Another interesting hypothesis on signifying has been proposed by Houston Baker Jr. (1984). I find this theory exciting because it links orature to literature through blues music. It also holds promise for an inclusionary method of critical analysis in that Baker makes some convincing claims for the blues matrix as a symbol “that generates (or obliges one to invent) its own referents. As an inventive trope it holds promises of “the type of image or model that is always present in accounts of culture and cultural products” (9). However, this promise is handicapped by Bakers’ neglect of the role of women in the origination as well as the propagation of the blues. This neglect therefore limits the scope of this method of analysis.

Baker puts forward an argument to claim the blues as a code which radically conditions Afro-American culture. His proposal projects the blues as matrix for Afro-American culture. He defines a matrix as:

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<sup>11</sup> They mention Ama Ata Aidoo , Flora Nwapa and Efua Sutherland on page 14 among others to illustrate the inadequacy of using the language in which a person writes to determine origin. They also quote Aidoo on 233 to problematize privatist treatments of public themes. Zora Neal Hurston appears on a list to show how writers have reworked traditional materials and modelled aspects of their narrative styles on tradition.

a womb, a network, a fossil-bearing rock.... The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitutes such a vibrant network. They are what Jacques Derrida might describe as the 'always already' of Afro-American culture. They are the multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed. (3-4)

In other words, a matrix is a living vibrant area of influence which is neither confined to the past nor static but one which is always alive and always evolving. Baker goes on to enumerate the various elements which constitute the blues as:

a synthesis....Combining work songs, group seculars, field holders, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, they constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World. (5)

Whilst it is tempting to infer that by "much more" Baker also has those aspects of orature in which women predominate in mind (especially given the image of the womb evoked to describe the matrix), all the predominant images and metaphors he invokes to put forward his theory are incontrovertibly male. Quite apart from the way in which he persistently refers to the blues singer as "he," his images in some places are unabashedly evocative of the male orgasm. For instance, in describing the blues he writes that "like a streamlined athlete's awesomely dazzling explosions of prowess the blues song erupts, creating a veritable playful festival of meaning" (5).

Furthermore, Baker's analysis also privileges the experiences of men in the evolution of the blues tradition. First, his analysis focuses on the instrumental aspect of the blues (i.e. the harmonica, guitar etc), where men dominate at the expense of the lyrical and vocal where women prevail. Also, whilst suggesting that onomatopoeia be taken as cultural mimesis, he categorically states that "the dominant blues syntagem in

America is an instrumental imitation of *train-wheels-over track-junctures*” (8, italics in the original). In addition, Baker is unequivocal in his assertion that “ to suggest a trope for the blues as a forceful matrix in cultural understanding is to summon an image of the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song” (7).

One is left with the impression that the blues tradition is an exclusively male tradition as one is forced to ask what about the women that these men left behind? The mothers, lovers, sisters and daughters? What about the women who were bound to the plantations, to the slave barracoons or the White masters’ mansions, confined to life as his domestic minions and sexual preys, nursing his children at the expense of their own? How did their anguish play out in the blues? How did their “unceasing oppression” manifest itself? What about the millions of women who never saw the inside of a train station? Did the blues not resonate in their lives? Yet, we know that some of the most accomplished blues lyricists and singers have been women: Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, Billie Holliday, Aretha Franklin, to mention just a few. And it was a woman, Mamie Smith, who was the first blues singer to make a blues record in 1920. Baker’s theory takes no account of the role of Black women in the evolution of the blues, neither does he take account of their role in using the blues as an avenue for ushering Black culture into mainstream American culture. According to Sandra Lieb (1981), however, it was Black women who pioneered the recreation of Black experiences, and it was their effort which first made the lives, experiences and aspirations of millions of Black Americans visible through the blues.

## **The Signifyin (g) Monkey**

In an attempt to find a system of rhetoric and interpretation that could be used as parameters for a “black” criticism and as frames to “interpret” or “read” theories of literary criticism within the African and Afro-American traditions, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) concentrates his theory on orature. Primarily, he “turns to two trickster figures, Esu Elegbara<sup>12</sup> and the ‘Signifyin (g) Monkey’, in whose myths are registered certain principles of both formal language use and its interpretation” (1988: xx). Gates believes that these “two separate but related trickster figures serve in their respective traditions as points of conscious articulation of language traditions” (1988: xxi).

According to Gates, on the surface, “these two tricksters would seem to have little in common. However Esu, both a trickster and the messenger of the gods, figures prominently in the mythologies of Yoruba cultures found in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, among others. Whilst the Signifyin(g) Monkey seems distinctly Afro American”(1988:xxv), Gates is able to trace the latter’s origin - through a form of evolution brought about as a result of the “Middle Passage” - from Esu. He postulates that the central place of both figures in their traditions is determined by their tendency to reflect on the use of formal language. He traces the influence of the Signifyin(g) Monkey to the crucial aspects of African-American literature as first of all a form of tropological revision “in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts” (1988:xxv).

Using the earliest slave narratives as data, Gates links the theory of “Signifyin(g)” to African oral practice by proposing that the “first trope shared in the black narrative tradition (in America) is – the Talking Book.” He explains that the “form that repetition

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<sup>12</sup> One of the Gods in the Yoruba pantheon who is of indeterminate gender and credited as muse.

and difference take among these texts is the first example of Signifyin(g) as repetition and difference in the Anglo-African narrative tradition”(1988:xxv). He asserts that this trope is based on evidence in some of the earliest slave narratives, which depict how Africans who had come from oral cultures on first encountering books expected the books to speak to them.

Another mode of Signifyin (g) that Gates explicates is the “Speakerly Text.” He opines that this is “exemplified in the peculiar play of ‘voices’ at work in the use of free discourse.” He illustrates through Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* how this form of narrative strategy works through the “representation of the speaking black voice in writing” (1988:xxvi). Zora Neale Hurston, in defiance of the prevalent tradition, pioneered the depiction of African-American speech patterns in her novel. Other women writers both in Africa and the diaspora have since signified on her work. In addition, Gates also explores Black intertextuality, within the limits of the “metaphor of the double-voiced,” which he traces from Esu-Elegbara to Alice Walker’s novel, The Color Purple, as another way in which “black texts ‘talk’ to other black texts”(1988:xxvi). In The Color Purple, Alice Walker clearly interrogates some of the major themes which Hurston had treated by making her main character write to God.

Yvonne Atkinson (2002), whilst recognizing the extent to which Black literature is indebted to the oral practice of Signifying, believes that “[i]n Signifying there is almost always a berating, censoring aspect to the discourse” (xxii). Geneva Smitherman also attests to this quality of “Signifyin” as “the verbal art of ritualized insult, in which the speaker puts down, needles, talks about (*signifies on*) someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun. It exploits the unexpected, using quick verbal surprises and

humor” (1994:206 italics in the original). Atkinson (2000) believes this sense of “Signifying” is somewhat distinct from the way Gates understands the term and she therefore faults Gates’s version of “Signifyin(g)”, which is based on “refiguring” key canonical topi and tropes received from the Black oral tradition. She also faults Gates’s theory for not taking the “put down” aspect of Signifying into consideration, and for the fact that “his theory also does not accommodate the reaffirmation of communal identity that is evident in Signifying from the Black English oral tradition of Call/Response and Witness/Testify”(16). Atkinson’s main criticism of Gates’ theory is furthermore premised upon his failure “to ground his system of rhetoric in African-American traditions.” This she believes, further marginalizes the African-American traditions (17).

Whilst I also have reservations about the fact that Gates’ analysis seems limited to the “principles of formal language use”, and as such relies heavily on Eurocentric hermeneutic traditions as the framework for his theorizing, his theory of “Signifyin(g)” is ground breaking and will allow me to make a link between the ways women in Africa and the diaspora write. I believe his three primary themes (as explained above) can be seen in the works of African women writers in the diaspora, as well as contemporary African women writers like Mariama Ba whose So Long a Letter (1980) has elements of the talking book, Ama Ata Aidoo’s Changes (1991) which reflects qualities of the speakerly text, as well as the rich and extensive dialogue which takes place within texts by Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Toni Morrison. Like their counterparts in the diaspora, works by African women writers are firmly rooted in the oral culture and they are the first to admit the influence of their foremothers on their writing (See Taiwo 1984, Schipper 1985, and James 1990).

I will dwell more on the limitations of Gates' theory in the section on my theoretical approach. I am also particularly interested in Atkinson and Smitherman's extended definitions of Signifying as their explanation points to a major intersection between the Black diasporic writing from America and African oral practice. For instance in Solomon Iyasere's (1980) explication of criticism as a performance of ritual in African oral tradition, he alludes to this adversarial form of signifying and it is possible to identify its presence in the dialogical relationship between African women's writing and the works of their male counterparts as well (see Stratton 1994). However, when I use the terminology *signifying* in relation to the intertextual exchanges going on between works of Black women writers, I am referring to the qualities of reaffirmation and communal identity described by Atkinson.

### **The African Imagination**

In his seminal study, Abiola Irele (2001) expresses the notion of a reliance of the imagination in African traditional societies on the spoken word as a common denominator (9). He also suggests that this reliance on orality has implications for the African conception of literature and values of interpretation. His analysis proposes three levels of orality: 1) The level of ordinary communication with only denotative use of language in straightforward, "factual statements or commands." 2) The "forms of orality associated with rhetorical uses of language." He distinguishes these from the first level in that they are not "reserved for special situations but [they] are ever-present in traditional African discourse through the use of proverbs, aphorisms, which regularly channel communication ...and therefore provide ... a 'formulaic' framework for speech acts,

discursive nodes, and indeed the structure of thought.” 3) “The strictly literary level, which is concerned with and reserved for the purely imaginative uses of language” (9).

Whilst readily admitting that these three levels “exist along a continuum” because it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between denotative and connotative uses of language in oral communities, Irele nevertheless forces a distinction by pronouncing that “it is only the last level or category that interests [him], for it is here that we encounter what *must* be accepted in many societies as a consecrated body of texts” (9, emphasis mine). He then goes on to illustrate with some examples such as Akan dirges, family praise names (*oriki*) of the Yoruba and other forms which he categorizes as canon “in the strict sense... a body of texts that have been fixed and set apart, reified ... as monuments of collective sensibility”(10). The examples he cites of these are praise poems of the Zulu (*izibongo*) and Basotho, court poetry of Rwanda, great epics of *Sundiata*, *Da Monzon*, *Mwindo*, *Ozidi* and the Ifa corpus of the Yoruba (10, italics in the original).

However, bearing in mind the functionality of all these examples which Irele provides, it is difficult to agree with him that they are representative of his third category which he describes as “strictly literary..., which is concerned with and reserved for the purely imaginative uses of language.” It is equally impossible and insufficient to limit the influence of orature on African literature to these influences alone.

Irele’s analysis, like Chinwezu et al’s *Bolekaja* approach, is too content with only seeing the world from a male perspective and in so doing colludes with that which it seeks to critique – western hegemony. For if, as Irele later declares, literature in Africa is “... the area of an active and focused self-consciousness that extends in its implications into both a sustained interrogation of history and a determined engagement with

language” (29), then how can he be content to accept that only one category of orature has impacted it? Is it not more practical and realistic to simply accept that the “expressive potential of language” is different in oral societies and therefore dispense with the kind of rigidity with which Irele attempts to justify his classification of which he further writes:

We must also consider the nature of those specimens in the oral that are endowed with the same character of literariness as written texts.... We must expect to see a preponderant recourse to those aspects of discourse that signal this character of literariness: metaphors, tropes, and other figures of speech that create a second order of language with constitutive elements – words-- foregrounded, organized in highly stylized ways, and subjected therefore to artifice so as to carry a special charge of meaning.  
(9)

Why is this attempt to confine the representation of discourse to the formal so vital to Irele’s analysis when there clearly exists the possibility that, where discourse is orally transmitted, it necessitates the participation of more people than would be accommodated in literate cultures for the simple reason that everybody can talk but not everybody can read or write? The “vital immediacy” of the spoken word is such that it will not accommodate Irele’s attempt to limit the influence of orature on literature to his third category. This calls to mind a comment made by Ralph Ellison’s music teacher when he was at Tuskegee in order to underscore the participatory nature of not only performance but also criticism in a predominantly oral culture:

You must always play your best, even if it’s only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because ... there’ll always be a little man hidden behind the stove ... and he’ll know the music, and the tradition, and the standards of musicianship required for whatever you set out to perform. (Ellison quoted in Houston Baker 1984:12)

With this literature review, I have tried to show that both in the stories they tell and in the telling itself, Black women cultural practitioners continue the line of African women storytellers who pass on the message of their culture to future generations.

Atkinson (2000) highlights this when she suggests that in writing her novels, Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate novelist, “knows that there will be ‘holes and spaces’ in the text that are caused by writing down an oral language, but Morrison also expects the reader to fill in those gaps with communal knowledge” (14). Atkinson does not see this as a fault in Morrison’s style but rather believes that. “This participatory involvement mirrors the ritual of storytelling from the Black English oral tradition” and that the “reader who is aware of the Black English oral tradition is also aware that he/she is obligated to participate in this conversation” (15).

### **My Theoretical Approach**

As earlier stated, I am fascinated by Houston Baker’s approach in that it holds promise for an inclusionary method of critical analysis because he makes some convincing claims for the blues matrix as a symbol “that generates (or obliges one to invent) its own referents. As an inventive trope it holds promises of “the type of image or model that is always present in accounts of culture and cultural products” (9). However, I believe that the blues or any other kind of music is only one example out of many elements of the oral culture which has influenced Black writing.

Again, whilst Gates’ theory of signifying is useful for tracing a link between African and African-American literature, and has also provided a key to analyze music (see Samuel Floyd 1995), I find it inadequate for my purposes for a number of reasons in addition to the ones raised by Atkinson and Smitherman to which I previously alluded. One of my objections to Gates’ approach has to do with the origin of the “Signifyin(g) Monkey” which has been traced only to Esu.

Considering the prominent roles which the ports of Lagos (Nigeria) and Whydah (Dahomey, now Republic of Benin) played in the transportation of slaves from the western coast of Africa, it is possible to conclude that a large percentage of those taken were Yoruba or people of Oyo or Benin Empires. This can also explain the presence of elements of Esu in so many cultures of the diaspora. However, it is impossible to determine what percentage was captured from different ethnic groups. Therefore to use Esu/Ifa as a sole focus in theorizing about African-American literature is to discount the wealth of culture and knowledge which ethnic groups other than the Yoruba, brought with them on the Middle Passage.

This is not an attempt to deny the obvious link between the Signifyin(g) Monkey and Esu. However, Esu is only one of a number of possible ancestors or cousins of the Signifyin(g) Monkey. Other trickster figures which have emerged in various parts of the diaspora are Uncle Remus and Anansi (who is sometimes a spider and sometimes a tortoise and has its origin in Ghana). Similarly, Esu is only one of a pantheon of over two hundred Gods and Goddesses found in the Yoruba tradition, just as the Yoruba Gods and Goddesses amount to only a small percentage of numerous others in Africa.

There are other deities whose attributes are closely related to creativity enough to make them strong contenders for the honour that Gates has bequeathed Esu in his analysis. For instance, my favourite contender for the role of muse is the fecund Goddess Osun, while the first Black Nobel laureate for literature, Wole Soyinka, favours Ogun, another Yoruba God. One could focus on other deities who are related to creativity but this would lead to a competition among gods for which is most appropriate. This type of classification is not suitable for a feminist analysis as it leads to hegemony.

In order to examine if a continuum exists between the literature of the diaspora and Africa, I feel it is necessary to avoid confining one's analysis to the public sphere. It is necessary to look beyond the public sphere for other links because, as in the diaspora, the public/private dynamics have been convoluted, first by Islam, then by Christianity, and then by colonization. These successive waves of competing patriarchal influences shared in the instituting of a dichotomy which keeps women out of power in the way they have constructed woman. This approach can again become problematic if one were to approach the public/ private divide from a mainstream western perspective, which construes the public/private divide sharply, along gender lines. Although feminists like Linda Christiansen-Ruffman (1989) have argued that the public/private dichotomy may be seen as a politically constructed divide, used to suppress women historically, the view is still dominant.

The Yoruba tradition presents a more fluid, less divisive picture. According to Oyeronke Oyewunmi (1997), who conducted research on Yoruba culture, women were never totally excluded from the spiritual realm, which, before contact with Islam and the west, constituted the highest level of the public realm. She uses the absence of gender specificity in the language or names as well as the fact that there were female deities who had both male and female acolytes to buttress her assertion. However, I am reluctant to generalize about the culture of other African ethnic groups based on a study carried out on the Yoruba alone.

It is because I am reluctant to generalize that I am inclined to situate my study within the ambit of the domestic, where it is possible to find commonalities in the role that women have played as cultural conduits as an integral part of their role as primary

caregivers. Their position as mothers and communal mothers which has been attested to by several researchers (some of whom I have quoted earlier) places them in a strategic position as primary educators and explainers of the world. The stories they tell, the explanations they give of the world are likely to be the first and most crucial to which the next generations are exposed and these influence their societies even at the public level. Their contribution to the creation and preservation of knowledge is thus quite distinct from that of their counterparts in mainstream Western societies, where women's influence was deliberately restricted by a distinct separation of the public and the private through the institutionalization of knowledge creation. Not only did the introduction of schools limit the role of women as primary educators, their influence was very clearly undermined by practices such as surrogacy and the Victorian ideology of governors and governesses for children of royalty as well as the middle and upper classes. As earlier mentioned, I am also faulting Gates' theory because he bases the hermeneutics of African-American literature on Esu which is an indication of a patriarchal mindset as it leaves out the informal, the domestic and the pivotal role of women.

In the next chapter on Phillis Wheatley who was captured from West Africa, I will examine the ways in which her writing demonstrates the inadequacy of existing theories such as Gates'. In addition, the chapter will illustrate a continuum between Africa and the diaspora and it hints at the wealth of culture and knowledge which ethnic groups other than the Yoruba brought along with them on the Middle Passage in that while it is difficult to see the influence of the Signifyin(g) Monkey or Esu on Wheatley's works, a link can be made between her writing and the tradition of the griots as well as

other elements of orature which are not accounted for by the four major theories discussed earlier.

## Chapter Three

### Phillis Wheatley

#### Introduction

All of the controversy surrounding the position of Phillis Wheatley, as the first African-American to publish a book of poetry as well as her personal history, make her a good candidate for studying the relationship between orature and the works of Black women writers as well as the intersections between the literary works of African women and Black women in the diaspora. In this chapter, I problematize previous readings of Wheatley's works which have been content with only tracing the Western influences in them. Furthermore, I examine links to the tradition of the griots and other elements of orature.

Although as the first Black person to publish a book of poetry in America, and possibly anywhere else in the world, Wheatley generated a lot of attention (an inquisition preceded the publication of her book), the significance of her role as pioneer of African-American literature is one which has gone largely un-acclaimed.

The inquisition which preceded the publication of her first book was deemed necessary because she emerged as a writer at a time when the Western world was convinced of the intellectual inferiority of the Black race. According to Gates (2003), "[t]he panel had been assembled to verify the authorship of her poems and to answer a much larger question: was a Negro capable of producing literature?" (5) Prior to that inquisition, notable occidental philosophers and thinkers like Francis Bacon, René Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and George Frederick Hegel had speculated on

the humanity of Africans and concluded that Negroes were intellectually inferior to White people. As the first person to write a book that was approved for publication by an audience so sceptical of the capacity of her race, Wheatley was called upon not only to prove her own intellectual capacity but also that of her race.

### **Analysis**

The immediate response to the publication of Wheatley's first book was two fold. People like Voltaire became convinced of the ability of Black people to create art and antislavery writers started citing her as positive proof of the equality of Africans and a reason for the abolition of slavery (Gates, 2003). However, there were others like Thomas Jefferson who, rather than concede the equality of Africans, shifted the argument away from the question of whether or not Wheatley as a Black person had a soul and therefore the ability to write, to the quality of what she wrote. For instance, Jefferson, in accepting that Africans had souls, continued to maintain their inferiority. As such, Jefferson was able to readily dismiss her writing by asserting that, "[t]he compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (Jefferson cited in Gates 42).

Ironically, it seems that the very disdainful tones in which Thomas Jefferson appraised the works of Wheatley have been re-echoed by Black literary critics based on a cultural evaluation of her works. Gates reports that in 1928 Wallace Thurman called her "a third-rate imitation" of Alexander Pope: "Phillis in her day was a museum figure who would have caused more of a sensation if some contemporary Barnum had exploited her" (Wallace quoted in Gates 2003:75). This tone was also echoed in 1962, by Amiri Baraka who called her works "pleasant imitations of eighteenth-century English poetry" (Baraka quoted in Gates 2003:76). Baraka also condemned her works as a "ludicrous departure

from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights” (Baraka quoted in Gates 2003:76). Seymour Gross in 1966 also said of her, “this Negro Poetess so well fit the Uncle Tom syndrome” (Gross quoted in Gates 2003:76). It is apparent that critics like Thurman, Baraka and Gross have only attributed Wheatley’s use of poetic conventions and poetic strategies to the impact of British poetry whilst ignoring the possibility that there were analogous models for the same in the culture to which she was exposed before she was captured. The attempt here is not to deny the impact of the European model to which she was exposed in America; rather, my intention is to underscore the importance of the African origins which constituted her primary levels of influence.

Whilst literary theorists like Gates and Houston Baker have gone to a lot of trouble to propose a form of literary criticism for analyzing African-American writing based on some aspects of oral tradition, their analyses have not gone far enough to include all the facets of orature that have obviously had impact on women’s literature, and Phillis Wheatley’s life and works illustrates this. As I have shown, Gates’ theory based on the relationship between Ifa and the Signifyin(g) Monkey, Bakers’s based on the blues tradition, Chniwezu et al’s Bolekaja theory and Abiola Irele’s African imagination have all concentrated on only aspects of orature predominantly dominated by men. As such, none of these theories are adequate for the appraisal of Phillis Wheatley’s work, given the link between her socialization before her captivity and her work.

Although Wheatley was reported to have been taken captive from Africa when she was about seven or eight years old, according to Odell, who is the source of most of what is known about Wheatley’s early life, “[s]he does not seem to have preserved any remembrance of the place of her nativity, or of her parents, excepting the simple

circumstance that her mother *poured out water before the sun at his rising*--in reference, no doubt, to an ancient African custom”(10). As incongruous as the idea that Wheatley did not preserve any remembrance of her life before captivity sounds, it seems that so far, all who have tried to appraise Wheatley’s works have taken this statement at face value. While it is possible to argue that as a child of eight such memories would be fragmentary, and not reflective of the level of sophistication of the cultural context that shaped them, my position is that as a prodigy,<sup>13</sup> which Wheatley unquestionably was, her propensity for such level of sophistication needs to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, within the context of an oral culture, assimilation of cultural forms and models occurs at a much more rapid rate. So far critical appraisals of Wheatley’s works approach them as if her mind really was a *tabula rasa* at the time she arrived in America. Yet, in the second part of Odell’s statement which I quoted above lies proof of its contradiction. First, we have not been given any reason why she would have forgotten everything else. In addition, not only do we find that the sun plays a prominent role in her poems but in one particular poem, “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth”, it is apparent that she did not forget all about her life before her enslavement as the author of her memoirs would have us believe. From this poem, it is clear that Phillis Wheatley retained vivid memories of her past life in Africa. In the poem, she does not only recall her parents but there are hints in the underlined line about how she was abducted:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?

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<sup>13</sup> Her propensity for such a level of sophistication can be likened to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s, another child prodigy who is reported to have read Homer by the age of eight.

Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:

Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (75, Underlining mine)

The result of the assumption that Wheatley had no recollection of her life before enslavement is that appraisals of her works have not even tried to identify the influences of her early life, i.e. Africa on her works. Yet, we know that Wheatley was taken captive from the area around modern day Senegal and Gambia, which has a rich history of orature through the griots<sup>14</sup> who from ancient times have produced celebrated oral poets, lyricists, and historians.

One hint as to the influence of the rich orature of her native land on Wheatley is the fact that she presumed to write poetry although she did not appear to know any women poets in America. Whilst there were female poets writing in Britain, as well as some in America whose works might have served as models, it is equally possible that she was influenced by women in her family or her community before her capture.<sup>15</sup> If we are to go by one of the major influences of Black women writers even today, their mothers and community mothers who were versed in oral traditions influenced their ability to see themselves as creators of stories and poems. Is it so remote to assume that

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<sup>14</sup> Through the application of the tools of creative musicology, analysis of slave ship manifests and other historical sources, as well as an in depth familiarity with both blues and West African music, blues scholar Samuel Charters (1981) has established a genealogy for the blues in which he identifies griots as musicians who correspond most to blues singers. This is not surprising because like their West African counterparts, the griots, and griottes as well as blues singers have also been active in chronicling American history. According to Robert Palmer (1996), blues musicians are some of the first and foremost African-American historians, a claim which he illustrates with the example of Delta legend, Charly Patton who chronicled the 1927 Mississippi flood in an extended narrative which took up two sides of a 78-rpm disc and Sleepy John Estes who left vivid images of Brownsville, Tennessee's lawyers, doctors, policemen, lawbreakers and other citizens in his dozens of blues recordings.

<sup>15</sup> I am also proposing this partly because I am cognizant of the sociological implications of race and class on the kind of affinity Wheatley might have felt she had with female poets of her age.

Wheatley had known female griots in her native land? Or that she might have come from a family of griots? It is pertinent to note, for the study of the factors that influenced Wheatley, that in pre-colonial Africa just as in the present, there were women who served as griots or griottes.

Actually, this rich history of oral tradition is not unique to the Senegambia area. In most parts of Africa, traditional rulers and other aristocrats patronized artists who practiced highly developed and diverse art forms. However, principal amongst these art forms was the oral narration of societal, lineage and personal history which were performed in the most poetic language. For instance, every Yoruba ruler had a poet laureate and in the same way not only the aristocrats or the wealthy but every Yoruba family had members who were well versed in their oriki. According to Karin Barber (1991), “oriki are a genre of Yoruba oral poetry....Oriki are a master discourse.” In the areas around modern day Gambia and Senegal from which Wheatley was captured, these oral artists were known as ‘Jeli’ or Jeliya if they were women in Mandingo (the language of the Mandingoes) but they are better known today by the French appellation, griots or griottes. According to Joseph Hill (1999), in pre-colonial days griots were royal heralds, court entertainers, and praise-singers. Hill further writes of griots that they

belong to an endogamous caste of historians, musicians, praise-singers, and mediators. Their accomplishments include a body of epics, legends, and lyrical songs; sophisticated and virtuosic instrumental and vocal traditions; and detailed oral histories sometimes going back a thousand years. West Africans today know the names of such kings and warriors as Sunjata Keita, Kelefa Sané, Albouri Ndiaye, and Omar Tall because all of these figures had griots who composed laudatory songs and histories about them that subsequent griots have passed down to us today. As modern political and economic systems replaced the aristocratic systems of pre-colonial days, griots found patronage in the general public and their art became popularized. (1)

There are clues which point to the possibility of the influence of the tradition of the griots in the kind of poems that Wheatley wrote as well as her themes. For instance, she wrote epics, elegies and memorials celebrating the lives of people who had died or those who had accomplished great feats. She also wrote poems which commemorated America's struggle for independence from Britain. All of these are in line with the tradition of the griots:

#### Words of Malian Griots

We are vessels of speech, we are the repositories  
which harbor secrets many centuries old & without  
us the names of kings would vanish from oblivion,  
we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word  
we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings  
for younger generations. History holds no mystery for us;  
we teach to the vulgar just as much as we want to teach them,  
for it is we who keep the keys to the twelve doors of Mali &...  
I teach the kings of their ancestors so that the lives  
of ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old  
but the future springs from the past. (Mamadou Kouyate, quoted in Niane, 1217-1237)

From this excerpt it is apparent that in the role of the griot was a conflation of functions: religious, music, the esoteric, the occult, magic, history, entertainment in much the same way that Wheatley saw her poetry as having a social and religious function.

Whilst I have not found evidence to indicate that she had any close personal interactions with other poets of her time who might have served as mentors to her, another clue to the influence of her native culture can be found in her familiarity and immersion in the patron/poet relationship. The relationship of the griot or traditional poet laureate to the ruler or wealthy patron was similar to the relationship between poets and their patrons on which Wheatley obviously thrived as a slave writing in the USA. She was also highly successful in maneuvering her relationship with British aristocrats. It was

a delicate relationship which required skill and sensitivity on the part of the poet laureate. Not only did Wheatley manage to navigate this delicate terrain but it is apparent that she was cognizant of the dynamics of patronage because she wrote about it. This is indicated in Kendrick's (1996) analysis of Wheatley's poem "To Maecenas",

it would not be inaccurate to read [Maecenas, who was the patron of Ovid, Horace, and Virgil] as an exemplary figure in Roman culture ...if not impossible, to disregard the considerable cultural political power that Maecenas must have possessed, as a patron capable of canonizing/legitimizing a work by means of his support and influence. When Wheatley writes "What felt those poets but you feel the same? / Does not your soul possess the sacred flame?" (9) in the opening stanza of "To Maecenas," the political aspects of the patron/poet relationship are suggested, underneath the aesthetic relationship which Smith identifies as taking place within the poem. By possessing the "sacred flame," Maecenas not only holds the "poetic fire" that creates and inspires, but also the power to canonize and mark as sacred, certifying a work as aesthetically and culturally legitimate. (5)

This delicate patron/poet relationship is further illustrated in the way she wrote which can be read as a sign of the influence of her early life as well as her other influences. As repositories of ethnic or family lore, griots wield immense power in that they can make and unmake social identities. However, in order to effectively wield this power, the griot has to master the art of double speak. This is because the griots' livelihood rests in their ability to speak things that would be considered out of place for others to say (i.e. social commentary) as much as it depends on their ability to say those things delicately enough so as not to alienate the patron who is their source of sustenance. This quality is reflected in Wheatley's works and one of the points which Kentrick raises in his analysis of Wheatley's poem is the fact that signifyin(g) on Maecenas allows her to simultaneously praise and mock Maecenas.

Stylistically, Wheatley's works echo African oral tradition by violating strict European laws of genre. According to Kendrick, she did not just resign herself to creating "a neo-classical epic patterned after the Iliad or the Aeneid, or a Christian epic along the lines of Dante's *Commedia* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*"(2). So although she writes in the poem "To Maecenas" that, "she aspires to the same level of greatness as these authors," and although "a careful reading of Wheatley's works reveals that these calls echo across her entire work, ... [t]hese calls announce pleas for transgression, a needed violation of the autonomy of the laws of genre which require other author(itie)s to authorize her work." Kendrick also asserts that even when Wheatley "repeats figures of epic discourse" she does so not out of a desire to conform to Western laws of legitimacy but "she enacts the same economy noted by Derrida," in which the recitation and re-petition of the symbols "of generic status re-cite ... essential disruptions" of the law that grants generic status even as they appear to be propagating those laws (3).

Kendrick also suggests that she is able to do this "from underneath masks" (4). He also refers to another literary critic, Shields, who asserts that Wheatley was donning a mask to deliver a subversive message. Although this imagery of a mask is not fully explicated, I am intrigued by this notion of Wheatley donning a mask in order to deliver a message which she considered subversive.

However, I find Kendrick's attempts to read the motive behind Wheatley's mask greatly limited by his Western interpretation of the role of the mask to an African which Wheatley undeniably was. I believe his error stems from his application of a Western conception of the mask. In the West, the mask is perceived as an instrument of concealment whereas for Africans the mask is never a device for concealment. It is only

an outward tool, which signifies that the body has become inhabited by a spirit other than the one which normally inhabits it. Ordinarily, a masquerade is the outward manifestation of the spirit of one's ancestors. It is a thing of pride. One needs to look beyond the mask to the spirit behind the mask i.e. her ancestral spirit in order to comprehend Wheatley's motivation in donning a mask to execute the delivery of a weapon as subversive as the one which she dared to deliver, given the socio-cultural frame-work within which she operated. For it is because of us that our ancestors existed and it is through us that they continue to exist. It is up to us to keep their spirit alive. If they cease to exist, so do we. According to the Yoruba for instance, life is cyclic, a continuum which is unbreakable even by death. A child might be seen to be superior (even older) than the parent if such a child is identified as the bearer of the grandparent's spirit. By the same logic, a child who dies before the parents becomes their elder, their ancestor. In her masked state Wheatley is not only speaking as herself, but she speaks for all who have gone before. She is at her most potent. Donning a mask to deliver her subversive messages also reinforces Kendrick's other assertion that Wheatley deliberately disrupts the essential protocols of western literary traditions whilst appearing to buttress them on the surface.

### **Conclusion**

It is amazing that the influences of the traditions of the griots have been acknowledged as having far-reaching effects on African-American music, yet there has been very little effort to trace their influence on the literature of the same people. As a person who was taken from Africa, an in-depth comparative study of Phillis Wheatley's works alongside the orature of the area from which she was taken will no doubt enrich any attempts to theorize about Black literature. I am proposing that in order to fully

analyze the works of Phillis Wheatley, we need to do an in-depth study which is fully cognizant of her African influences alongside her other influences. As such, a comparative analysis of her works side by side with the orature of the area from which she was captured as a child is imperative. This is necessary not only so as to engage in a proper study of her works but since her works apparently represent a major position as a bridge between Africa and the diaspora, such a study is essential to any attempt at fashioning an appropriate and lasting critical approach.

Phillis Wheatley's themes and her style as described above as well as the role her writing played in changing some conceptualizations about Black peoples' intellectual abilities illustrate that her writing played a major social function. In the next chapter, I will be looking at Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun which was also a first in that it was the first play by a woman of African descent to show on Broadway. It is also pertinent to note that as a pioneer in her field, Lorraine Hansberry in a way similar to Phillis Wheatley saw her writing as having a social function. Furthermore, the chapter also traces how Hansberry used her writing to challenge major stereotypes about women while raising important issues about race.

## Chapter Four

### Lorraine Hansberry

#### Introduction

One of the most apparent things about A Raisin in the Sun is the fact that Hansberry smashes myths which are prevalent in orature about Black women, Black men and the Black family. The play does this by challenging popular notions of the major stereotypes of women by bringing the audience into a Black home and documenting every day resistance to attempts by the mainstream American society to objectify them (Hill Collins, 1991). Hansberry also expresses strong political and sociological views which attack racism and prejudice, and she demonstrates the power of orature as an instrument for positive change.

The self referential<sup>16</sup> nature of the play (since it is based on Hansberry's lived experiences) situates it within the oral tradition and allows her to interrogate stereotypes of women by presenting more complex and multi-dimensional women. The play also makes social commentary about race, the American way and the universality of the Black struggle by introducing the connection between the Africans' struggle for self determination and the oppression which African-Americans face in the United States. It also shows the power of orature as an instrument for positive change, in the form of a "talking cure" by showing how words are used to light Walter Younger's path from desperation into a community of focused adults.

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<sup>16</sup> Whilst not all self referential works are situated within the oral traditional, it is a major element in traditional narratives. See Okpewho (1992).

**Synopsis:**

A Raisin in the Sun examines a family's struggle as they determine what to do with a life insurance cheque which the matriarch, Lena Younger, gets sometime after her husband dies. Most of the play revolves around her son Walter Younger (also called Brother), as the drama which unfolds follows his development as a character who changes drastically from a defeated and desperate man as a result of racism to a husband and father who is more committed to the collective survival of the family.

The play begins with Walter's obsession with the insurance cheque that the family is expecting. Walter, who is tired of his degrading life as a chauffeur for a White man, is determined to convince his mother to give him the money so he can invest it in purchasing part of a liquor store in partnership with some of his friends. He gets into an argument with his sister, Beneatha, who is a pre-med on the morning that the cheque is expected because he suspects their mother would rather invest the money in her education than in his business venture. He tries to get his wife Ruth to convince his mother to sign the cheque over to him but she too is unconvinced of the viability of the business venture. Ruth is tense because unknown to anyone, she is pregnant. Her tension is caused by the fact that she is worried the new baby will further strain the family's overstretched resources.

Walter and Ruth already have a son, Travis, who has to sleep in the family's living room because there is no other room in the cramped apartment which they share with Lena and Beneatha. Apparently, Walter's father and mother had moved into the apartment as a young couple who had found their way north from the southern states of America. Full of hope based on all the promises of life in the north, they had planned to

live in the apartment for only a short while because they had dreamt of one day buying their own house. However, like other unfulfilled dreams that Blacks in America had, the Youngers were forced to keep deferring their dream of owning their own home until Walter's father lost his life.

After much argument with her son, Lena Younger makes a decision to put a deposit on a house for the family in an all White neighbourhood because it was all she could afford. She then entrusts the rest of the money, \$6,500, to Walter, asking him to invest half and save the remaining half towards Beneatha's education. For most of the play Beneatha and her brother's relationship is strained, and the subplot of the play is centred on Beneatha who is being wooed by two very different kinds of Black men. One of her suitors is a scion of a wealthy African-American family who is unquestioning of the capitalist American way. The other is an African international student, a Nigerian, who has radical ideas about race.

Walter takes the decision to invest all the money in the liquor business in the hope that he would pay for Beneatha's education with his profits. Unfortunately, one of his business partners absconds with the money. Meanwhile, in another development, the all White neighbourhood has sent a representative to the Younger family to make them an offer to buy them out of the neighbourhood so as to protect the value of their own property from going down due to racial mixing. The offer comes when Mrs. Younger is out of the house and Walter, Beneatha and Ruth are unanimous in their decision to turn down the insulting offer. However, when Walter's investment falls through, he takes the unilateral decision to invite the neighbourhood representative back in the hope of making a profit out of the racist proposal. The play climaxes when, challenged by his mother,

Walter is forced to decide between standing up for his family's honour (i.e. their right to live wherever they choose) and degrading financial profit.

The denouement occurs in the final scene in which we see the family getting ready to move in spite of all the veiled threats and the loss of the insurance money. Beneatha's relationship with Walter is also mended and she reveals to her mother that Assagai (her African boyfriend) has proposed to her.

### **Analysis**

Through the characters, Lena, Ruth and Beneatha, Lorraine Hansberry interrogates stereotypes of Black women that were prevalent in American society. Such stereotypes had made their way into mainstream American literature as well as films and in this regard, Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist hypothesizes:

Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammys, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering black women's oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought. (Hill Collins, 1990:67)

In her analysis, Hill Collins posits that these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life. She identifies four prevailing interpretations of Black womanhood, which form a nexus of elite White male interpretations of Black female sexuality. In addition to the mammy figure, she includes the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel or seductress. She further asserts that "by meshing smoothly with systems of race, class, and gender oppression, they provide effective ideological justifications for racial oppression, the politics of gender subordination, and the economic exploitation inherent in capitalist economies "(78).

The mammy figure, the oldest of the four stereotypes, has its roots in slavery. The mammy figure reflects the interest of White Americans in maintaining Black women's subjugation as faithful and obedient domestic slaves and later as servants. As Hill Collins further points out,

Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behaviour. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She accepts her subordination. (71)

I am of the same mind with Hill Collins that the mammy image is important due to its centrality to the intersecting systems of race, gender and class because, through such an image, women are encouraged to and portrayed as people "who transmit to their own children the deference behaviour" (72), associated with the mammy role.

While the mammy is usually portrayed as a "good" and an "asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface devoted to the development of a white family" (72), the matriarch figure is used to symbolise the "bad," overbearing mother figure in the Black family. Ironically, it is the very quality which is put forward as the reason for the mammy's "goodness" that is also used to condemn the matriarch. Her condemnation is premised on the fact that she spends too much time away from her family earning a living as a result of which her children turn out as miscreants: "Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly cannot properly supervise their children and are major contributing factors to their children's school failure" (74). In addition, Black matriarchs

also allegedly “emasculate their lovers and husbands” as a result of which they end up being deserted by men.

The third type of figure is that of the welfare mother. Hill Collins posits that this figure emerged after World War II when the political economy started to offer African-Americans new rights. The new economy allowed them to acquire basic political and economic protection through programs like Social Security, Aid to Families with dependent children etc. As such, they were able to turn down exploitative jobs which their parents and grandparents had been forced to do and such demeaning jobs had to be filled by illegal immigrants (76). The figure of the welfare mother is important to the political economy because it allows the system to label the fertility of women who are not White “as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country” (76). Unlike the matriarch, the welfare mother is projected as lacking aggression since she does not have a job and is content to simply lull around collecting welfare and so she ends up passing her poor work ethics to her children.

The fourth stereotype is that of the Jezebel who is seen as a sexually aggressive and promiscuous woman. Hill Collins proposes that the Jezebel “is central in this nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (77). This image also originated under slavery and was used to rationalize the sexual exploitation of Black women by White men. The image of the Black woman as possessing excessive sexual appetite, unlike proper White women, was also used to justify her exploitation as a breeder of slaves.

Lenora Clodfelter Stephens (1981) also shows how the sexually aggressive seductress image was introduced at the birth of filmmaking when exotically seductive

West Indian dancers provided the subject matter for Thomas Edison's experiments with kinetoscope vignettes in the 1890s. According to Stephens, the earliest mammies came on the heels of the seductress to film, as they made their appearance even before the advent of Black actors on the screen. Mammies were played by White actresses in 'blackface'. An early example can be seen in *A bucket of Ale* (1904) which was a biograph, whilst Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was the first major production which featured both the seductress and the mammy and both were played by White actresses in blackface (Stephens, 1981).

While discussing the Hollywood images of Black women in two early productions, *Hallelujah* (1929) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1949), Stephens writes that the two predominant types of images, the seductress and the mammy, have also been used to define the position of Black females pitched against each other, given that the two films featured White boys led astray by sensuous, light-skinned tragic mulatto women. Predictably the women die whilst the men are rescued by their longsuffering mammy (Stephens, 1981).

Lorraine Hansberry, the first Black female playwright to have a play on Broadway, was apparently cognizant of these stereotypes as she tackled the problem of portrayal of the Black woman in *A Raisin in the Sun*. First in the character of Lena Younger, the widow who struggles to actualize her dream of purchasing a home for her family, we have an amalgamation of both the mammy and the matriarch. The result is a character which is extremely complex and multidimensional. We are presented with a Lena Younger who works as a maid for a White family but who, unlike mainstream America would like us to believe, is passionate about her family and is committed to

buying them a home against all odds. Her commitment to her family ruptures the dominant image of the mammy who is usually portrayed as slavishly devoted to and contented with slaving for her “White family” at the expense of her own biological family.

The other aspect of Lena’s character which overlaps with characteristics of the stereotypical matriarch is that she is apparently the head of her household and this is illustrated in her own words when she has cause to chastise Beneatha over the existence of God. She is categorical about her headship of the home as she makes her daughter repeat after her: “In my mother’s house there is still God .... There’s some ideas we ain’t goin’ to have in this house. Not long as I am head of this family” (77). Later her authority as head of the family is again underscored when she has cause to chastise her son: “I don’t ‘low no yellin’ in this house, Walter Lee. And you know it” (109). It is apparent that Walter, who at the death of his father expected to step into the substantive role of head of the family, resents his mother for her leadership: “What you need me to say you done right for? You the head of the family! You run our lives the way you want to” (127). This is also reflected in his determination to wrest the insurance cheque from Lenas’ hold so he can invest it in a liquor business and make profits, as he believes it is only through his ability to provide for his family materially that he can be a man. His commitment to the capitalist dream is expressed in his outburst to George (Benatha’s African-American suitor): “(with maximum bitterness): I see you all the time-with the books tucked under your arms, going to your ‘clahsses.’ And for what! What you learning over there? ... but are they teachin you how to be a man? How to take over and run this world?” (118).

Through Lena, we see facets of both the mammy and the matriarch that often go unacknowledged. Through her position as a widow, we see how both the mammy and the matriarch end up without male partners. It is neither because the mammy is asexual nor is it because the matriarch castrates men as mainstream America likes to believe but because the Black man's blood has had to be sacrificed to actualize the American dream and in this instance, all that the Younger family get as compensation for the loss of Lena's husband is a miserable cheque for ten thousand dollars. Whilst we are allowed to see the strength of Lena's position as the central force in her family, her prestige as matriarch is protected from that of the stereotypical emasculating image by the constant reference to her life with her late husband and her commitment to the material, spiritual and psychical growth of her children. Her strength is also shown in her willingness to entrust Walter with the money and in her unshakeable faith in him even after he loses it. Lena's strength or power as matriarch is not pitched against her son's maleness; rather her strength is there to challenge him to come into his own as a responsible adult.

The image of the welfare mother is tied to Black women's dependence on the social support system and denigrates women as breeders by stereotyping them as lazy and incapable of adopting and passing on proper work ethics to their fatherless brood. This of course runs 'contrary' to the American way of life. The welfare mother is usually portrayed as an unsavoury, unwed mother, a woman alone, who has no male authority figure to 'guide' her. A recent example of this is seen in the film *Losing Isaiah* (1995), in which Halle Berry plays a drug-crazed single mother who, on delivering a crack-addicted baby, abandons him. The boy who is named Isaiah is adopted by a White couple only for the biological mother to

return and engage them in a law suit to get Isaiah back. Hansberry interrogates the image of the welfare mother by presenting us with Ruth, Walter's wife.

Unlike the welfare mother, Ruth is situated within the framework of an extended family unit which allows us to see the extended family network at its best, cancelling the need for welfare. Unlike the stereotypical welfare mother who is content with living off the society, it is impossible to imagine Ruth on welfare. She remains proud in spite of her poverty and would not even be persuaded to stay away from work when she falls ill. As well, she is prepared to consider having an abortion instead of bringing another child that she cannot afford to fend for into the world. Also, unlike the stereotype, Ruth is married to Walter and, through their relationship we see the kind of situations that led women of her generation into single parenthood because we are allowed to see how the system emasculates men like Walter and through his initial commitment to the American dream, we also see how men like him interiorize their subjection as normative reality.

Beneatha's character serves as a way of rupturing the predominant image of the Jezebel and the characterization lends itself to interpretation on a number of levels. The Jezebel or sexually aggressive seductress which evolved in American lore during the slave era provided rationale for the sexual assaults by White men through the portrayal of Black women as having excessive sexual appetite (Hill Collins, 1990). It also helped to justify their capitalization of Black women's fertility. The earliest slave narratives by women like Harriet Jacobs attest to the power of this image. It was also tied to Black women's economic exploitation by forcing them to work as wet nurses. An early example of this is the famous musical *Carmen Jones*, which played as a musical on Broadway in

1943 and was later made into a movie in which Dorothy Dandridge plays the lead tragic mulatto figure.

Over the years, the Jezebel image has enjoyed centre stage in mainstream culture as African-American women have managed to gain a bit more foothold than the men within the capitalist framework. Through *Beneatha*, Hansberry is able to simultaneously address several issues pertinent to Black male/female relationships as *Beneatha's* character allows us to see tensions between Black men and women on various levels. One level can be seen in the antagonism inherent in *Beneatha's* relationship with her brother Walter, which speaks to issues of the economic tensions between Black men and women. This is achieved by making Walter a chauffeur who does not only confine himself to the crumbs which mainstream America throws at him but who chastises his sister for daring to dream beyond the confines of her race and sex: “ ‘Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy ‘bout messing round with sick people, then go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet ...’ ” (28). Toni Cade Bambara (1970) bears witness to this kind of tension when she writes that the antagonism between Black men and women is one of the distinguishing features of the Black community.<sup>17</sup>

Another level of economic tension at a romantic level is seen in *Beneatha's* relationship with George. George, whose family has managed to amass some level of wealth within the American system, cannot see beyond his meagre capitalist advantage and his relationship with *Beaneatha* will only thrive if she allows him to mould her into a Black imitation of the “proper White woman,” one who is content to support her

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<sup>17</sup> This discordance is another bequest of slavery which deliberately pitched Black men and women against each other through the added complex dimension of the African-American woman's sexual exploitation. bell hooks also attests to the origin of this antipathy in her book *Sisters of the Yam* (1993). She goes further to identify the role of popular culture in perpetuating it in a latter essay titled *Malcolm X: The Longed – for Feminist Manhood* (hooks, 1994).

husband's forays into the capitalist jungle by remaining in the safety of the domestic arena where she reclines cushioned by the proceeds of his exploits: "GEORGE: As for myself – I want a nice – simple – sophisticated girl. I don't need a poet - okay?" (146).

There is also some tension between men and women at the level of revolutionary discourse and this is reflected in Beneatha's relationship with Asagai, the African who though a revolutionary, believes that there can be only be one kind of relationship between a man and a woman:

BENEATHA: You have never understood, apparently, that there is more than one kind of feeling which can exist between a man and a woman – or at least, there *should* [emphasis in the original] be more than one kind of feeling!

ASAGAI (*laughing a little at her again*): No. Between a man and a woman there need be only one kind of feeling. And I have that for you. Now even-right this moment-

BENEATHA: I know! And by itself it won't do. I can find that anywhere ...

ASAGAI (*smiling*): For a woman it should be enough.

BENEATHA (*with spirit*): I know – because that's what it says in all the novels that *men* [emphasis in the original] write. (92)

It is apparent from this dialogue that, whilst Beneatha sees herself as a partner in the revolution as well as in the romantic relationship, Asagai can only see her playing the latter role and this amounts to a denial of her agency. The irony of Asagai's statement in trying to restrict the kind of relationship he expects to have with Beneatha as a woman is made more poignant when juxtaposed against his stance as a revolutionary who is committed to shaking off the oppressive and patronizing relationship between Africans and their colonial masters. However, at the same time he has bought into the kind of male/female relationship which is a colonial legacy.

Like traditional story tellers, Hansberry saw her role as a writer closely linked to her responsibility as a social commentator, as this is evident from her declaration at a

conference in 1959 at which she enjoined African-American writers to address any dispute about fundamental questions of society and individuals (Hansberry cited in Abell, 2001:1). According to Joy Abell, Hansberry held strong beliefs about the means by which African-Americans should attain their civil rights. I agree that her beliefs are reflected in the issues she tackles as well as in the characters she presents as she used her plays to make some of the earliest and very far-sighted social commentaries about race, the American way and the universality of the Black struggle by highlighting the connection between Africans' struggle for self determination and the African-Americans' struggle for civil rights. One example is illustrated by the character of Beneatha. Although A Raisin in the Sun was written before the Black Power or Black is Beautiful Movement which was at its height in the latter half of the 1960's and on into the 1970s (doCarmo), we are presented with a Beneatha who reflects a strong sense of racial pride.

Also by bringing in Asagai to interact with Beneatha, Hansberry comments on the need for Black people in America to connect with their African history and roots. This is illustrated through Lena who, until she met Asagai, only thought of Africa as a place very far removed from her life so that even when she gave money in church for missionary work "in the dark continent," she never really stopped to make a connection between the lives of the people there and hers as an African-American.

In addition, it is easy to read Hansberry's last play, Les Blancs (the one she was working on at the time of her death), which was set in Africa, as a sequel to A Raisin in the Sun as by reading the two plays back to back, a continuum can be discerned. Whilst A Raisin in the Sun makes some mention of Africa as a way of underscoring the link between the Africans' struggle for self determination and the African-American struggle

for civil rights, in Les Blancs she focuses more on Africa but links the oppression of Blacks in Africa to that of the Blacks in America. In both cases, race is the major theme and she portrays a struggle against racism as one which transcends any one group of Blacks (Abell 2001:2). In each case, she takes a universal concept and particularizes it. This approach speaks directly to oral forms of narrative.

Quite apart from the way in which Hansberry challenges the popular stereotypes of Black women through her own complex portrayal of Black women, she also addresses the dynamics of how the construction of the Black race affects the Black male psyche in the presentation of Walter Younger. In her seminal study about the effects of anti-Semitism on Sigmund Freud's works, Anne Pellegrini (1997) is able to use historical accounts of how being a Jewish male (at a time when Jewishness was equated with femaleness by mainstream Europeans) impacted his work and led him, a Jewish man to deflect by emphasizing gender. Going by Pellegrini's analysis of the effects of the genderisation of Jewishness as femaleness, it is possible to see Blackness as being primarily constituted as female since the femaleness of Jews was tied to their "blackness." Pellegrini also suggests that the result of such anti-Semitic beliefs was that whilst all Jews were construed as female, no females were seen as Jewish. This assertion is similar to the perception of African-American women which led to Sojourner Truth's famous "Aint I A Woman?" address.

Walter starts out as an ultra male character, one who is bent on overcompensating for his powerlessness by deriding not only his mother's authority as the head of the home but one who also despises his sister's ambition of becoming a doctor. In one of the early scenes, Walter gives Travis, his son, two fifty-cent pieces even though he knows he

cannot afford such extravagance. He then has to turn to Ruth for carfare after Travis leaves for school. Through this scene we see Walter's way of trying to overcompensate his son for his economic inadequacy, and his attempts to deny his financial reality because he equates maleness to financial capability. His situation becomes more pathetic when taken in the light of the fact that he has bought into the American capitalist dream in which a man's worth is measured by the size of his wallet although there is no room for the likes of him in the system:

WALTER: What's the matter with you all? I didn't make this world! It was give to me this way! Hell yes (*to his sister*), I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls round my wife's neck! Aint's she supposed to wear no pearls? Somebody tem me *who* it is who decided which women is supposed to wear pearls in this world? I tell you, I am a *man*- and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world! (196)

By holding such beliefs, Walter unwittingly resigns himself to perpetual oppression because the only route open to him as a Blackman to succeed at that capitalist dream is one which requires him to mortgage what little self respect he has left and he is prepared to do even this to achieve the American dream:

WALTER: I'm going to feel fine! I'm going to look that man in the eyes and say – (*He falters visibly for the first time*) I'll say: "All right, Mr Lindner – "*(He falters again; the persuasion is not easy.)* "That's your neighbourhood out there and you got a right to keep it the way you want!" (*He glares at all of them.*) That's right! I'm going to say more than that! Gonna say, "you just write me that check and the house is yours! Yeah!, you just put that money in my hand and you won't have to live next door to no bunch of *stinking niggers!*" (196-197)

In the end it is through the power of orature in the form of a classical ritual of "a talking cure" that Walter is able to make his way from the emasculated state into which the American system has forced him into a manhood which projects into life as a committed and valuable member of his family and by extension his community. The term

“talking cure” is attributed to a woman who is simply identified as Fraulein Anna O. Fraulein O was a patient of Joseph Breuer, who was Sigmund Freud's colleague. Fraulein O is described as a “hysteric” who, amongst other symptoms, experienced absences, was unable to speak her native language of German and spoke only in English. She is also said to have suffered from some kind of paralysis of the right arm. Breuer is reported to have helped improve her condition through hypnosis, talking and by the recollection of forgotten events. Fraulein O is said to have described the process of emotional catharsis as a “talking cure” or a form of “chimney sweeping” and her “hysterical condition” is said to have disappeared when the event which had given rise to them was reproduced in her hypnosis and her speech disturbances were “talked away” (Webster 2004).

Caroline Rody (1995) broadens the use of the term *talking cure* in her analyses of the resurgence in fictional plots concerned with revisiting America's past through the relics of slavery. She analyzes historical novels in which the protagonists become reconciled to their past and enslaved ancestors by examining instances in which the family and generational divides take on the forms of tropes through which communal as well as personal history can be problematized. By focusing on narrative strategies of historical return in contemporary works by African-American women and postcolonial writers, Rody reveals the inevitability of confronting the concerns of marginalized communities haunted by a history of oppression. She observes that, instead of dismissing the past as an inaccessible and textually dependent chimera, writers reconstruct history by displaying the point of view of the disempowered (99). Her analysis underscores the importance of historical narratives and connects history to the role of the family in the

psychic health of individuals as well as the larger community. She also highlights the link between narratives of history and the symbolic structure of parental relations.

As an individual, Walter Younger's emotional catharsis in A Raisin in the Sun is similar to a talking cure and it is what engenders his ability to grow as a character whilst at the same time moving the story of the Younger family which for most of the play, is in crises towards a denouement which is for the most part open ended. It is open-ended because, although we see the family moving into the all White neighbourhood, the outcome of such a move can only be speculated on.

However, when Lena Younger celebrates her son's coming of age by saying: "He finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain" (205), the reader knows that Walter has, with the help of his mother, succeeded in talking himself into being a manhood that is not threatened by the strength of the women in his life. Rather, it is a manhood that celebrates their strengths and all that such strengths stand for in this family and the human community. It is a manhood that is cognizant of the collectiveness of the struggle at hand, a point reflected in the way he includes not only the women in the family but the generations gone by as well as his son who represents the future of the struggle in his final decision to turn down the insulting offer by the representative of the all White neighbourhood to buy them out.

### **Conclusion**

Hansberry's strong political and sociological views which attack racism and prejudice are demonstrated through the power of orature as a tool for positive change. In addition, the self referential character of the play is one which is often found in oral narratives. The pervasive negative images of African-American women prior to the

emergence of the play A Raisin in the Sun have been resisted through the documentation and presentation of the complexity of Black women's lives. Since A Raisin in the Sun, literature by Black women writers has provided "the most comprehensive view of Black women's struggles to engender positive self-definitions in the face of denigrated images of Black womanhood" (Hill Collins, 1990: 83). Novelists like Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Marita Golden, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Danganrembga have all written to present an alternative view of Black women.

The presentation of a comprehensive view of the lives of women which Hansberry does so admirably has also been one of the major projects of African women writers and in the next chapter I will be looking at how Ama Ata Aidoo also interrogates orature in order to rewrite stereotypes of women.

## Chapter Five

### Ama Ata Aidoo

#### Introduction

Traditional story-telling is a multidimensional exercise which may include proverbs, songs, dance and drums. Ama Ata Aidoo's novel Changes: A Love Story (1991) interacts with orature stylistically in the incorporation of various genres such as poetry and dramatic dialogue. She also interrogates orature thematically by rewriting folkloric tropes such as the motherhood trope. In addition, interaction with orature is evident in her use of localized English and it is apparent that communicating with the audience is crucial to Aidoo's aim as a writer. In an interview with Maxine McGregor (1972) she explains her mission:

I totally disagree with people who feel that oral literature is one stage in the development of man's artistic genius....  
We cannot tell our stories maybe with the same expertise as our forefathers. But to me, all art of the speaking voice could be brought back so easily. We are not that far from our traditions. (23-24)

Furthermore, she responds to orally prevalent notions of women as their own worst enemies and the presumption that feminism is a borrowed culture.

#### Synopsis

In Changes, Esi, the main character, is a woman living in Accra, Ghana. She is a data analyst for the government whilst her husband Oko is not doing so well professionally and this affects their marriage. Oko's dissatisfaction with Esi's independence leads to marital rape, as a result of which the marriage breaks up. Esi

becomes attracted to a married man, Ali, after leaving Oko. Ali marries her as his second wife. Her marriage to Ali soon falls apart due to Ali's constant traveling.

Changes portrays other feminist conflicts and concerns through the depiction of Esi's friend and confidant, Opokuya, who is a nurse dealing with different marital issues because her husband is also very chauvinistic in his outlook. Opokuya is different from Esi because she is determined to juggle her obligations to her husband and children as well as her career while Esi apparently favours her career. Unfortunately, Opokuya's husband does not appreciate her efforts. Through the portrayal of Fusena, a Moslem woman, who is the first wife of Ali ( Esi's second husband), we are also allowed to see how the modern Moslem woman navigates her life in a polygamous culture which is so heavily stacked against wives in favour of their husband.

### **Analysis**

If we are to make any significant impact in problematizing the status of African women, it is crucial to explore what orature says about women. The omnipresent effect of modern forms of communication today makes this even more imperative. In Changes, Ama Ata Aidoo presents us with poignant images of the role of women in modern African society and both thematically and stylistically, she interrogates orature. From the first page her indebtedness to the oral tradition and determination to interrogate orature is reflected when in the first paragraph she introduces us to the verbal onslaught which women drivers suffer:

Esi was feeling angry with herself. She had no business driving all the way to the offices of Linga whatever. The car of course stalled more than once on the way, and, of course, all the other drivers were unsympathetic. They blew their horns, and some taxi drivers shouted the usual obscenities about 'women drivers'. (1)

This opening passage, which can be read as a model of the modern African society, serves to introduce us to the internal as well as the external struggles with which Esi, a modern educated African woman, has to contend. First, she is mad at herself because she realizes she has somehow been manipulated into the situation in which she finds herself. Secondly, other drivers have no sympathy for her and the taxi drivers simply verbalize what is on their minds. The negativity which surrounds Esi as the novel opens paints a poignant picture of the general perception of the educated African woman. Esi's colleagues, who it is safe to assume are all educated and male, are just as unrelenting in challenging her intrusion into the public sphere that they see as their turf. This is reflected in the way they exploit her as the second paragraph illustrates: "In spite of how strongly she felt about it all, why couldn't she ever prevent her colleagues from assuming that any time the office secretary was away, *she* could do the job? And better still, why couldn't she prevent herself from falling into that trap?" (1) The possible answer(s) to the question which Esi raises in this passage constitutes the rest of the story as Aidoo shows us how, through the power of orature, the society tries to contain women. The novel also paints a vivid picture of how through words the society is itself boxed into a frame of mind which restricts its ability to project and accept the multiplicity of women's identities.

In her book, Excitable Speech (1997) Judith Butler explicates the power of speech as something which goes beyond mere words. She sees the word as something which not only incites action but also constitutes action and she writes about the danger posed by the power of language to injure as well as to empower. Butler uses an image which was proposed by Louis Althusser to illustrate the way that subjection can be constituted by an act as overtly simple as that of a policeman who hails on a street, "Hey, you!" By turning

to answer this call, a person is “interpellated” by the law and is thus constituted as a subject of power (25). In Changes, Aidoo skilfully consolidates the power of words to mould, even when the source cannot be recalled. This she does by presenting us with Oko, Esi’s husband who is torn between his emotional attachment and dependence on Esi and his desire to live up to being a man in the eyes of the world:

He had always loved Esi. And what was wrong with that?

‘It’s not safe to show a woman you love her ... not too much anyway,’ some male voice was telling him. But whose voice was that? His father’s? His Uncle Amoa’s? He wasn’t sure that the voice belonged to any of those two. (7)

Although Oko does not remember where he has heard these words yet their potency remains intact and his attitude to his wife is determined by something he heard from a source he can not recall. His inability to determine the source or the historicity of these words does not reduce their ability to interpellate. According to Butler:

the illocutionary speech act performs its deed *at the moment* of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment. The “moment” in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance. (3)

However, unlike Butler who posits that “[i]f we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power” (2), Aidoo presents us with female characters who refuse to be conditioned by the insulting power of words. We see the radical Esi, as well as the more conservative Opokuya and Fusena, questioning, and challenging the restrictions which the appellation ‘woman’ tries to place on them. Perhaps it is the recognition of the double-edged power of the word that makes Aidoo situate herself within orature as a site of resistance. She does this through a “marked

idiosyncrasy of her style, its playfulness and fluidity, its disrespect for generic boundaries, its dramatic and oral quality, above all its elusive irony” (Bryce 1999: 1).

Aidoo disregards the conventional delineation of genres, occasionally providing authorial interventions in the form of poetic notes embedded in the text:

traditional shyness and contempt for biology of women;  
Islamic suppressive ideas about women;  
English Victorian prudery and French hypocrisy  
imported by the colonizers ...(75)

She also has spurs of conversation in dialogic script form (see page 101-102) and incorporates the use of a chorus which is reminiscent of the call and response device of the oral narrative. All of these devices allow her to bridge the gap with her audience as they make it easy to imagine the novel as a story-telling session with the listeners participating. An example can be found on page 22 when she uses the form of a chorus provided by Ali Kondey’s other mothers to tell the story of his biological mother:

‘Was she not fifteen when Ali was born?’  
‘That was all she was.’  
‘Then how could she have lived?’  
‘She could not live. She did not live.’  
‘I saw it all. She looked at the baby Ali very well.’  
‘You would have thought she just wanted to be sure  
That everything was fine with him.’ (22)

According to Nana Jane Opoku-Agyemang (1999),

The folktale is a popular literary art in the true sense of the expression .... When in the telling, for example, a member of the audience contributes to the narration with a statement such as ‘I was a witness to this event,’ or when the narrator directs a phrase such as ‘You should have seen this for yourself,’ or a sentence such as ‘My children, you must listen carefully to what this animal said ...’ to the audience, the comments serve to obscure the past and the passage of time by suggesting that once upon a time is

now, and that in the world of the tale the past and the present can converge. The tale, together with its importance, is thus drawn from a distant past and made to approximate the realities of the present time. (1)

In this instance, Ali's mother's tragic death is drawn from the past into the present and used to illustrate the life of women not only in the novel's "present" but also in the readers' present. For if a member of the chorus which represents the voice of the audience/reader was 'present' i.e. an eye witness to Ali's mother's death, how distant can the incident be to the readers' reality? Thus the use of the chorus here allows Aidoo to speak to issues of child brides as well as maternal mortality without digressing from the main story. In addition, Opoku-Agyemang also asserts that interventions like this "allow the narrative to make claims to occupy a hermetic space by drawing attention to itself as a tale." This is because, having collectively participated in the formulation of the story, the audience is expected to abide by its morals. This kind of dialogic exchange also enhances the ability of the artist and the audience (which also constitutes the critic) to "operate at the same time and space" (2).

Oral narratives take for granted the accessibility of the language in which they are expressed whilst the opposite has been the case with the written literature in which language has tended to be used more as a tool of differentiation. Classical literature actually prides itself on elitism, as it was never meant for the generality of the public but for the educated or the refined. The case has been the same amongst African writers given the role which language played in colonization. Aidoo uses English but has refused to be confined in her use to the dictates of mainstream convention in incorporating local flavour. Interaction with orature is also evident in her use of localized English. A vast vocabulary in the English language has been claimed by proponents of English as a sign

of its superiority (Pennycook 1998: 33-146). Unsurprisingly many Black writers before Zora Neale Hurston took great pains to cultivate “an educated English” as if to prove that as “speakers of English, they are the ablest thinkers” (40). Zora Neale Hurston’s approach was to damn the arrogant gaze of the mainstream critic by unapologetically incorporating Black English and other writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Flora Nwapa and Aidoo have since signified on this quality. Like Zora Neal Hurston, Aidoo sometimes talks directly to her readers in the tradition of the speakerly trope (see page 19).

Also like Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Changes* is written in a form of English which is unapologetic of its local flavour but rather takes for granted the readers’ ability to decode cultural symbols. An example is presented when Aidoo describes the aftermath of the marital rape by referring to Oko’s removal of the sleeping cloth and Esi’s retaliation in sucking her teeth:

He got out of bed, taking the entire sleeping cloth with him. Esi’s anger rose to an exploding pitch. Not just because Oko taking the cloth left her completely naked, or because she was feeling uncomfortably wet between her thighs. What really finished her was her eyes catching sight of the cloth trailing behind Oko who looked like some arrogant king, as he opened the door to get to the bathroom before her. She sucked her teeth, or made the noise which is normally described, inadequately, in English as a sucking of teeth. (9)

In addition to underscoring the inadequacy of the English language to capture the complexity of the African psyche in spite of its prestige as an international language, this sequence is richly encoded in symbols which I am able to recognize because they are common place in the oral culture in which I grew up. In the Yoruba language, for instance, there is a proverb: “eniyan l’aso.” Loosely translated, this means that people are

the cloth or fabric with which we are adorned. In other words, without people like members of our family and others with whom we are in good standing, even the wealthiest of us remains naked. This idea of people as a person's real adornment is also played out in the way members of Ali's family are referred to as his fathers and mothers and the indignation expressed by Esi's fathers when Ali attempts to go and ask for her hand in marriage without the adornment of his people (see page 133).

In a marriage, the idea that the man is the cloth which covers his wife is also very strong culturally, and when Oko immediately, preceding the rape act, first of all "flung off the bed cloth" he draws a battle line, and although after the act he "tried to draw the bedcloth to cover both of them again," it is apparent that something in their relationship had been destroyed. So that when he ends up "taking the entire sleeping cloth with him," it is an act which leaves her "completely naked" when he exits the room. This is why "what really finished her was her eyes catching sight of the cloth trailing behind" (10) him. In this way, Aidoo relays the end of the marriage. Esi's retaliation is also culturally encoded in the act of sucking her teeth. To suck one's teeth at another is a reflection of the worst kind of contempt. It is one of the worst ways a woman can transmit scorn to a man. In the Yoruba culture, it is like a powerful armour in a woman's hand.

One of the ways in which Aidoo interrogates orature thematically is in the portrayal of marital rape, which is depicted as a result of Esi's husband's anger at her professional and financial independence and success (9). Women's financial independence was the pillar stone of some African cultures like the Yoruba in Nigeria and the Ewe in Ghana. In these cultures, women retained their autonomy until missionary incursions and colonization rendered them appendages to their men folk. Oral tradition is

replete with images of the powerful financially independent woman and the lengths to which men would go to try and overcome her. A good example can be found in Ifa divination poetry, one of the oldest and most sacred forms of Yoruba orature. Ifa comprises the corpus of traditional religious and philosophical knowledge for the Yoruba.

### **Odi Makes Love to the Head of the Market Women**

A dia f'Eji	Ifa divination was performed for Eji Odi
Ti nlo so/ja Ejigbomekun,	Who was going to the market of Ejigbomekun
O nsunkun ailobirin.	Weeping because he had no wife.
Won ni ki Odi orubo.	Eji Odi was told to perform sacrifice
Kin ni oun o ha ru bayii?	What should he offer for sacrifice?
Won ni ki o ru opolopo oyin.	He was told to perform sacrifice with plenty of honey.
O si ru u.	He performed it.
Ninu oyin ti o ru	Out of the honey which he offered for Sacrifice,
Ni awon awoo ree ti mu	His Ifa priests took a little,
Ti won fi se Ifa fun un	And with it, made the medicine of Ifa for him.
Bi Eji Odi ti doja Ejigbomekun,	As soon as Eji Odi arrived in the market of
	Ejigbomekun,
Iyaloja lo ko digbo lu,	He got hold of the head of the market women,
O si ta Okan ninu awon igo oyi	And he poured honey from one of the bottles
Ti won fise Ifa fun un si didii	Which contained the Ifa medicine into
	her private part.
Leyin na loba iyola lopo	It was after that that he had sex with her,
O si gbadun re pupo.	And he enjoyed her exceedingly.

(Abimbola 1977: 66-67)

As Aidoo illustrates with the characterization of Oko, the power of orature is such that it very easily takes on religious under-tones and leads to the making of taboos. For instance, regarding the power of Ifa amongst the Yoruba, Wande Abimbola writes: "Ifa is a means whereby a non-literate society attempts to keep and disseminate its own philosophy and values despite the lapses and imperfections of human memory on which the system is based" (4). Unfortunately, as a result of our history, Islam, Christianity and colonialism have overshadowed a lot of the positive elements with regards to women in

society. So while orature has continued to play a very major role, not only in the way our societies have evolved but also in the way we continue to live, it has been primarily the negative images of women that have been highlighted.

The above quotation from Odi Meji, a section of the Ifa corpus, illustrates one of the negative ways in which women are presented as sexual objects in some of such sacred texts. While such images explain why women are often portrayed as sex objects in a lot of songs by modern musicians as well as in books and the African video/film industry, there are some examples, for instance, of creation stories from the Yao or the Ekoi in which women are portrayed positively, not only as founders or co-founders of their societies but also as pillars of such societies. Unfortunately, as Aidoo shows it is the negative notions of women which have become institutionalized in modern African culture. Even within the Ifa corpus women are sometimes seen as positive and crucial elements to the wellbeing of their family and society. For instance, in one of the stanzas of Irosun Meji, taken from another section of the Ifa corpus, the woman is presented not as a sex object or a domestic slave but as an essential element to the success and wellbeing of the husband and family. The husband in this instance is not just any ordinary man or powerful Ifa priest but Orunmila, the very God of divination. In Irosun Meji, “Ifa divination was performed for *Orunmila* when he was practicing divination without a wife. (73)” Implicit in the statement that divination was performed for him is the idea that he was in some kind of trouble because divination is usually performed in order to find solutions to problems. The value of a wife as solution to his problem is buttressed by the next line which says: “Could [he] possibly have a wife?” It is only after some sacrifice was performed that he got a wife who “helped him carry the calabash of kolanuts.” The

calabash of kolanuts here symbolizes economic wealth and the role of the wife as an economic partner is signified by her metaphorical role as kolanut bearer. The positive influence she represents in his life is also illustrated by another line which expresses his gratitude to the Ifa priest who performed the divination for him:

He started to give thanks  
To the Ifa priests who performed divination for him.  
He said that was exactly what his Ifa priests predicted.  
“When fire dies, it covers itself with ashes;  
When the moon dies, it leaves the stars behind...”

The rest of the stanza consolidates the air of prosperity which the marriage brings into Orunmila's life as the images invoked by the fire covering itself with ashes and the moon leaving behind stars are symbols of material prosperity, procreation and long life. Sadly, in some ways the modern African woman has lost such foothold within the society and this is illustrated by the way in which Esi's professional success results in marital rape and the collapse of her marriage.

Unsurprisingly, there is no name for marital rape in Esi's language.<sup>18</sup> As such, in order for her to react against it, Esi has to first of all take the trouble to name it for the despicable act it is (11-13). Naming Oko's assault as marital rape rids the act of any innocence even though it was committed within marriage. Naming marital rape therefore becomes a first step towards rejecting it; thus Aidoo plays out the power of words to activate.

Another way in which Aidoo thematically interrogates orature is reflected in the manner in which Esi is attracted to Ali, a married man whom she ends up marrying as a

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<sup>18</sup> In trying to answer the question which Esi raises on page 11 in which she wonders if a name exists for rape in other African languages, I have been unable to find one for it in Yoruba language. In “Odi Makes Love to the Head of the Market Women” which I cited above, it is the same words used to describe love making that has been used to describe rape.

second wife. I am not aware of any statistics to illustrate what the majority of “modern educated African women” think of monogamy as an alternative to polygamy. However, some of the most vibrant yet most ignored arenas for the evolution and devolution of culture in Africa as well as the diaspora are homosocial spaces. We have examples of the vital role which such homosocial spaces play in the diaspora in Paule Marshall’s depiction of her mother and her friends at the kitchen table in Brown Girl, Brown Stone (1959). Marshall illustrates how the protagonist, Selina’s mother and her friends, regularly converged in their kitchen to discuss and analyze virtually every thing under the sun. These kitchen table sessions formed a crucial part of Selina’s socialization.

In Africa, men have their own spaces the same way in which women have theirs. Whilst in most cultures, the men’s space might be more formalized;<sup>19</sup> the informal settings of women’s gatherings make them relaxed, fertile grounds for the generation of ideas as well as the examination of topical issues.<sup>20</sup> I cannot count the number of times when I have been at women-only gatherings where the idea of monogamy versus polygamy has come up amongst educated women. Although such discussions often start out in a very light-hearted way and might end up taking the form of jokes, they sometimes end up reflecting deep-seated ambivalence about the so-called advantages of monogamy. As women from societies which have a history of strong independent

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<sup>19</sup> Examples are the various political caucuses that most African ethnic groups have or the secret societies like the Ekpe society, in Cross River State of Nigeria. Other examples are the long periods of separation during which boys are inducted into manhood during circumcision as practiced by groups like the Mandingoes of the Senegambia area.

<sup>20</sup> The role of such informal gatherings by women as important avenues for the evolution of ideas and sometimes for activism can be illustrated with the Aba Women’s War of 1929 which started out as such an informal gathering but has become a land mark in Nigeria’s history. It was an informal gathering which quickly grew into an organization which enabled the women to organize a very strong resistance against the colonial government which tried to impose unfair taxes. Again in 1946 a group of women which used to meet informally in Abeokuta was able to garner enough energy and clout to successfully oust the traditional ruler of the town who was identified as a collaborator with the colonial government.

foremothers, modern African women are often mocked and challenged as ‘senior servants’.<sup>21</sup> This is because wifedom and motherhood in a monogamous marriage has impacted the lives of the modern woman differently from the ways in which marriage did the lives of their foremothers who were in polygamous relationships. In Oyeronke Oyewunmi’s (1997) analysis of the traditional Yoruba social structure, while procreation is the major reason for marriage as a result of which children are the main obligation of husband and wife to each other, the woman managed to retain her autonomy in respect to her finances. In addition, she did not become absorbed into her matrimonial family but retained her status within her own natal family. As such, it is difficult for today’s women not to sometimes wonder if they are really better off in monogamous marriages, unlike their foremothers.

Aidoo speaks to this ambivalence in Changes because one of the main reasons which Esi considered before marrying Ali was the fact that she thought being a second wife would allow her to make her work a priority. Through this aspect of the novel Aidoo brings this often ignored but very real dilemma of the modern African woman to light.

In addition, Aidoo responds to music which is another form of orature and which is one of the most vibrant and most effective ways in which ideology is propagated. Houston Baker (1984) in his study of the blues declares that, “Afro American blues constitute such a vibrant network. They are what Jacques Derrida might describe as the ‘always already’ of Afro-American culture. They are the multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (3-4). Perhaps the most popular

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<sup>21</sup> I do not know the source of this phrase but it is one which was familiar to me even as a child. It is used to convey disdain for middle class women or wives of rich men who do not work as the idea of a woman without her own source of income is abhorrent to most traditional cultures. The Yoruba describe such women as *a’ la bodo* which means a woman who is fed for the sole purpose of providing her man with sexual gratification.

musician to come out of Africa was the late Fela Anikulapo Kuti who popularized a song which is sarcastically titled 'Lady.' Whilst Anikulapo Kuti was unquestionably committed to denouncing military dictatorship, corruption and neo-colonialism in all its ramifications, his activism and ideology was quite confused where women were concerned as illustrated by this excerpt from the lyrics of the song:

I want tell you about Lady  
She go say im equal to man  
She go say im get power like man  
She go say anything man do  
im self fit do...  
She go want take cigar before anybody  
She go want make you open door for am  
She go want make man wash plate for her for kitchen  
She want salute man she go sit down for chair  
She want sit down for table before anybody  
She want piece of meat before anybody (Anikulapo Kuti 1974)

In songs as in other aspects of modern orature, the African woman is not only portrayed in a negative light but she is often compared unfavourably against the so-called authentic African woman:

African woman go dance she go dance the fire dance  
She know im manna Master  
She go cook for am  
She go do anything he say  
But Lady no be so... (Anikulapo Kuti 1974)

The intention is to ostracize the modern woman, here derogatively referred to as 'lady,' from her base as an integral part of her society. I know from interviewing Aidoo that she is insistent on proving that feminism is not alien to Africans, as detractors would have us believe. The gist of the "Lady" song, which challenges the authenticity of the modern African woman as African, is played out in the complex characterization of Esi which forces Oko to question her veracity: "Is Esi too an African woman?" (8).

It is only natural that if female writers who have been nurtured within the African setting today must effectively debunk, where necessary, or highlight a lot of the often neglected positive myths through which our societies have and continue to be shaped, then the body of existing myths must be actively and constructively interrogated. Aidoo takes on the challenge of remoulding some myths. One myth which she revises is presented in the form of Nana's (Esi's grandmother) version of the creation myth (110). Aidoo does this on more than one level. First Nana challenges the accuracy of any existent creation myth by declaring that: "No one knows what it was like then." By questioning their genuineness, Nana draws attention to their nature as fiction and positions herself as a story teller with as much creative rights as whoever had come up with those other creative myths. Also, Nana deconstructs the notion of men as gods because, although she refers to them as the "first gods of the universe," she also describes them as "devouring gods," therefore drawing attention to their unworthiness as gods to be worshiped. The importance of this attempt to interrogate myth can only be appreciated when we recall the role that myths play in the religious realm of African societies.

In an appraisal of the expectations and attitudes concerning roles and behaviour designated appropriate for a particular gender as reflected in Akan folktales,<sup>22</sup> Opoku Agyemang (1999) explains that: "The emphasis on parenting is explicated largely as a female's role" (10). However, after Esi divorces Oko, she leaves her child with his parents. This constitutes a major reversal of the motherhood trope as seen in Akan folktales.

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<sup>22</sup> Akan is Ama Ata Aidoo's ethnic group.

**Conclusion:**

Traditional African societies and to a large extent various modern African societies rely on orature as a necessary form of cultural expression. Orature embodies traditional forms of art and religion as well as story-telling, songs and proverbs. These all constitute the major sources of myth alongside modern ones like books, films, stage performances and various forms of popular culture from which Africans who are attempting to subsist in the global village draw inspiration. Orature constitutes an integral part of not only the ritual, spiritual life of communities but the day to day lives of the people. Ama Ata Aidoo like other women writers who have been nurtured within settings which are reliant on orature actively and effectively debunks, where necessary, prevalent myths in a bid to problematize the condition of the modern African woman.

Culturally there is a dialogical interaction between the narrator, poet and the audience and this is reflected in Changes. Though writing distances the author from the reader, by periodically addressing the audience through the use of the chorus, localized language and symbols, as well as mixing of genres, Aidoo draws her readers in as participants in her story-telling. All of these allow Aidoo to dialogically engage her audience. Engagement with their readers is a quality which appears in the works of all the writers under review. In addition, while engaging in dialogue with their audience, some of the women writers under review also simultaneously engage in dialogue with one another and the next chapter on Buchi Emecheta will illustrate how this is done in addition to reiterating some of the other ways in which women interact with orature.

## Chapter Six

### Buchi Emecheta

#### Introduction

According to Yvonne Atkinson (2000), African-American writers “read each other, and seem intent on refiguring what we might think of as key canonical topoi and tropes received from the black [English oral] tradition.” She stresses that in doing so “the writers are Called on to Respond to what they have Witnessed in the works of other African-American authors. Their response becomes their testimony and a reaffirmation of community” (16). Buchi Emecheta’s novel, Joys of Motherhood, makes for an interesting study of the intersections between the writings of African women and those of African women in the diaspora. It illustrates that there is a distinct literary tradition amongst Black women writers from different parts of the world. This tradition is best illustrated through the way they signify on one another’s works, which is a form of affirmation of community. For instance, whilst Buchi Emecheta overtly signifies on Flora Nwapa’s Efuru, there is also evidence to show that Toni Morrison and Tsitsi Dangarembga signify on Buchi Emecheta’s Joys Of Motherhood. This quality is important to the study of the impact of orature on their works as signification through reinventing is a practice which is prevalent in the oral traditions of most African societies.

#### Synopsis

The Joys of Motherhood is the story of a woman, Nnu Ego, whose life revolves around her children. Although Nnu Ego’s mother who died soon after her birth was a very strong and independent woman who refused to marry (not only because her father

had no sons and the culture expected her to have children who would bear his name but also because she did not want to), Nnu Ego is convinced that as a woman it is only through her children that she will gain the respect of her society.

The novel opens in Lagos in 1934 with the image of Nnu Ego running wildly through the streets after discovering the body of her dead baby, “the one that told the world that she was not barren” (62). Nnu Ego had been sent to Lagos to marry Nnaife, her second husband because she was unable to have children in her first marriage. This is why the death of her first child, who also happened to be a boy, a few weeks after his birth, drives her to attempt suicide. With no identity outside the designation of mother, she feels she is incapable of existing. Fortunately for her, she is rescued by a man from her village who prevents her from committing suicide.

Eventually she produces multiple progeny and initially she revels in the assumption that her life is complete and that she has fulfilled her vocation in life. However, this period of contentment is short-lived. Colonial influences began to complicate traditional patriarchal values, with the attendant result that ill-equipped women like Nnu Ego find it impossible to comprehend let alone survive the new realities imposed by colonialism unscathed. For starters they are forced to relinquish the little clout they have within the traditional societies and their lives are further complicated by poverty imposed on them by the capitalism that has been ushered in by colonial administration.

Joys of Motherhood takes us through Nnu Ego’s life journey as she becomes increasingly disappointed and disillusioned even in the children on whom she expends her life raising, as the two oldest boys, the highly valued sons, desert her in search of

higher education abroad. Ironically, the little succour she has in her old age comes from her daughters who were so devalued within the family structure that they were made to sacrifice any possibility of education to ensure that their brothers went to school.

A major side plot, which also serves as backdrop to Nnu Ego's story, takes the form of the story of a slave girl who is killed as a way of honouring Nnu Ego's father's chief wife after she dies. However, when Nnu Ego is born, it turns out that the slave girl is her chi.<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, Nnu Ego's chi turns out to be out for vengeance, and it is as a result of this that she first refuses to grant her children. When she eventually does, she first appears to Nnu Ego in a dream to show her that she would only be giving her dirty babies, i.e. children who would shame her rather than be a source of pride. However, Nnu Ego in her determination to have children is too desperate to heed this foreboding.

In the end, Nnu Ego dies an ignoble death by the roadside only for her sons to return home from abroad in order to give her a lavish burial. At her death she is even canonised but her spirit refuses to grant children to descendants who worship her in the hope that she would grant them children.

### **Analysis**

Like other writers under review, Emecheta successfully debunks several notions about African women which are prevalent in orature. One example is the notion that romantic love is alien to African women. She does this through the depiction of Ona and Agbadi's (Nnu Ego's mother and father) relationship. Ona and Agbadi lived in the village which, compared to the capital city of Lagos, was farther removed from European

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<sup>23</sup> In Igbo cosmology, the chi is the guardian spirit which is assigned to every human being born into the world. It is the major force in a person's essence. The chi is appeased when the person encounters difficulty and it is celebrated when a person enjoys good fortune as the chi is responsible for a person's success or failure in life.

influence. Emecheta depicts their relationship as romantic and mutually fulfilling. The idea that Africans felt and experienced romantic love is further buttressed by the fact that none of the characters who live in Lagos and are more exposed to Westernization are shown in such lights. The closest to any notion of romance that we get from an urbanized character is expressed by Cordelia who is married to Uzo, a cook who works for the Europeans, Dr and Mrs. Meers (Nnaife's employers). Even this is an affection which developed in spite of urbanization and not because of it as Cordelia readily admits that she had been married into Uzo's family as a child and had been raised by his mother as her daughter. She had therefore grown to love him even before being brought to live with him in Lagos.

Emecheta also shows that even in the traditional Ibo setting, women had a say in the course of their lives. Although Nnu Ego was only a teenager when she first got married, her father consulted her before making a decision about who she would marry. Again, although traditionally, Ona's father (Nnu Ego's maternal grandfather) was allowed to keep his first daughter at home to bear male children who would continue his line. Through the way Ona interacts with her father, Emecheta shows that such an arrangement has advantages for the daughter. There is also no evidence that this arrangement was forced on Ona as she herself is adamant that she does not want to be under the control of a husband and she clearly has autonomy in her father's house.

Furthermore Emecheta problematizes the notion of African women as homogeneous. This she does through what Florence Stratton (1994) describes as the "convention of the paired women" (97). According to Stratton, one of the ways in which African male writers tried to counter the "myth of the inherent inferiority of the black

race – a myth which provided the ideological rationale for European imperialism”- was through the mythologizing of Africa in the form of the “mother Africa trope” (40). Whilst there “are indications that [this trope] is indigenous to African artistic expression, occurring in the orature,” the trope has over time become identified with and has a history specific to African male literary tradition. It is a trope which now has various versions as male writers continue to revise and reiterate one another’s versions of it (40). Stratton also observes that, whilst this trope serves the purpose of male writers, their female counterparts have repudiated it because it constitutes further exploitation of women by stereotyping them as homogeneous and castigating those female characters that fall short of its unattainable level of the perfect mother figure. In addition, she shows that African women have countered this trope through the institution of their own convention:

Like the Mother Africa trope, the convention has more than one mode, the defining feature of the form, as Nwapa introduces it, being the familial or social juxtaposition of two female characters (sisters, cousins, co-wives, best friends) who, in their response to male domination, are the antithesis of each other, one passively submitting, the other actively resisting. ... It is a recurring feature of the African female tradition in fiction and one that runs counter to a number of the trends in male literary traditions, including the tendency to identify women with tradition and to resolve narrative tension with such themes as redemption through marriage and/or motherhood or through repatriation to the village. It acts as a corrective to the image of women which men writers valorize, for it is the radical not the conservative sister or friend, the one that challenges patriarchal authority, who is rewarded in the narrative. (97)

In Joys Of Motherhood, Emecheta juxtaposes Nnu Ego with Adaku her co-wife, who has a totally different outlook from her. Through Adaku, we are able to see a different and more radical dimension of the African woman. Again, Emecheta also presents us with Ona who, although steeped in tradition, would not be cowed. There is

also Mama Abby, who is a single mother whose past is clouded in speculation but she raises her son who does very well and is able to provide for her in old age. Another character though very peripheral but whose characterization is apparently deliberate, is Iyawo Istekiri, Nnu Ego's neighbour in Lagos. Iyawo Istekiri, though married, has no children but she is not as fixated about having children as Nnu Ego was before she had her brood. Each of these characters can be read as opposing specific character traits and conservative beliefs, which Nnu Ego portrays. In other words, for every flaw which Nnu Ego displays we are presented with another female character that does not.

Another quality which Joys Of Motherhood shares with the oral narrative is the way in which Emecheta addresses issues pertinent to the larger society through Nnu Ego's story. Through the portrayal of the various women who interact with Nnu Ego, Emecheta shows that while in terms of status they did not fare very well when compared to men, African women were not totally bereft of clout in their society as they had evolved various ways of negotiating their lives.

Like Tsitsi Dangarembga in Nervous Condition, Emecheta uses the various interactions between men and women to problematize the popularly held notion that it is only men who react to colonization. Like Dangarembga, she shows the irony inherent in how colonization not only emasculates African men, but also how they become blinded by the so called advantages that they enjoy as men under colonialism and are often less questioning of its effects on their lives than women. This is reinforced by the fact that even though Nnu Ego is the most conservative of all the women portrayed in the novel, she still finds the subservient attitude of men like her husband who work as domestic servants for the British demeaning.

Emecheta also opens up the structure of the levirate marriage as practiced by the Igbo to illustrate that women had a say in whether or not they were inherited by members of their husbands' family. For instance, when Nnaife's brother dies, one of his wives, Ego-Obi decides to return to her natal home rather than be inherited by Nnaife. Adaku who he marries, only comes to Lagos because she wanted to be inherited. Although one of her reasons was because she thought it would afford her the opportunity of having a male child, it is also possible to deduce that she chose to marry Nnaife because it gave her a foothold in Lagos, which was the commercial nerve centre of the country.

In line with oral tradition, Emecheta uses Nnu Ego's story to comment on the socio-economic situation of the society by making the link between capitalism and the plight of women in the third world. She shows how capitalism induces poverty, which increases women's oppression. It takes away whatever values they had within their natal families through urbanization. For example, through the depiction of Nnu Ego and various other female characters, she shows that women had status in their natal clans and homes which had little to do with their ability to procreate. However, with the loss of this political base through the process of rural urban migration, as people are forced to abandon their villages in search of work in the cities, motherhood took on new meanings and it became conflated with womanhood.

Joys Of Motherhood shows how capitalism undermines women's ability to network, which traditionally has always been a source of strength. Furthermore, it reduces their chances at any form of economic independence. In Lagos, where money is so hard to come by, women quickly become preoccupied with eeking out a living and this robs them of the time to network. Also, because money is so hard to come by, Nnu Ego

and her husband only worry about investing in their sons' education. Thus the novel shows how capitalism puts more pressure on third world girls who are increasingly seen as nothing more than investments by their parents. Many times in this novel people allude to the fact that a girl is only good for her dowry.

It is also capitalism which brings Nnaife to the cramped room in Lagos where he is forced to make a living by washing his colonial master's wife's underwear. Nnaife thus typifies the oppressed turning oppressor himself for while he complacently takes all the insult poured on him by his colonial master, he in turn expects his wife to be as complacent under his authority as he is under his master's. Capitalism is also responsible for disrupting traditional values which would have ensured that Nnu Ego's sons took care of her in her old age. Instead, they are lured abroad where individualism blinds them to their traditional responsibilities as integral parts of their family and community. The irony of their so-called value as sons is underscored by Aduka who ends up better off than Nnu Ego because of her financial independence though she has no sons.

In Joys Of Motherhood, Emecheta signifies on Efuru by Flora Nwapa in several ways too numerous to mention here. The protagonists in the two novels lose their mothers; both are daughters of independent and strong mothers who die when they are young. Both marry twice, lose their first children and return to their natal homes at the end of the book. According to Solomon Iyasere (1980),

In traditional Africa, criticism was not a dogged, impersonal, dispassionate and autonomous intellectual activity, but a creative performance, a ritual. Each literary piece was presented orally involving the entire community in the creative process. So, too with the criticism... In keeping with traditional emphasis on creativity in all artistic endeavours, the critical evaluation was considered a creative act, an artistic performance. (169-170)

Iyasere illustrates this assertion with several examples of how performances of orature take off from where others stopped. One example has to do with the performance which was common in the expected case of story-telling and in the more formal situations such as the complex Ijala chants. He opines that the performance by one Ijala artist would be carefully listened to by other experts present and if another expert thought the performer had made a mistake, he would cut in (170).

However, this idea of criticism taking the form of refiguring does not have to be antagonistic or competitive in nature as Henry Louis Gates (1988) and others have asserted. Rather, African women writers readily admit to the influences of their foremothers in the same way in which both Yvonne Johnson (1998) and Margaret Washington (1990) suggest that, unlike this model of competition with a single precursor favoured by male writers, African-American women writers willingly embrace multiple predecessors (Johnson 1998:2). Johnson also points to the fact that it is this willingness to recognize and validate multiple “foremothers” which “distinguishes the voices of modern African-American female writers.” She points to writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison as examples of women who draw from a broad literary and historical tradition (1998:2). This is a quality which Buchi Emecheta apparently shares with her sisters who are writing in the diaspora. For instance, when asked in an interview about her relationship to other female writers from Africa who had been published before her, she described herself as “their new sister” (Umeh and Umeh 1985:25). It is therefore not surprising that Emecheta openly signifies on Efuru and has in turn been signified on in other works like Beloved by Toni Morrison and Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi

Dangarembga as well as a later novel, One is Enough (1981) by Flora Nwapa which was published after Joys Of Motherhood.

Joys Of Motherhood continues the dialogical exchange between tradition and modernity started in Efuru. Susan Andrade (1990) postulates that dialogic exchange within Efuru is between “the discourse of tradition’ and ‘modernity’ (Andrade quoted in Stratton 92). By presenting us with the figure of Ona who lived all her life in the village of Ibuza and Nnu Ego as well as other women from Ibuza who live in Lagos, Emecheta shows how urbanization occasioned by colonisation affected the lives of modern women. I am in agreement with Stratton who suggests that “Ona’s death is also symbolic of the decline of women’s power under colonisation” (94).

The very title Joys of Motherhood is found at the end of Flora Nwapa’s first novel, Efuru, when the main protagonist, ruminates about Uhamiri (the goddess) that “[she] had never experienced the joy of motherhood” (Nwapa 221). Joys Of Motherhood can actually be read as an attempt to proffer answers to some of the questions posed in Efuru. For instance, Efuru wonders “why then did women worship [Uhamiri]” who had never known the “joy of motherhood” (221). In Joys Of Motherhood, Emecheta shows us how, as a result of socialization, women become so blinded that motherhood is the only way through which they can be defined, and what happens to women like Nnu Ego who refuse to question such machinations. Furthermore, by making Nnu Ego’s spirit withhold the gift of children from her progeny, we are allowed to see that Uhamiri’s value as a goddess does not have to be tied to fecundity. Thus, both narratives interrogate notions of motherhood as supreme and eventually arrive at the same conclusion and although Nnu

Ego's conclusion comes too late, the reader, true to the participatory nature of African oral tradition, is already privy to this conclusion long before Nnu Ego comes to hers.

In addition, the two characters Efurū and Nnu Ego can be seen as two sides of a coin, as Emecheta through Nnu Ego shows the reverse side of Efurū's character. As such, unlike Efurū, Nnu Ego's psychical journey is one which is marred by her dependence on being defined only through conventional notions of what a woman is. Nnu Ego's reliance on others to define her speaks to issues of the power of the word to contain. This flaw is missing in Efurū who challenges the power of words to contain her. As such, she frees herself from the power of words to limit her whereas Nnu Ego lives to fulfil the words which society has assigned to define her. There is agreement in the finales of the two novels as Efurū ends with a conclusion that marriage or motherhood does not define women, just as Nnu Ego eventually comes to decide; hence her refusal to grant children after she dies. This way Emecheta engages in dialogue with orature by interrogating one of the most popular Igbo proverbs which states that "mother is supreme." Whilst Emecheta shows how women go to great lengths in order to fulfil their responsibilities as mothers, she also problematizes the notion of mothers as supreme by showing how the rewards of motherhood are neither guaranteed nor commensurate to the sacrifices which women make.

I also find the fact that it is at the end that Emecheta makes her most radical commentary about the wisdom of spending one's life in pursuit of motherhood interesting. Perhaps it is because orature is so replete with powerful images of motherhood that it would be sacrilegious to speak brazenly against it? According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985),

Narrative outcome is one place where transindividual assumptions and values are most clearly visible, and where the word "convention" is found resonating between its literary and social meanings. Any artistic resolution . . . can, with greater or lesser success, attempt an ideological solution to the fundamental contradictions that animate the work. Any resolution can have traces of the conflicting materials that have been processed within it. It is where subtexts and repressed discourses can throw up one last flare of meaning; it is where the author may side-step and displace attention from the materials that a work has made available. (3)

The fact that Emecheta waits until the end before hinting at the possibility that Nnu Ego posthumously revised her stance on motherhood illustrates one of the strengths of the oral narrative. It is likely that, as an African woman herself, Emecheta found it easier to show this conclusion rather than speak against such a convention and the open-ended style of the oral narrative allows her to do this successfully as readers are left to speculate about why Nnu Ego does not grant the requests of her progeny for children. In addition, like traditional stories Joys of Motherhood is not prescriptive but descriptive, with an open-endedness which takes for granted the readers' participation.

One other way in which Emecheta engages orature is in the portrayal of characters who are fully aware of conventions yet decide to break them and, more importantly, who get away with doing so. She presents characters who are fully cognizant of the need to constantly interrogate and review tradition. One such character is Adaku, who is fully aware of the strong possibility that by striking out on her own she would be removing herself from the protective custody of her clans people in Lagos, yet she decides to leave, even threatening to go into prostitution. Eventually, not only does she succeed on her own but the myth that people like her would be ostracized which amounts to a social death is debunked. Adaku continues to live and operate in Lagos

within the Ibuza community and there is no indication that she loses status (Stratton 116). In the same vein, it is significant that Nnu Ego lives most of her life in Lagos, the so called bastion of western civilisation in Nigeria, but she remains even more loyal to traditional values than people in the village. Thus Emecheta also proves false the myth of the city as a corrupting element (Stratton 118).

Like Flora Nwapa in Efuru, Emecheta builds on notions of female independence in an Igbo community. Nwapa does this through Efuru's devotion to the goddess Uhamiri, but Emecheta does so by showing Ona (Nnu Ego's mother) who remains independent of both her father and her lover until she dies. Also like Nwapa, Emecheta weaves the supernatural into her story and her protagonist's experiences are defined through identification with history (Stratton 112). This is an aspect on which Toni Morrison signifies in Beloved through the ghost of the child who was killed by her mother.

I am also intrigued by the significance of Nnu Ego's vengeful chi to the history of slavery from an African perspective. I read the former slave turned chi's role as the aftermath of a damaged social psyche whose effects will not go away with the end of slavery. Again, this represents an intersection with Toni Morrison's Beloved in which the title character is the ghost of a child which the mother had been forced to kill as a result of slavery. In Joys Of Motherhood, as in Beloved, the past is treated as something which needs to be confronted because its effects are still very much present. Efuru also broaches this but to a limited extent.

## **Conclusion**

Joys Of Motherhood signifies on Efuru just as all female writers under study signify on orature (especially of their foremothers) and sometimes the literary works of one another. This quality is crucial to the dialogical engagement of their community. As modern day myth makers it would be futile for them to create in a vacuum when they can actively and constructively engage their orature which is still such a powerful influence on the devolvement of culture in their societies. As I have earlier indicated, Beloved by Toni Morrison illustrates that there is dialogue beyond continental borders in the way which it signifies on Joys of Motherhood. In the next chapter, while looking at some of the ways in which Beloved interacts with African-American orature, I will also be highlighting some ways in which it displays resonances of Yoruba culture.

## Chapter Seven

### Toni Morrison

#### Introduction

In my chapter on theory and methodology, I have tried to show the inadequacy of existing theories in analysing the works of Black women because such attempts have only focused on the public sphere and formal language use, whereas, both in the stories they tell and in the telling itself, Black women writers continue the line of African women storytellers who pass on the message of their culture to future generations.

As my aim is to trace the works of Black women writers in the diaspora as a continuum from Africa, Beloved represents a good case in point because it has a lot of striking resonances of Yoruba beliefs. Just as she does in Song of Solomon, (1977), Toni Morrison draws from the Yoruba belief in the cyclic nature of life. Among the Yoruba (who are predominantly located in South Western Nigeria, from where a large proportion of slaves were taken), life is perceived as cyclic in nature. According to this system of beliefs, people are not just born into the world from a vacuum but are seen as parts of a family which rotates in coming to the world. Thus, a baby at birth is as much a child as an ancestor to members of the family. We are born then die only to come back again. When people die, they go home for a rest from the world which is a market place from which we purchase the right to rest when we die. Thus, death is not final but an interlude; we come back to the world after resting. The length of time spent in the market i.e. the world also varies and this explains why some live long and others do not. Echoes of this belief can be discerned in Morrison's depiction of the character of Beloved.

**Synopsis:**

The novel opens in the aftermath of slavery and the American Civil War in 1873. Most of the story is situated in number 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio, a house which is haunted by the ghost of an angry baby. Prior to the opening of the story, the house had been rented by White liberals named Bodwin, to Baby Suggs, a freed slave whose son Halle, had worked to buy her freedom from Mr. Garner, a plantation owner. Garner prided himself on being humane when compared to other slave owners. After Garner dies, his wife becomes ill and brings in her relation, simply called Schoolteacher to run 'Sweet Home' (the plantation). Schoolteacher's arrival at the plantation marks the beginning of an unprecedented reign of terror, which leaves the slaves living like abused animals so much so that they saw themselves lower in status than Mister the rooster (71-72). They are left with no option but to try and escape. Unfortunately, the escape plan is botched.

As a result of some miscommunication, Sethe sent her three children ahead to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in Ohio while she stayed behind to wait for Halle, but he did not show up at the appointed meeting place and time of the escape. She decided to wait for him a little longer as a result of which she was discovered by Schoolteacher and his nephews. In spite of being six months pregnant, she was taken to the barn where they milked her like an animal. They also beat her, leaving very ghastly bruises in the shape of a tree on her back. She managed to run away the following day.

During the course of her escape which she was forced to do on foot and alone as all their plans had collapsed, a White girl found her and helped her to the Ohio River where she had her baby, whom she named Denver in honour of the girl who was on her

way to the city of Denver. Eventually, Sethe and baby Denver made it to Baby Suggs at 124 and were reunited with Sethe's other children. Only twenty-eight days later, Schoolteacher showed up to take them back to slavery. Sethe, determined to save her children from the ordeal of slavery, tried to kill them all rather than let them suffer as slaves. However, only the older girl whose neck she had severed with a saw died. The two boys were injured but survived and baby Denver was left unscathed. Sethe was sent to jail along with the baby. After her release, she was forced to sleep with the mason in order to have her daughter's grave marked. Since the baby had not been named before she was killed, her gravestone only bore the word "Beloved."

Soon after, the house became haunted as a result of which Sethe's two sons ran away and Baby Suggs, the grand mother who was also a preacher, and had become the rallying point for not only the family but also the community, resigned from life as she took to her bed to wait for death, making the contemplation of colours her only preoccupation until her death. Gradually, the family at 124 became ostracized.

The book opens with Paul D, who had also been a slave at Sweet Home, coming to look for the family after wandering from place to place for about eighteen years. The ghost of Beloved also shows up at 124 and although it is obvious from the onset that Sethe is the main reason why she has appeared, this does not stop Denver from becoming devoted to her because she quickly recognizes the visitor as her older sister's ghost who had returned to life.

Beloved's presence is very unsettling for Paul D, as she supernaturally seduces him into having sex with her against his will. Paul D eventually leaves after finding out about the way Sethe tried to kill all her children. After he leaves, Sethe becomes

convinced that Beloved is the reincarnation of her dead daughter and she becomes entirely focused on spending time with the girl who has an insatiable appetite for both Sethe's stories and very sweet foods.

**Analysis:**

Although the novel was set after the American civil war when slaves were supposed to have been freed, emancipation did not make life a whole lot easier for ex-slaves as they continued to be victims of violence, physical as well as spiritual, based on their past as slaves. Morrison addresses several power relations from the point of view of Black people. For instance, she examines various master and slave relations by juxtaposing Garner's 'humane' treatment of his slaves against those of his neighbours as well as School Teacher's extremely vicious treatment of the slaves. She also effectively shows that Garner's slaves, whom he showed off as "men", were men not because of him but in spite of him. This she achieves by showing several instances in which the men at Sweet Home suffered as a result of Garner's "humane" form of slavery (see Pages 11, 21-22, 26, 41).

I situate Beloved within the African traditions of women's storytelling that I have been discussing as a story about story-telling and its importance to communal life and individual survival. Using the device of myth, Beloved is Morrison's attempt to reflect the effects of the 'story' of slavery on the psyche of African-Americans. It is based on the real life story of an escaped slave woman, named Margaret Garner who in the face of imminent recapture killed her children rather than allow them to be taken back into slavery (Furma1996). Beloved comes to 124 hungry for stories of the past before she was cut off from life because the way she died had rendered her existence unspeakable. This is

why stories became “a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling” (58).

It is also stories of the past which propel the initially timid and homebound Denver into the future. However, even though she loved them, listening to stories “made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it. But who she owed or what to pay it with eluded her” (77). How could Denver pay her “bill” as bearer of memories if they are not passed on to her, sweet as well as bitter? How could she grow on the second hand account of people like her classmate, Nelson Lord, who had first kindled her curiosity? Luckily, in spite of the burdensome nature of Sethe’s stories, “watching Beloved’s alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know,”(77) Denver began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it.

Sethe’s stories and her memories of what she heard from Baby Suggs helped Denver to come into her own as a bearer, (possibly the last one) of the memories of her family:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it-through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to scraps her mother and grandmother had told her-and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together. (178)

It was words, memories and history which she had heard from her mother and grandmother which animated Denver as she “stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it” until she remembered Baby Suggs’ words reminding her of the power of the

words she had heard from them to “defend” her, “Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (245).

The story of how Beloved died, which because it was too ugly for the human mind had been rendered unspeakable, is also integral to the collective memory of the Black community: “Every body knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her” (275). Yet, her story is one which must be faced, not only for what it says about the cause of her violent death but also for what the manner in which she died says about the Black community. This was a community which gave up its voice as it stood judging how straight Sethe’s back was as she was being taken away to prison and so was too preoccupied to offer her even the comfort of their voice:

Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all (152).

This silence speaks volumes, in light of the traditions which I addressed earlier. “No words” were spoken about the momentous act, when a mother is forced to try and kill all her own children rather than see them taken back into slavery, until Beloved reappeared and the community’s attempt to exorcise her; to once again erase her. “Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative looked at too long-shirts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself there. They can touch it if they like, but don’t because they know things will never be the same if they do” (275). As much as they tried to repress the memory of

how Beloved died, simply being witnesses to the event has made it part of their lives; it is a part of their history as a community and their story as individuals. It is a part of them which needs to be dealt with and they cannot simply wish or will it away.

I am in agreement with Atkinson (2000) who points out that Morrison allows the reader to become part of the “circle’ of storytelling and thereby Witnesses” (23). Morrison’s method of simply showing the effects of silence, underscoring the need for African-Americans to confront the story or stories of slavery without pontificating, is a good example of this. Morrison’s participatory approach to story-telling is very similar to traditional African story-telling, which is interactive even when it is didactic. Although usually there is an elder (who could be either female or male) anchoring the story-telling sessions, the listeners, even where they are children, are enjoined to contribute to the narration. This is based on the belief that they and their ancestors are part of the history which is being narrated or passed on. Even when the listeners are children, there is a belief that they too, like those yet to be born, will in time be woven into their community’s meta-narrative when it is passed on to on-coming generations. From a feminist point of view, I believe this undermines the privileges which lead to a system of hierarchy that in Western societies are usually conferred on the story teller (i.e. author, mythmaker, historian) as the sole creator, maker or giver of knowledge. By making the audience part of the authorial or creative process, power is decentralized.

Beloved as the ghost of the child whose memory is so unspeakable represents a rupture in the reality which the community has tried to put together in order to survive their individual and collective pasts. Even Paul D the most recent member of the community is not immune to the powerful pull that Beloved represents as a symbol of

memory. As such, Paul D becomes gradually restless and uncomfortable as he is dragged out of the artificiality of the life he tries to build with Sethe by Beloved's "shining."

It is also apparent that one of the major attractions which Sethe holds for Paul D is based on his memories of the girl she used to be, the one who had been a symbol of humanity not only for him but for all the men at Sweet Home. What Sethe as a Black woman represented for the male slaves at Sweet Home who had been reduced to trying to assuage their sexual desire with the livestock because of their lack of freedom is best captured in the words which Sixo (one of the male slaves on the plantation) used to describe the Thirty-Mile Woman (his love interest) "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (272).

It is in such a woman that Paul D, broken, bruised and laden by his own experiences of slavery and its aftermath, hopes to find refuge. However, this is such an unrealistically idealized vision of what a female partner who has as many if not graver scars of her own can offer. Again, even if Sethe was ever such a girl, by the time Paul D finds her at 124, she is no longer that girl. Her experiences at Sweet Home and since leaving it as well as her murder of her daughter have changed her.

The handling of the character of Beloved and her effects on Sethe, Denver and Paul D unfolds like a riddle in that it does not lend itself easily to an explanation or resolution. In other words, memory is not something which can be handled with levity. It is a sword with many edges. This holds true for the human inhabitants of 124, and for

Beloved herself who is the symbol of a violent past, who returns only to disappear again into thin air. It is therefore possible to read memory as something malleable.

From the beginning, when Paul D violently tries to banish the baby's ghost from the house, he sets himself against memory (the ghost of the baby) because it challenged his masculinity as a Black man in the US. He saw himself in danger of being convinced by his memory of the past that as a Black man he and his cohorts were

[o]ne step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke. His strength had lain in knowing that schoolteacher was wrong. Now he wondered...." (Paniccia Carden 1999: 13)

The attraction which Beloved holds for Paul D through her shining moved him out of the artificially constructed comfort of number 124 and propels him into the back house where Beloved forces him to confront his darkest fears about himself by insisting:

"You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name."...  
"Call me my name."  
"No."  
"Please call it. I'll go if you call it." (117)

It is only after he calls her name, after her reaches out to her, the symbol of a sordid past that the "rusty tin" that his heart had become changed into living flesh again. "Red heart. Red heart" (117).

Although Toni Morrison uses the vehicle of a seduction to describe the encounter between Beloved, the symbol of memory and Paul D, the result is such that Beloved who as a ghost is without form and therefore an "emptiness caused by the dismemberment of her family in slavery--meets Paul D's emptiness--caused by a similar lacuna in identity" (Smith cited in Paniccia Carden 1999: 348). However, because of the

historical trauma, the sexual act between them only offers false hope of fulfilment in that, while offering possibilities of re-encountering the past, it is a false past: a past which is as much a figment as Beloved the ghost is. In that at no point in Paul D's life has he ever been allowed to live as a human being. As such the sexual encounter with Beloved only results in the prying open of "his tobacco tin to expose the red heart secreted within." All that he gets is a flitting momentary satisfaction, a "bodily cure" (Smith cited in Paniccia Carden 1999: 348).

It becomes apparent that a bodily cure will not work against the "disease of history" when Paul D admits that Beloved "reminds [him] of something... look like, [he is] supposed to remember" (234). According to Paniccia Carden (1999), he equates intercourse with her with "a brainless urge to stay alive. Each time she came, pulled up her skirts, a life hunger overwhelmed him and he had no more control over it than over his lungs. And afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to" (1999: 264).

The implications of the orgasmic nature of Paul D's encounter with memory underscore the perilous nature of his attitude to history. Although intercourse with Beloved animates his heart, the benefit is very short lived as he becomes overwhelmed by the reality of the fact that he not only dislikes and distrusts Beloved, but also that it is with Sethe that he has chosen to make a new life. So rather than the mindless intercourse with Beloved doing anything to improve his vision of himself as a man, an adult, a human being, it underscores his failings, his weaknesses and highlights all the negatives which slavery has nurtured in him.

Again, because *Beloved* is more than just a ghost, this scene speaks to issues of memory in other ways. *Beloved* targets Paul D out of her "hunger" to be "recognized," her need to be "known," as Barbara Schapiro (1991) suggests, "in [her] inner being or essential self" (201). This is similar to the Yoruba belief in the cyclic nature of life. According to the Yoruba, it is because of us that our ancestors lived and continue to live. Our ancestors continue to live not only because we carry their genes but also because of our memories of them, propagated through the bearing of their names as well as stories of them – history. When *Beloved* died, she lost her chance of being named, along with her sense of self and as such her future. It is unsurprising that the erotic encounter does not end in any form of satisfaction for either party.

Morrison also speaks to issues of memory in the relationship between Paul D and Sethe, which at first promised a joining of memories (his and hers) in their attempt to engage in domesticity as a route to the future. However, Paul D's inability to resist *Beloved* makes a mockery of the artificiality of the normalcy which they try to achieve without confronting memory head on. As such, Paiccia Carden (1999) describes sex with *Beloved* as a projection of memory beyond the structures of the home. This is illustrated by the fact that even as Paul D and Sethe talk about Sweet Home, there are things so odious they cannot mention so they also started to romanticize some of the experiences so much so that Denver, who had never lived there with them challenges them: "How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed" (13). Along with Paiccia Carden, I am of the opinion that Paul D's "vulnerability to *Beloved* indicates that the 'talking cure' which he and Sethe attempt failed to ignite the heart, because of the "demasculinizing" experiences

which hamper his perception of himself as a man. In other words, due to the complications of the dynamics of gender, Sethe and Paul D's memories fail to elevate them into a present or a future together in American culture (see also Cade Bambara, 1970; hooks 1993, 1994 on the impacts of slavery on the friction between African-American men and women). Their memories have crippled their spirits and dehumanized their hearts. This is why Paul D's heart is described as an old rusty tobacco tin and the effect on Sethe is the way she holds on to justifying her action in trying to kill all of her children, even after seeing how the outcome has decimated what is left of her family.

The theme of male/female tension is also highlighted by Paul D's discomfort with Sethe's "self-sufficiency" which is as threatening to his notions of manhood as sex with Beloved because both threaten his masculinity. His defence is therefore to look beyond his own "shame" while focusing on hers and the revelation of Sethe's infanticide is all the excuse he needs. Whilst Sethe holds on to her sanity by justifying her action as the only way of preventing Schoolteacher from dehumanizing her children, Paul D is unconvinced by her motive and this gives him an excuse to abandon not only Sethe but also his attempts at a domestic life.

It is also not until after Paul D leaves and without the "distraction" of his demands, that Sethe is able to focus on Beloved as the reincarnation of her daughter and as such an integral part of herself. This also marks a return to the former kind of family structure that had existed before Paul D: a female-headed household uncomplicated by gender tussles and one which freely indulges in the engagement of memory.

But there is danger when memory or the past mixes with the present without boundaries. Sethe makes the mistake of assuming that, simply because Beloved has

returned, her infanticide is justified, as such there is no need for introspection. She also chooses to wallow in memory at the expense of everything else in the present. So while on the one hand Paul D had tried to persuade Sethe to change herself to conform to the world outside, Beloved's presence convinced her that "whatever is going on outside [her] door ain't for [her]" (124). However, the purpose of memory is not so we do not have to explain our past or confront our future but the exact opposite. It is to foster introspection if it is to have any meaning. When Sethe fails to see memory as a tool for life, she gives in to the power of memory to overwhelm. The past encroaches on the present. Beloved, who had been prevented by her premature death from developing along the normal line which history would have taken her, has come yearning for relevance and will not be easily assuaged. As the family focuses only inward, boundaries between individual members become eroded:

You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?  
I will never leave you again  
Don't ever leave me again  
You will never leave me again  
You went in the water  
I drank your blood  
I brought your milk  
You forgot to smile  
I loved you  
You hurt me  
You came back to me  
You left me  
I waited for you  
You are mine  
You are mine  
You are mine. (216-17)

As their voices mesh, they become incoherent. Their words turn to violent "recriminations and fruitless explanations," the sound becomes "a conflagration of hasty voices, women's voices mumbling and jumbled so that the only word decipherable is

'mine" (172). Their desperate voices also become conflated with the "voices of 'the black and angry dead" (198). The house becomes "a place where the past possesses the present", a household without domesticity or familial hierarchies. So rather than words invigorating, or strengthening them as individuals and collectively, they are destroyed by their power. Now Sethe sits "licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (250). Beloved is memory gone amuck.

Fortunately, as the past consumes Sethe, Denver manages to "break free" by recalling memories of Baby Suggs, who had relayed to her the importance of history which is to "know it, and go on out the yard" (244). Denver, of all the people who encounter Beloved, is the one who "faces her fears, adapts her views, and acts" (Paniccia Carden 1999: 15). This further buttresses the idea that Beloved is like a riddle, something which Toni Morrison admits when she says:

There is always something more interesting at stake than a clear resolution in a novel. I'm interested in survival--who survives and who does not, and why--and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety might be. I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. (Toni Morrison qtd. in McKay 1993: 402)

Implicit within the Yoruba belief system is also the idea that suicide or murder upsets the cycle and I agree with Susan Corey's (2000) analysis that Beloved, as a result of the manner of her death, is unable to rejoin the cycle of life. Corey rightly posits that "in African cosmology, those who die an unnatural death cannot be ancestors; hence a spirit who suffers an unnatural death is capricious and 'not easily pacified' since it has lost its family and community moorings" (42).

It is apparent that Beloved is the ghost of the child who was killed just as she is the ancestress who was captured from Africa (210-213). She is the child which the mother was forced to kill as much as she is the mother who was forced to abandon her child; she is the captive, the same one who was raped, killed and dumped into the sea, who refuses to stay under. The cycle has been broken for Beloved; the self therefore becomes fragmented. And so she is angry; refusing to stay dead, yet unable to return to life through birth, she craves all she has been denied and the sweetest, the best that the living have. She is a symbol of all whose cycles have been broken as a result of slavery. She is the disremembered, without whom the living are incapacitated. The ones whose memories are so ugly that the living resolutely look away.

Morrison is also able to show the complexity of memory in the lives of the freed slaves in a way which can be linked to African values. Memory for most African cultures like the Yoruba, Edo and Ijaw, which are still predominantly oral in nature, is the abode of the departed. It is where they are honoured through remembrance. It is this belief in honouring through remembrance that the colonialists derogatorily called ancestral worship. Memory, in cultures which do not write or commit their history onto paper for the edification of future generations, is the lamp with which they find the path to the future. With the atrocities of slavery, however, memory becomes complicated for the emancipated. Memory for them is a difficult place; it is full of shame, humiliation, indignity and guilt, yet without the memory of the past, the future will remain a foggy, difficult terrain.

On a universal level, I think the importance of collective memory plays itself out vividly in so many ways. One good example is our treatment of genocide. We have tried

forgetting – keeping the past at bay, but this has failed, see Bosnia, Rwanda, Iraq. Is it not time to insist on remembering? What better weapon do we have against American imperialism if not the memory of how the world came to be the way it is today?

In her use of language Morrison also signifies on aspects of the Yoruba beliefs about the power of the word. The power of language as an instrument of oppression and violence to writers, especially women writers, was the focus of Toni Morrison's Nobel lecture. In the lecture, she uses the analogy of a bird to describe language as a living thing. In the parable, a group of young people approach a wise but blind old woman claiming to have a bird in their hands and asking her to determine if the bird is living or dead.

She does not answer, and the question is repeated. "Is the bird I am holding living or dead?"

Still she doesn't answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive.

The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.

Finally she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know", she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

Her answer can be taken to mean: if it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it.

Whether it is to stay alive, it is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility. (1993:1)

Morrison goes on to analyze language by acknowledging the power of language for violence. She explains that its capacity to do violence goes beyond the fact that it actually limits knowledge typified by the policing of knowledge. She stresses the need to remain cognisant of this potential: "[w]hether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-

ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek” (1993:2).

### **Conclusion**

In so many ways, the sentiments which Morrison expresses also resonate amongst the Yoruba. In the Yoruba language, the word is metaphorically referred to as an egg. This perception of the word as an egg means it requires transportation via the proverb, which is its horse. Proverbs are also so ubiquitous that when words go astray or awry, it is with proverbs that they are rescued. In some other cultures too, like the Igbo, the awareness of the potency of speech is so acute that it is exercised with great caution through proverbs -- the horses of words.

The Yoruba word for speaking when translated to English means “to throw” and the Ifa corpus – which is a primary religious as well as philosophical realm of the Yoruba - is a divination which is driven by words through repetition. The potency of words is also such that some ethnic group’s appellation (for example, the people of Ibadan, a former military outpost of the early Oyo Empire, or the Akure, an outpost of the Benin Empire, both in south western Nigeria) is such that it describes them as people who shun the sword in favour of words for battle in order to ensure victory. They take more pride in their oratory skills and its power to maim than in any other physical prowess. Words are also sent as messengers to opponents.

Whilst the Yoruba believe that a responsible speaker should be able to control their words, the control though is only until it is uttered. Viewed as an egg, speech is delicate and living-- it can be hatched into a chick, in which case it yields a positive

result, or if one is careless, it can fall and break in which case it can never be gathered or put back together. It becomes unmanageable, a mess. The outcome of the word, therefore, depends on the way it is set down. Implicit within this definition is also the power to injure as well as the power to incite emotion in the addressee who is also not without her/his power to respond: a power which might sometimes be complicated by the dynamics of class but which still remains largely uncomplicated by racism or the state as elaborated by Butler (1997). This is the reason why this image of speech as an egg is usually invoked to elicit caution on the part of the utterer.

I believe it is the predominantly oral nature of the Yoruba culture which has made us very acutely aware of the power of language and therefore the power of speech to either imbue with heroic qualities or inflict injury. I think this might be because spoken words have more likelihood of generating an immediate effect, unlike written words, which very often have to traverse distances to advance an impact. In the next chapter on Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter, which is written in the epistolary style, I will be examining how this approach allows her to incorporate the elements of orature in some really interesting ways. Her approach also allows her to debunk widely held myths about women in a polygamous Islamic culture and by incorporating the role of a female griot who is a constant presence through most of the major events in the story, Ba underscores as well as critiques the social function of griots.

## Chapter Eight

### Mariama Ba

#### Introduction

Mariama Ba was the first francophone as well as the first Moslem African woman writer that I ever read. Her novella, So Long a letter, therefore opened up new vistas for me in its depiction of the lives of African women in a francophone Islamic setting. In addition, the epistolary nature of the book also illustrates how women made the jump from orature to writing. I have always seen letter writing and journal keeping as crucial forms of expression for African women during periods when writing fiction was not an option open to them. This was what informed the stylistic approach of my most recently completed novel in which one of the parts is written in the form of letters between a mother and her daughter. For the purpose of verisimilitude, another part of my novel is made up completely of journal entries which record the life of one of the women who lived in Lagos between the late 1920's and the late 1950's when writing and publishing by African women was virtually non-existent.

Likewise, in an essay on Dorothy Osborn's letters to William Temple, Virginia Woolf (1932) observes that letter writing was a crucial step towards novel writing for European women. She wrote that, "Had she been born in 1827, Dorothy Osborne would have written novels; had she been born in 1527 she never would have written at all. But she was born in 1627, and at that date though writing books was 'ridiculous' for a woman... there was nothing unseemly in writing a letter" ( 51).

The epistolary style in which Ba wrote her first novel allows her to incorporate elements of the oral narrative in some really interesting ways. In addition, it allows her to debunk widely held myths about women in the polygamous Islamic culture. Also, by incorporating the role of a female griot who is a constant presence through most of the major events in the story, she underscores as well as critiques the social function of griots.

### **Synopsis**

So Long a Letter is an epistolary novel which traces the story of Ramatoulaye Fall, a widow who recounts how her husband Modou deserted her for their daughter's friend Binetou in the form of a letter to her childhood friend, Aissatou.. Modou had, according to Islamic tradition taken Binetou in marriage as a second wife. The novella chronicles Ramatoulaye's anger at Modou and the customs that allow polygamy. Through the letter we are also told Aissatou's story. Like Ramatoulaye, Aissatou is highly educated and had married Mawdo, a doctor who is Modou's friend. However, Aissatou comes from a lower caste than Mawdo's, as a result of which his mother holds her in contempt for marrying her son. Unlike Ramatoulaye, Aissatou chose to leave Senegal for the U.S. after her husband marries a young relative at his mother's behest. In the U.S., Aissatou not only succeeds in making a life for herself and her four sons, but she is also able to support Ramatoulaye through her trials since Ramatoulaye, who has twelve children, does not believe leaving her husband is a viable option. However, in spite of the fact that Islam enjoins husbands to treat all their wives equally, Modou abandons Ramatoulaye after he marries the young and beautiful Binetou but he dies of a heart attack a few years into that marriage.

At his death, Modou's brother Tamsir makes a move to inherit Ramatoulaye in a levirate marriage but she turns him down. Furthermore, she turns down a medical doctor who is also a highly influential politician in spite of the fact that her mother had favoured a marriage to this man instead of Modou when he had first proposed to her as a young woman. By the time he comes and proposes to her again after Modou dies, he is already married to his cousin. And even though this marriage is presented as one of convenience, Ramatoulaye, who has felt the sting of polygamy, cannot find it in her heart to deprive this other woman of the full attention of her husband. This is to the great disappointment of her griot, who lambastes her because as Ramatoulaye's griot she would have been entitled to some financial reward for her role as negotiator of the marriage. It is however thanks to the griot that she discovers that her unmarried daughter has become pregnant.

### **Analysis**

Ramatoulaye describes the narrative project of her letter as self-healing (Abuk 2003:15). This is because it is through the process of writing the letters that she goes back through her life's journey and with the benefit of hind-sight manages to be more introspective than at the actual moments of the occurrence of the events which she recounts. This form of introspection engenders her psychological growth so that we are able to see her grow from an idealistic unquestioning woman into one who is poised to confront a tough future as a widow in a society which sees her as incomplete without a man. This underscores the role of writing for her as a social one, a healing process. Appraising Mariama Ba's novella along side those of other Black women, it is possible to see a link, for although So Long a Letter is supposed to be a correspondence between two childhood friends, it takes the trouble to go over their lives as well as some of the socio-

political history of Senegal. As such, it also manages to incorporate a lot of social criticism of the institution of marriage, of Islam, and of the role of women in the Senegalese society. Like the works of other woman writers, it is concerned with not only the effects of colonization on the Senegalese society but also with the effects of intra-societal values.

Ruth Perry (1980) observes that by their nature, letters constitute women's responses to difficulties and temptations. She also posits that the emotional quality of the subject matter is what makes the epistolary form suitable for transmitting them because the "epistolary structure dwells on responses to events rather than on the events themselves" (86). Janet Gurkin Altman (1982) goes even further to describe the epistolary style as being "obsessed with its oral mode" (135). This is because the letter writer is driven by a desire to share her difficulty with a confidant. The letter, therefore, becomes an avenue for reflecting on ideas, so that the process of sitting down to write becomes conflated with being in the presence of the addressee. Writing and speaking become one and the same. Elizabeth Campbell (1995) in agreement with Altman suggests that it is the oral mode of epistolary novels which accounts for "the frantic writing" in this kind of novels in which the letter writers strive to make written discourse out of oral discourse. Campbell also says that epistolary writing constitutes "a subversive and freeing agent" as it serves as a mirror in which the writers seek themselves and sometimes others. The process also allows them to attempt to change their lives so as to reflect a mirror image. I believe that this quality of letter writing and/or journal keeping has been very significant in my development as a writer. I know from personal experience that I only started writing because I was desperate for the voices of women

when I did not find women like me or the ones I knew or the ones in my grandmother's stories in the books that I had to read. It is also the reason why I made one of my protagonists, who lived at a time before the possibility of writing and publishing, a fastidious journal keeper and letter writer. Keeping a journal and writing letters allow her the outlet for thinking life through, and it affords the reader the opportunity to hear her voice as she writes in her own type of English and not the authorized Queen's English.

Altman identifies some other characteristics of epistolary writing as "multiplicity of point of view, polyphony of voices, interior monologue, superimposition of time levels, presentation of simultaneous actions ..." (195) all of which are also qualities present in the oral tradition (see Okpewho, 1992). Also, according to Altman the device of the epistolary style in women's writing allows them to subvert the language and values of the dominant culture. She explains that in epistolary fiction, the attempt to be heard is more important than working toward an ending and "imposing closure." This quality also marks letter-writing as a significant phase for Black women writers as it illustrates how they make the jump from orature which projects the story beyond its end in an open ended style.

One of the oldest images of my early socialization as a child was the notion of two distinct groups of women, those who were married and therefore honourable and those who were not. Those who were not were projected in orature (mostly in the form of folk songs) as women who would stop at nothing to relieve the married women of their husbands. It was an elaborate enactment of the popular saying 'women are their own worst enemies.' Ba rewrites this popularly held image of 'the other woman' and shows her as much of a victim as the wife. This is reflected in the portrayal of young Nabou and

Binetou. Although both these young women are on the wrong side of the fence (Binetou for becoming her co-wife and young Nabou for marrying Aissatou's husband), Ramatoulaye does not vilify them; instead she recounts their stories fairly and assigns credit and blame where it is due. For instance, rather than castigate Binetou as a gold digger for marrying Modou, she recognizes her as a victim: "Beautiful, lively kind hearted, intelligent, Binetou had access to many of her friends' well-off families and was sharply aware of what she was sacrificing by her marriage. A victim, she wanted to be the oppressor. Exiled in the world of adults, which was not her own, she wanted her prison gilded. Demanding, she tormented" (48). Thus, the reader is able to empathize with Binetou as she falls victim to Modou's enticement, which he engages by making her abandon her education for a monthly fee of 50,000 francs as a result of which: "Binetou like others was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (39).

Ramatoulaye also rightly points to Binetou's mother's greed as an attempt to level up to her affluent peers, which is why she is willing to sacrifice her daughter's youth through the mismatched marriage with Modou. Binetou's mother is depicted as wailing and begging her daughter to give her a happy ending in the villa which Modou had promised their family. This allows the reader to sympathize with her because we are shown the debilitating effect of what Barbara Klaw (2000) describes as the result "of societal hierarchies and structures that support such injustices that she has the figurative right to sell her daughter into marriage. It is due to the European colonizer's influence that money plays such a powerful role" (13). Ramatoulaye is also pragmatic enough to see corollaries in her life alongside that of young Nabou who displaced Aissatou in her

marriage : “Young Nabou, responsible and aware, like you, like me! Even if she is not my friend, we often share the same problems” (48).

According to Christina Abuk (2003), “The latter, 'actual' period of her narration of official mourning frames the former (and probably greater) loss, which occurred five years earlier” (15). I agree that in this instance, as is the case for other African women, it is true that Modou’s abandonment of Ramatoulaye and her children is a greater loss than his death as far as losses go. Widowhood is considered more honourable (so long as the widow manages to escape being implicated in the cause of the death of the husband) when compared to divorce or separation, which are seen as disgraceful to the woman. So Long a Letter is the first novel by an African to frame loss of a spouse through separation in fiction. In the minds of African women, separation or divorce which are often involuntary (because they are usually instigated by men as most women would rather be reconciled to a bad marriage than seek divorce or separation) and unexpected can be easily conflated with bereavement. I remember my father’s friends being struck by my mother’s audacity when they came to commiserate with her at my father’s death when she asked them why they were only just coming to commiserate with her at that point because in her mind she had been a widow for over thirty years. She was referring to the time when she chose to be separated from my father. Although opting for separation rather than be reconciled to ‘respectable polygamy’<sup>24</sup> was very radical for a woman of her generation, like the few others like her of that period who had taken such a step, she

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<sup>24</sup> I use this term to describe a practice by middle class, Christian, educated Nigerian women who choose to look the other way rather than acknowledge that they are in a polygamy when their husband sets up a second home or has children with another woman. It is a practice which has been prevalent in the Lagos area since colonial days.

never asked to be officially divorced. I think it is because separation is also a notch more respectable than outright divorce.

Like most other wives in her cultural setting, Ramatoulaye had no knowledge of the existence of a mistress until after Modou had actually formally married Binetou. The announcement that her husband had taken on a second wife was totally unexpected. Her abandonment can easily be compared to her husband dying suddenly. Yet the society is structured in such a way that she is not expected to or allowed to mourn.

Altman proposes that an important characteristic of epistolary writing is the confidential nature of the letter and the confidence which the writer must have in the addressee. It is perhaps this quality which allows Mariama Ba to bring the reader into the very significant safe homosocial spaces which are crucial to the lives of African women but which are neglected in attempts to theorize about them. Such spaces are vital because they afford women safety from the complicating scrutiny of fathers, lovers, husbands, brothers, or sons. It is in these kinds of spaces that the *Umuada*<sup>25</sup> of Igbo land meet and discuss strategies for confronting marital and other social issues. Safe homosocial spaces could also be in the form of the fattening rooms<sup>26</sup> where young Efik or Ijaw girls are taught the skills of manoeuvring marriage and life as women. They are spaces which exist not only at the formal levels (like the *Umuada* or the fattening rooms) but are also widespread at the informal level through women's societies for most African women and which, in the past constituted a major power base, but which with European intervention have become greatly undermined and eroded as havens for gossip.

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<sup>25</sup> The Igbo title for women in their natal clans.

<sup>26</sup> A kind of confinement during which women are beautified before marriage.

So Long A Letter also underscores the importance of friendship amongst women which has over time been undermined by such popularly held notions as ‘women are their own worst enemies.’ Ramatoulaye describes her friendship with Aissatou as having “splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and servers couples. It has heights unknown to love” (54). This way, Ba not only reclaims the power of female bonding but also the confidentiality of a homosocial space, which is crucial to Ramatoulaye’s development as an insightful individual.

So Long a Letter represents an important voice in the appraisal of the lot of women within a polygamous Senegalese society. The novella presents us with rare images of the lives of educated middle-class women as they are caught between the tidal waves of an evolving culture driven by France’s colonizing values vis-a-vis the traditional values which have become so mixed up with Islamic ideas that it is often impossible to tell which is indigenous and which is not. Through the portrayal of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as well as Binetou and young Nabou, (the young women that their husbands marry as second wives), we see African women as wives. We also see them as mothers through Ramatoulaye’s interactions with her many children as well as through Binetou whose mother is a major influence in her life. In addition, Ba presents us with representations of the mother/daughter relationship as we see quite a lot of Daba, who is Ramatoulaye’s daughter, as she stands up in defence of her mother and this is juxtaposed against the parasitic relationship between Binetou and her mother who sacrifices her daughter on the altar of wealth.

Even more interestingly we also see the corrupting influence of the mythicized

African mother/son relationship in the role in which aunty Nabou (Aissatou's mother in law), plays in the life of her son Mawdo. According to Klaw (2000) who paraphrases Sonfo "the groups most respected in society, men and their mothers or potential mothers-in-law, use guilt tactics that invoke Muslim laws, literary commonplaces, and social taboos to pressure other women into abandoning their own desires" (12). The result of these kinds of machinations is the reproduction of societal myths, which although meant to propagate male dominance sometimes result in misery for them as Ba shows through the depiction of Mawdo, who allows his mother to talk him out of a fulfilling marriage to Aissotou, and into a less than satisfactory one with young Nabou. Klaw opines that an example of such a myth which is prevalent in West African Romanesque literature celebrates "the African mother as radiant, fulfilled, and always welcoming life and man whereas the African wife is rarely mentioned" (Sonfo 1976 qtd in Klaw 12 ). Klaw also cites Memel Fote, who observes that "the three great principles of 'l'ethique negre' (Black African ethics) are life, force, and unity, which is why one's mother, the origin of life, is sacred and enjoys unlimited respect and veneration in Senegalese society" (Memel Fote cited in Klaw 12). Klaw further explains that Ba debunks two widespread myths: that a woman must put her role as a mother above all else and that a mother can do no wrong. This is unlike writers who privilege the mother and glorify her as a result of which they reinforce such myths. Klaw also illustrates how in contrast, Ba calls into question the notion of the supremacy of mothers and uses specific examples to illustrate the ways in which a mother can abuse her influence with her son. Mariama Ba, capitalizing on her writing as a social function, uses it to interrogate such myths, which she sarcastically refers to as "truths." Referring to Aissaotou's rebellion against such

myths, Ramatoulaye recalls: “These common place truths, which before had lowered the heads of many wives as they raised them in revolt, did not produce the desired miracle; they did not divert you from your decision. You chose to make a break, a one way journey with your four sons” (31).

By referring to them as “truths,” Ba not only challenges the authenticity of such myths but also acknowledges their power in pretending to be the only “truth.” She then goes on to proffer Aissatou as an example of an alternative truth: “ The fact that Aissatou is able to succeed on her own and raise her sons in a very comfortable fashion indicates that being a good mother does not mean sacrificing one's own self-respect and happiness” (Klaw: 13). Ba allows Ramatoulaye to reiterate these myths only so that they can be problematized as supposed truths. By so doing she is able to sort through the major sources of her socialization: her African heritage and the colonizers' lessons in order to arrive at her own essence. Ramatoulaye's story also raises questions of life experiences versus occidental education as “[s]he opens her tale with a confirmation of the way that she learns best, which is not through trusting others' perceptions of reality but through her own experimentation with life” (Klaw: 14).

In addition, writing in the epistolary style allows Ba to take us through Ramatoulaye's growth from a complacent educated middle-class woman who, though shocked at her husband's deception, is prepared to share him according to the dictates of her faith, to one who rejects the option of polygamy as a way out of the social isolation of widowhood. As overwhelming as Modou's desertion when he first abandons her and his death is to Ramatoulaye's family structure, we see her adapt and brace up for the struggle

ahead, thus demonstrating not only the tenacity of women even in an Islamic society but also the multiplicity of the various dimensions in their psyche.

With the epistolary novel, the reader has some advantages over readers of other styles of writing. According to Campbell (1995), in the

epistolary fiction there are two readers, the reader of the letters/texts within the novel itself and the reader of the novel. The reader of the novel is conscious of the text as both oral and written discourse and is also conscious of the reader in the text as both reading the words and hearing the voice of the writer/speaker. The reader knows both the writer and the reader in the novel. Even if the letter (or letters) is only from a single correspondent, the reader comes to know the addressee. (5)

As a result of this quality of the epistolary fiction, the reader is brought into the dynamics of authorship in a way which is not possible in conventional writing. She becomes a participant. This quality also allows the reader of epistolary fiction to receive “information never meant for a third reader, the reader of the novel who is outside the private text (5)” One suspects that in So Long A Letter when Ramatoulaye recalls events at which Aissatou was present, she does so not only to remind Aissaotu but also for the benefit of the reader who is outside of the novel: “ Aissatou, my friend, perhaps I am boring you by relating what you already know” (9). This quality of the epistolary style which makes the reader privy to so much more than even the person to whom the letter is addressed, constitutes a reversal of the role of the omniscient narrator where the narrator “like a creator, knows the world of the novel and what everyone in that novel is thinking or doing” (Campbell 1995:5). In the case of the epistolary fiction, it is the omniscient reader who has access to what the writer is thinking even before her intended recipient of the letter. She also knows the reader’s response before the letter writer through her replies. The “interpreter (reader) of the epistolary novel” thus becomes the omniscient

party. This not only decentralizes the power of the author but it also empowers the reader as an active participant in the narrative. This is akin to the level of involvement of the audience in traditional African story-telling, which strives for the active participation of the audience in the form of call and response.

Also very significant to the study of the intersections of orature and writing with regard to this novella is the fact that Ramatoulaye's turning point comes in the form of a verbal onslaught. "My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous. .... You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand"(57-8). I agree with Abena Busia (1991) who rightly says that this is Ramatoulaye's 'triumphant moment of speech" (96). But I disagree with her other conclusion that it is a "moment of self-discovery." I see this outburst as more than just a moment of self-discovery or the expression of her anger but as one which signifies to onlookers (especially the men to whom she addresses it) that she is no longer the complacent person they knew. The self discovery was gradual and not confined to one moment. It is, however, her first revelation that she has discovered her true essence. Her avowal that "I felt that I had emerged into the light after a long journey through a dark, narrow tunnel" (88) justifies this assertion that her self discovery was not a momentary thing but a drawn out process. I also agree with Busia that "The end of her ritual seclusion is marked by an extended narrative passage about her family, developing new ideas about the future, new ways of relating to her children on a basis of equality, and other kinds of love than sexual love" (71-88). Abuk (2003) sees Ramatoulaye's outburst as indication that she "has fully processed her grief for both losses of her husband, and is ready at last to move on" (17).

In So Long a Letter, which is written in a fashion similar to daily journal entries, the reader is allowed a unique vantage position of seeing Ramatoulaye's daily existence after her husband's death when she has to adhere to the customs of Senegalese Muslim society, which mandates that she mourns side by side the young girl who has become her mate. The reader is drawn into her emotional dilemma as she must accommodate the presence of this child turned mate who is as much of a victim of the social order as Ramatoulaye is. The reader is taken on a journey with her as she recalls the humiliation of watching Modou squander his wealth to please Binetou and her greedy mother.

However, we also see her grow into a woman who, whilst holding on to her faith, begins to question its customs. So that although polygamy is a traditional part of Muslim society, Ramatoulaye, who is devastated by its impact on her life as well as her children's, takes strong objections to its occurrence and the disrespectful way in which she is informed of her husband's second marriage by his Imam, best friend (Mawdo) and brother (Tamsir).

Through her letter to Aissatou, her childhood friend, we see another kind of educated African woman, the one who is so totally different from the popular image of the 'senior servant' as middle class educated African women are often stereotyped in modern orature. Through the chronicling of Aissatou's story, we also see the strength and value of female friendship, unlike popularly held notions which urge women to be wary of other women. Instead, we are presented with Aissatou who is gracious even in adversity. For instance, although Ramatoulaye like every one else knew about Mawdo's impending marriage to young Nabou, we are given no indication that she warned her friend of this impending doom. I cannot count how many home video plots I have seen

fashioned around this kind of a situation which is often portrayed as a kind of deception and which over the years has become a classic trope. Yet Aissatou does not hold this against Ramatoulaye. Instead she supports her emotionally and financially when her own husband deserts her.

According to C. B. Davies (1994), “Ba uses several metaphors for resistance, including voice, movement, reclamation of memory, formation of identity, and self-definition. ... Education and the revision of tradition are explicitly identified as elements of this reclamation, (Davies cited in Abuk 2003: 15). I agree with Abena Busia who suggests that that in So Long A Letter access to language serves as a metaphor for access to control of life (1991: 91). These assertions speak to issues of how language and writing have been used as tools for colonization and domination. The imposition of the language of colonizers in Africa engendered a shameless scramble for the mastery of the colonizers’ language and way of life. This is illustrated by Frykenburg, who is quoted in Pennycook (1998) as having noted how “the Bengali bourgeoisie frustrated at their exclusion from the institutions of British rule, set up their own college, The Hindu College, in 1816, which was designed to provide an education in English language and literature, Western philosophy and social and natural sciences”(74). All of this effort to acquire a mastery of the English language was apparently at the expense of their own language and culture.

### **Conclusion**

Along with Abuk (2003) I agree that “by giving voice to her story Ramatoulaye claims a rhetorical identity.” Abuk further develops this hypothesis by contrasting Ramatoulaye's language at the beginning of the novella to her language after her

catharsis. She maintains that, “Ramatoulaye’s language is freed during her narrative of transformation. In earlier chapters there are stylised meditations on submission to fate” (17). She illustrates with an excerpt from page 11: “Each life has its share of heroism, an obscure heroism, born of abdication, of renunciation and acceptance under the merciless whip of fate”. Abuk proposes that “[b]ehind this acquiescent position lies a fear of social rejection and the loss of social status and security. In presenting the case for the retention and adaptation of tradition Ramatoulaye is effectively demonstrating a technique of immobility” (17). However, by the end of the letter when Ramatoulaye describes herself as someone who emerges from a long dark tunnel, it is apparent that she has taken huge psychical strides. The act of writing the letter to Aissatou allows her to break free from the constrictions of “Islamic injunction on women to be silent” (Sabbah 1984: 118) as well as the strangle-hold of trying to write her story in a way which conforms to an occidental genre.

Abuk also submits that Ramatoulaye who, like most women of her generation, is a part of the

Senegalese bourgeois” is forced into “a process of cultural migration from the home-based, private sphere of the native-language, traditional oral culture” of the female griots “to the public sphere of the Francophone, modern and literate... In Ba's domestic drama, the process of mourning women's abandonment and widowhood also serves metonymically to represent a silenced grieving for the loss of a maternal or familial world of pre-school domesticity. Grief opens the way for acknowledgement of 'othered' pasts. (Abuk 17)

However, I am less inclined to see Ba’s purpose as one committed to such a strict dichotomy i.e. the oral or traditional African versus the written, modern, Francophone. Rather I read Ba as a writer who acknowledges the complementarities of the various elements which have influenced her characters. While acknowledging the significance of

griots, Ba clearly demonstrates the need to reappraise their role as oral transmitters of culture “who are responsible for teaching traditional values and the role and place of each member of the community” (Ba, quoted in Klaw 2000: 7). She acknowledges the importance of their role, and situates herself within this tradition by taking on the task of debunking myths about the role of women and castes as defined not only by tradition but also by occidental notions. Thus, she proffers new roles for them. Like griots, she sees her writing as a social function and she declares books “a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon” (quoted. in d'Almeida 1986: 6).

In various ways So Long a Letter illustrates the fact that a dialogue exists between Black women writers and orature. This is reflected in the ways in which the novel challenges and rewrites images of women which are prevalent in orature. Ba’s style is similar to the ways in which Tsitsi Dangarembga in Nervous Conditions problematizes images of women. All of these suggest that a distinct literary tradition has evolved which has been carried through from the oral to the written.

## Chapter Nine

### Tsitsi Dangarembga

#### Introduction

In the same way in which traditional stories engage in intertextual dialogues, Nervous Conditions seems to be speaking to the assertions in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's book, 'Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, in which he condemns colonial education for alienating African intellectuals from the people they are supposed to serve. In his analysis, Wa Thiongo like other African male authors focuses only on men as the ones who react physically and psychologically to colonialism, while female reactions to colonialism are reflected through madness or other biological conditions (Patchay 2003). In the same vein, although Dangarembga's novel takes from Fanon the idea that the condition of being native is a nervous condition, "it 're-writes' Fanon's specifically colonized, male subject from a female / feminist perspective" (Patchay 2003:5). Through the portrayal of the lives of different women, Dangarembga also challenges major stereotypes of women which are prevalent in orature from where they have made their way into written narratives.

#### Synopsis

Nervous Conditions is the story of Tambudzai (shortened to Tambu), a young girl who lives on an impoverished Rhodesian farm during the late 1960s before the country's independence from Britain in 1980. At the opening of Nervous Conditions, Tambu (who is the narrator) shocks the reader by declaring that she felt no sadness when her brother Nhamo died. This is because it is only after the death of her brother that she gets access

to uninterrupted education. Nhamo had been the only son of the poor family and their paternal uncle, Babamukuru, only extended an offer of education at the mission school at which he was headmaster to him as the male child. Tambu, however, has great aspirations for her personal education despite the obstacles that stand in her way: on a national level, race; within her country as the child of poor farmers, class; and as a girl child, gender. The topics of colonization, western education and their relation to gender are important facets of this novel because colonization has impacted the country in ways which men are incapable of seeing. Women have been denied equal access to western education and even when women like Maiguru, (Babamukuru's wife), manage to gain access to education, it increases their burden rather than reduce it as it is used as a type of power by many characters in the novel, most importantly Babamukuru, to oppress others. Anorexia is also used in the novel as a tool of resistance by Nyasha (Babamukuru and Maiguru's daughter) who is torn between two cultures. The story also discusses the many facets of colonization and the effects it has on people. Colonization affects each character in the novel creating in each of them a type of "nervous condition."

The book takes the reader through Tambu's coming of age story, which is highlighted by her oppression at the hands of the men in her family: her father Jeremiah, her brother Nhamo and her uncle Babamukuru. While Babamuku is presented as a benevolent character on the surface, his position as the family's most respected patriarch -- when examined alongside his disregard for the female members of his family -- marks him as a most menacing kind of oppressor.

Tambu is a gifted and determined young girl who is struggling to escape the limitations imposed on her by a patriarchal society. When the story opens, she is thirteen

and has only managed to remain in school by her own effort whilst her brother is the favoured recipient of the little resources that the parents have. Babamukuru is also a major character in the novel. He is the most educated and therefore the most affluent in a family whose other members remain uneducated and poor. Tambu's father Jeremiah is lazy and shiftless, and her mother has been beaten down by poverty and despair. However, in spite of Tambu's apparent qualities, she fails to catch her uncle's attention because she is a girl until after Nhamo, who becomes suddenly ill, dies.

Babamukuru, his wife Maiguru and their two children Nyasha and Chido had spent some time in England before the story opens. Although, while they were abroad, both Babamukuru and his wife had studied for and obtained their master's degrees, it is only his qualification that is acknowledged by the members of the family as his wife is seen as a mere appendage to him.

In addition, although both their children become alienated by exposure to cultures different from theirs when they lived abroad, the alienation has opposite effects on them. Chido the boy becomes the quintessential *assimilado* and, cushioned by his privileges as a male child, he imbibes western cultures unquestioningly, as a result of which he is more comfortable with a White missionary's family than with his own. Nyasha, on the other hand, has a more questioning nature. The exposure to western culture, which allows her to see the differences in the two cultures, places her in a position to critically appraise both. She becomes riddled by conflict and rebellion becomes her fortress, as a result of which she ends up suffering from a nearly fatal case of *anorexia nervosa*. Tambu is witness to her cousin's problems by virtue of her sharing a room with Nyasha while attending the mission school after her brother's demise.

## Analysis

One important theme which Nervous Conditions has in common with Toni Morrison's Beloved is the importance of remembering and the dangers of forgetting. This is expressed in Tambu's anxiety over forgetting who she is and where she came from, and in the unflattering portrayal of her brother Nhamo, who does everything to forget his background as soon as he has the opportunity to attend the mission school. Towards the end of the story, Tambu acknowledges the role of "mothers" in transmitting knowledge so that even her mother who has no western education and whose ideas are rather conservative is a repository of valuable knowledge: "mother knew a lot of things and I had regard for her knowledge" (203). Dangarembga acknowledges the importance of this theme in an interview with Jane Wilkinson: "I personally do not have a fund of our cultural tradition or oral history to draw from, but I really did feel that if I am able to put down the little I know then it's a start" (1992:191). This need and/or ability to remember and to put down stories that analyze cultural traditions is closely tied to the survival of the indigenous language and is reflected in Tambu's anxiety over the loss of her language.

As a child growing up in the rural areas, the dynamics of language do not elude her:

'We are dancing,' I invited Nyasha, who took a long time to understand. 'They don't understand Shona very well anymore,' her mother explained. 'they have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone.'

What Maigauru said was bewildering, bewildering and offending... I remembered speaking to my cousins freely and fluently before they went away, eating wild fruits with them, making clay pots and swimming in the Nyamirira. Now they had turned strangers. I stopped being offended and was sad instead. (42)

Like other Black women writers (Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid and Ama Ata Aidoo), Dangarembga problematizes the use of dominant

language as an encumbrance which reflects cultural constructions of oppression. She treats the loss of the indigenous language as a major mark of alienation in Chido and Nyasha and in the way in which Nhamo, Tambu's brother, attempts to lose his Shona as a mark of his enlightenment when he first goes to live in the city.

To start with, an analysis of the politics surrounding the imposition of the language of colonizers at the expense of indigenous languages in countries which Britain colonized points to motivations which are more far reaching than the most obvious aim of economic conquest. In regard to language as a tool for conquest, Zhenja La Rosa (1995) writes of the role of the Spanish language in the conquest of the Americas by the Spaniards that language was not only the means by which they controlled political and economic power but that it "also was the foundation for a conquest at an intellectual level" (50).

According to Frantz Fanon (1967), being colonized by a language has very far reaching implications for a people's consciousness, for to "speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization"(17-18). For Fanon, "speaking French implies an acceptance of the collective consciousness of the French, which identifies blackness with evil and sin" (18).

The widespread use of the English language as a medium of communication today in former British colonies is no accident. There is evidence to show that the British were well aware of the far reaching effects of language as a vehicle for conquest. As such, the teaching of English was a major part of discussions about the direction which colonial policy should take. According to Pennycook (1988), "[t]o some, provision of limited

English was a pragmatic policy to facilitate colonial capitalism; to others provision of English was an essential part of the messianic spread of British language and culture” (20).

The English language was deliberately used for the creation of a class system that was based on people’s ability “to ape” the British, and was encouraged by the colonizers because it served their needs. Thomas Babington Macaulay, a member of the Supreme Council of India who is credited with being responsible for the content and methodology of what was to be taught in Indian educational institutions along with the medium through which these have been taught, was unequivocal in his vision. He believed that the British had to “form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern - a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay’s Minute, 1835:19.18). Pennycook includes a quote by a British colonial official, made in 1867, which expresses in no uncertain terms the objective behind the imposition of English; “other languages will remain, but will remain only as the obscure Patois of the world, while English will become the grand medium for all the business of government, for commerce, for law, for science, for literature, for philosophy, and divinity” (133). Tambu’s sadness over Nyasha and Chido’s inability to speak Shona can be read as mourning for the cultural death of her cousins, since their alienation is an indication of cultural death. A loss of their mother tongue marks their end as integral parts of the Shona ethnic group. If they cannot speak the language how can they understand its mores?

The implications of this loss of cultural grounding are more serious for Nyasha, the girl who is condemned to life in a culture which like her natal one does not value her.

However, she has no way of learning the nuances of this alien culture, unlike the other uneducated female members of her family who have evolved ways of manoeuvring within the indigenous culture. As a potential radical or rebel, Nyasha more than any one else needs to acquire the intricacies of the Shona language, which are not only articulated through verbally expressed words. For as Tambu is aware, there is a lesson in even the mundane things of life. Even the music and drums have messages:

My early childhood had been a prime time for dancing. Then I had used to amuse everybody by dropping my scholarly seriousness to twist and turn, and clap almost in time to the music. As I had grown older and the music had begun to speak to me more clearly, my movements had grown stronger, more rhythmical and luxuriant; but people had not found it amusing anymore, so that in the end I realised that there were bad implications in the way I enjoyed the rhythm. My dancing compressed itself into rigid, tentative gestures, I did not stop completely, but gatherings were much less fun after that and made me feel terribly self-conscious ... (42)

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1994) describes the effect of the imposition of the colonial language on children as a "disassociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment" (17). He further posits that "since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition" (17). Wa Thiongo further explains that "colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active or passive identification with that which is most external to one's environment" (28). In a similar manner, Nhamo, Tambu's brother, tries to lose his Shona as a mark of "civilization" as soon as he goes to the missionary school and this leads his sister to lament, "there was one terrible change. He had forgotten how to speak Shona...This restricted our

communication to mundane insignificant matters” (52-43). Even at his death his mother mourns his loss of his native tongue as much as she laments his physical death. She rightly accuses his uncle who facilitated his loss of his of Shona:

First you took his tongue so that he could not speak to me ... you bewitched him and now he is dead. Pthu!" She spat at Maiguru's feet. "And you too Babamukuru! Pthu! I spit at you! You and your education have killed my son!" This time when she fell to the ground she did not pick herself up, but rolled there, tearing her hair and her clothes and grinding sand between her teeth. (54)

Ironically, when Nhamo first returns to the village after his first term at the mission school, he looks good physically. He is taller, looks more robust and even lighter in complexion but the cost of his physical beauty is apparently the loss of his tongue, his essence (52-53), in the same manner in which his uncle, Babamukuru who, having “devoured and digested the white man’s books,” ends up not a better person but only a “good Kaffir” (200).

In Nyasha’s case, although she is aware of the gap which a lack of cultural knowledge created in her, the loss eventually leads to a psychological collapse. According to Dangarembga in the interview with Wilkinson, Nyasha does not have anything to forget, because she was not taught her culture and about her origins. This apparently formed a “great big gap inside her” (1992:191-192). This gap is a major source of anxiety for Nyasha, who quickly realizes that not having anything to remember is a great loss and this realization makes her question “their history,” the White man’s version of history which she is made to study in school. In contrast, Tambudzai, who has been grounded in her culture, cannot forget and in spite of her deprivations, ends up as a strong character who is able to project into the future at the end of the story. Tambudzai recognizes her

cultural grounding as the framework of her very being. As such she is determined not to forget (Dangarembga to Wilkinson 1992).

Nervous Conditions shows that one does not have to live in the West for English to have the power to enslave one. Its power is there in the limitations it places on people who have to learn it as a compulsory second language as they try to grapple with its strange, oppressive grammar and syntax. It is there in the way it limits what non-native speakers can think, since it is the language of science, philosophy, technology etc. Its power to oppress is apparent in the limitations it places on how far non-native speakers' thoughts can go for, as the major language of neo-colonisation, it holds within it the ability to determine whose thoughts get heard. Its hold is apparent in the hours non native speakers invest in trying to learn its rudiments whilst native speakers speed ahead, unencumbered by the horror of learning it in a class room.

In Nervous Conditions we see how the English language, more than any other colonising language, is the medium through which the world is ruled. Colonizing languages stand unchallenged as the major tools of imperialism today. English, for instance, is the language of capitalism, individualism and globalization as these three elements all share the same root. It is the language in which the destiny of the world is being determined. By immersing ones self into it unquestioningly, one is in danger of undermining its past, as well as its hold over the future.

The English language, to put it in Audre Lorde's words, is "the master's tools" and a vehicle for his arrogance and denigration of others which is still being used deliberately to contain the majority of ex-colonials who are outsiders in terms of

knowledge creation. It has also ensured the power of a select few to color and interpret the world. Audre Lorde put it succinctly when she wrote that:

in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. (43)

In addition, Judith Butler also postulates that “*speaking is itself a bodily act*” (10, emphasis in original). However what is said is apparently not always indicative of what the body is doing or will do. The body therefore has its own language and in some traditional African societies, the language of the body is held to be more reliable than that of the tongue. One of the ways in which the Yoruba emphasize this is expressed in the belief that the eyes are less capable of deceit than the mouth. The eyes are therefore believed to speak even more audibly than the mouth. As such, a speaker is considered either disrespectful or sly if he/she does not meet the listener’s gaze.

Dangarembga demonstrates an awareness of speech as a bodily act when without uttering a word, but using her bodily movement in dance, Tambu declares herself “older,” and “stronger” (42). This bodily declaration does not elude the people of the community who are watching because they understand the voice of her body. In a more dramatic way, both Nyasha and Ma’shingayi (Tambu’s mother), attempt to starve their bodies to death as a way of protesting their situation. Their attempts to make their bodies speak of their unhappiness are tied to notions of the female body as a kind of statement about her family’s status in most African cultures. For instance, a robust figure in a woman is not

only seen as a sign of her wellbeing by the Efik and the Ijaw and most other ethnic groups but also as a sign of the wellbeing and wealth of either her father or husband (in cases of married women) and therefore it is a sign of her value. This is why some ethnic groups have traditions of sending women and young girls to the fattening room.

It is also logical to argue that a person's name, like the language in which a person communicates, resonates in the psyche. A person's name is an integral part of a person's identity and it plays an important role in the way they are perceived and present themselves and should be of equal importance in the way they are represented. Butler (1997) also states that: "[t]he jarring, even terrible, power of naming appears to recall this initial power of the name to inaugurate and sustain linguistic existence, to confer singularity in location and time. After having received the proper name, one is subject to being named again" (29-30). As a Yoruba, given the historicity of our names, which are sentences constantly upheld by oriki,<sup>27</sup> I am acutely aware of the power of naming. The Yoruba were some of the most persistent in resisting colonization and the power of naming was one of the things that the earliest Yoruba nationalists like their counterparts in other African countries brought into play. They recognized that power was conceded to the colonizers through the abandonment of their traditional names in favour of Christian names. They also realized that they did not have the same relationship with their Christian names as they had with their traditional names whose meanings were apparent to the traditional people who used them in their daily life.

Butler asks, "And what if one were to compile all the names that one has ever been called? Would they not present a quandary for identity?" (30). The Yoruba are also aware of this and it is reflected in our relationship with our names. My names are a

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<sup>27</sup> praise songs

shield. Each one of them is a sentence which affirms my worth. I carry them everywhere I go and they can never be completely replaced by any other or easily taken away from me. Even before I came into consciousness as a rational human being, my names (and members of my family had their favourites for me when I was growing up) affirmed me, my existence and what I would turn out to be. My names are a link to a community of people who got together at my naming ceremony to claim them for me. They define me as part of a community, part of a world. My names are also a constant reminder of the connection between body and language – every time my names are pronounced they speak to me. My names and my praise songs fortify me against the offensiveness of other people's words. My names sustain me as a "linguistic existence," which is spoken in the language in which I think. Dangarembga's novel plays out this quality of naming most beautifully, especially in the portrayal of Babamukuru and his wife.

Babamukuru's real name is never uttered by members of his family out of respect for his status as head of the family. In addition to the title "Babamukuru", on various occasions he is called "returning prince," "our father" and "benefactor." By conferring these appellations on him, the speakers not only acknowledge what he has done for them and the family in the past, they also spur and challenge him to do more. This is illustrated when Lucia (Tambu's maternal aunt), whose major strength as a character is her ability to manoeuvre the difficult terrain of her patriarchal culture for survival, needs Babamukuru's help to get a job after an episode in the village during which she had defied his authority by standing up to him and other male members of the family. "Do you know, Babamukuru? She began dispiritedly, being careful to call him by the more dignified title of Babamukuru" (156). On this occasion, Lucia takes the trouble to couch her words to

him in the form of a challenge to find a solution to her financial situation. This manner of challenging a person to rise up to the appellations with which they are imbued is different from flattery. The Yoruba refer to what Butler tries to describe as “a force that both presages and inaugurates a subsequent force” (9) as *‘pipe ori’* which, loosely translated, means calling a person’s head. In the Yoruba tradition, a person’s head is believed to be the centre of their spiritual being. To call on that centre is to call on an essence which one believes to be there already, as a person’s head will only respond to what it already is. In other words, it is not Lucia’s words which spur Babamukuru to action. The qualities which go with the appellations and with which she imbues him are already there in his personality and only need to be called up with the right names.

In the same vein, Maiguru’s real name is never used through out the book as she is so totally submerged in wifhood. Other than Maiguru, her husband sometimes refers to her as Ma Chido, (mother of Chido), which is her other locus. Although Maiguru is also a title, it is one which marks her firmly as an appendage to her husband. By not telling the reader Maiguru’s name, Dangarembga presents us with a person totally lacking in any essence outside of what wifhood and motherhood bestow on her as these are titles which situate her within her husband’s family and not as an individual in her own right. These titles confine her and, although she is the most educated of all the women, she is the most self-effacing. Through this character we are able to see how rather than empower women, western education and Christianity did more to erode the little power that they had in traditional societies.

In Butler’s analysis of speech, she sounds too cautious in her proposal of a strategy of resistance through “resignification” even though she opines that there “is no purifying

language of its traumatic residue, and no way to work through trauma except through the arduous effort to direct the course of its repetition" (38). I agree that resignification can be used as a form of repetition with which to "disjoin the speech act from its supporting conventions such that its repetition confounds rather than consolidates its injurious efficacy"(20). I also see resignification as a most important instrument in deflecting the injurious power of words. However, based on the Yoruba culture with which I am most conversant, I see it as secondary to signification as a tool to curtail the injurious efficacy of the speech act. One still very prevalent and elaborate way in which the strength of signification is demonstrated in the Yoruba culture can be seen at marriage ceremonies -- now called gagement ceremonies because the missionaries refused to count them as proper marriage ceremonies. Marriages in most traditional societies are seen as more of the coming together of families rather than as a union of two individuals. The Yoruba see families as rivals until they are brought together through the union of marriage. Therefore the marriage ceremony is constructed around a verbal battle. It is with words that they engage in battle to hold their own in order to win the respect of the other family. Usually each family presents their most eloquent (who are most often women!). One of the most effective tactics which these verbal warriors employ is to name themselves first before their opponents get a chance. They name their ancestors and recount their worth, but they also name anything they feel the opponent might use to wound them. They name anything they consider unsavoury about themselves and by so doing, they undermine the power of such words by uttering them first.

Black women writers also signify by turning the searchlight on their own family structures and communal cultures instead of concentrating on only the harm that is being

done to their society by outsiders. By opening up for discussion those unsavoury and intimate aspects of their culture, they confound the power of outsiders to explain and define them. Dangarembga does this through the presentation of the interactions between various male and female characters. One good example can be seen in the way that Babamukuru is juxtaposed against major female characters like Maiguru, Ma'shingayi, Tambu and Nyasha to reveal the way in which patriarchy complicated by colonization erodes women's agency. According to Patchay (2003),

[t]he multi-vocality lent to the novel through harnessing the stories of four women told by Tambudzai challenges the various ways in which African women's stories have been silenced through both patriarchal and colonial meta-narrativity. It also becomes obvious that post-independent Africa does not really create (that) many opportunities for women's stories. (2)

Furthermore, I agree with Butler's assertion with regard to the power of language that "[i]mplicit in the notion of a threat is that what is spoken in language may prefigure what the body might do"(10). Sometimes the act referred to in speech is the act that a person might actually perform. Speech can be used to captivate, to hold ransom or to curtail. This is illustrated in the way in which Tambu's brother, Nhamo, kept trying to use words to contain her: "Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? ... With me it is different. I was meant to be educated" (49).

However, it is as equally important to deconstruct the motivation of words as it is to analyze the qualities with which words imbue their wielder in order to effectively tame their potency. As Butler rightly identifies, "[a]s an invocation, hate speech is an act that recalls prior acts, requiring a future repetition to endure" (20). The listener's preconceived perceptions of the qualities of the speaker plays a very significant role. For instance, if the listener believes herself to be more powerful and immune to the speaker

and the words, she is better positioned to more effectively undermine or discountenance the speaker's attempt to maim with words. In this instance, Tambu is able to avoid being dragged down by all the verbal attempts to reduce her substance by the male members of her family because she has been fortified by the strength of her grandmother's stories about her role in the survival of the family through hard times, such as when she took the initiative of taking her nine year old son (Babamukuru) to be educated by the missionaries. Of all the members of the family, it was the grandmother who had the sagacity to recognize western education as the currency of the new age under colonization. The grandmother gave Tambu "history lessons that could not be found in a textbook" (17) and these lessons strengthened her against her brother's verbal assault in not only convincing her of her value as a human being but also by showing her that women have agency.

Furthermore, Dangarembga interrogates the notions of a deeply entrenched dichotomy between educated women and their grassroots sisters. Since the 80's in Africa, much has been made about the dichotomy between the educated urban women who constitute the elite and the uneducated rural grassroots women. In most cases the educated urban women who get involved in activism for women's empowerment are accused of appropriating the voices of their grassroots sisters. One good example of how far this notion of a dichotomy reached in Nigeria can be illustrated by how a women's empowerment initiative which was named Better Life for Rural Women quickly became known as Better Life for Ruler Women in local parlance, (see also the stage play Tell it to the women 1995 by Tess Onwueme ).

In Nervous Conditions, we are given the opportunity to hear the distinct and separate voices of various women. First, we have Tambu's grandmother, who represents a familiar archetypal matriarch whose voice contrasts sharply with those of the women of the next generation. We also have Ma'Shingayi, Tambu's mother and her sister Lucia who, although both rural and non- formally educated, speak in different voices. While Ma'Shingayi appears to be the most oppressed of the women in the novel, her voice is the most ardent in condemning "the virulence of 'the Englishness' that seduces her children and 'enfeebles' her husband in the presence of Baba; and while she appears to be helpless, she is actually a powerful challenge to the patriarchy" (Patchay 2003:3).

She is also as adept in using her silences as she is in using her voice to manoeuvre within the restrictive traditional structure. For instance, she goes on a hunger strike and stops cultivating her field which was the main source of her family's livelihood to protest her belief that through Babamukuru, "her children are being cultivated by the colonialists" (Patchay 2003: 3).

Ma 'Shingayi's vocal resistance is seen in the way in which this character signifies on the stereotypes of women as witches when Babamukuru decides that Tambu should go to another mission, Sacred Heart, after she finishes in his school. On hearing of Babamuku's decision, Ma'Shingayi curses him: "If I were a witch, I would enfeeble his mind, truly I would do it, and then we would see how his education and money helped him" (184). Her vocality challenges the servile domesticity usually attributed to African grassroots women. By using her tongue against her oppressor, she also renders false the popular stereotypes of women as witches who have to resort to supernatural powers in order to be able to stand up to men. In addition, her reference to Babamukuru's education

is the only verbal denouncement of colonization and westernization and the effects they have had in making the most respected patriarch of the family docile.

In appropriating the derogative description of “witch,” Ma’Shingayi undermines the power of the term to injure when male characters in the novel try to use it to cast aspersions on her sister Lucia, when she is labelled a witch because of her alleged seduction of Jeremiah (Tambu's father) and his cousin. According to Patchay (2003), Lucia is only labelled a witch because the men cannot resist her sexuality. They can neither resist her nor contain her as she, unlike other members of the family, is not in awe of Babamukuru and openly defies him. As such, since patriarchal power cannot control her, the men choose to castigate and condemn her as a dangerous woman who “walks with the night” (143). Ma’Shingayi’s way of appropriating the negative stereotype of witch is a very effective way of turning it into a site of resistance in much the same manner as the Yoruba tradition used at wedding ceremonies to which I alluded earlier.

Furthermore, in the portrayal of Gladys (Tambu’s married paternal aunt), we are given a poignant illustration of what can best be described as a “female patriarch.”<sup>28</sup> Although Gladys is a woman, she has a voice (and therefore power) even within the gathering of the patriarchs and as such, represents a different kind of woman within the traditional family structure.

Most tellingly, we are also afforded the opportunity of hearing two versions of Maiguru’s voice. Initially, all we hear is Maiguru’s educated tongue which had obviously become distorted by so called civilized virtues and the exigencies of speaking in an alien language. As such, she starts out spewing asinine babble until she is forced to leave her

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<sup>28</sup> See Oyeronke Oyewunmi’s The invention of Woman (1999), a sociological study on how marriage and natal affiliations impact the status of women in traditional Yoruba societies. Also, Ifi Amadiume’s Male Daughters, Female Husbands (1998) for a similar study among the Igbo.

husband when she gets tired of the way he kept spending their jointly earned money on hare-brained projects in his homestead. Maiguru goes away to spend time with members of her own family and by the time she returns she has another voice: this time, a voice which is devoid of baby talk. Going back to her own family and away from the overshadowing influence of Babamukuru allows her to reconnect with her own essence and by the time she returns we are able to see her as a more wholesome adult.

Representing the next generation of women, we have the insightful but unsettling voice of Nyasha and of course, the voice of Tambu through which we are escorted along her rite of passage from the shaky, curious, if shy but determined little girl, into that of a thinking, insightful and even more determined young woman. Through this array of voices, Dangarembga challenges allegations of dichotomies along the rural/urban; educated/uneducated or even generational divides.

According to Uwakweh (1995), Dangarembga's use of the autobiographical mode makes her work self-referential. This quality, in addition to the narrative style she uses to open and close the story, illustrates a similarity to traditional oral narratives. In addition, Okpewho (1992) observes that in traditional narratives [t]he narration proper begins, in many cases, by the narrator speaking of the tale as 'capturing' his characters – as well as himself, of course, since he has been charged with the duty to report the events of the story" (223). In the opening paragraph of Nervous Conditions, the narrator speaks of

the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion...(1)

With this opening, the narrator situates herself firmly within the story in much the same manner as a traditional story narrator might claim to be captured by the story. She also explains her relationship to the story, introduces her main characters and explains how she came to be charged with recording the events. Again at the end we see a clear-cut disengagement or what Okpewho describes as a “return” from the scene of the narrative, almost as if her return does not stop the world of her narrative from continuing its existence:

[q]uietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully something in my mind began to assert itself ... bringing me to this time when I can set down this story ... the story that I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began. (204)

This stylistic indebtedness to traditional story-telling format is what some feminist literary critics have called open endedness or writing beyond the end which is very common in the works of Black women writers. According to Rachel du Plessis (1985), writing beyond the ending is a:

transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. These tactics, among them reparenting, woman-to-woman, and brother-to-sister bonds, and forms of the communal protagonist, take issue with the mainstays of the social and ideological organization of gender, as these appear in fiction. Writing beyond the ending, "not repeating your words and following your methods but ... finding new words and creating new methods," produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feelings that are culturally mandated, internally policed hegemonically poised.(5)

Furthermore, by interweaving the voices and sometimes even the silences of the four major female characters as well as that of the female protagonist, Dangarembga speaks to issues of patriarchal authority and weaves the story of a nation into an entertaining domestic tale which climaxes when Nyasha denounces her father as a “good

Kaffir” before shredding her history book between her teeth (200-201). This is similar to the way in which, in traditional narratives, the universal is often particularized .

## **Conclusion**

By showing the effects of the domination of the female psyche on the women in the family, Dangaremba shows the inherent irony of how colonization emasculates African men. She is also able to show that, in spite of the oppression by patriarchy and colonization, the women’s voices in their myriad presentations constitute various forms of resistance. On the other hand, the men lured by the dubious power conferred on them by patriarchy over women within the domestic arena show very little signs of introspection or desire to challenge the effects of colonization. The most educated of them, Babamukuru, is a good example of a loyal and obedient colonial subject.

Similarly, Jeremiah who shows no regard for his wife or daughter as they are mere women, is the most emasculated of the family patriarchs (even when compared to his sister Gladys, the female patriarch), but he is so engrossed in tyrannizing the women in his family, he cannot link his reduced circumstances to a rupture in the socioeconomic framework of his country by colonization which has changed the order of things. He does not have his mother’s insights and foresights which allowed her to recognize the white colonizers as evil, but a kind of evil which she needed to take advantage of. This she does when she takes her son to learn from them, no doubt in the hope that he would learn how to best them at their own wizardry. Instead, we see in Jeremiah’s attempts to speak English to his son who has only been in the mission school for a few months, a sign of his conviction of the superiority of the White man’s ways over the traditional ways.

The various voices of women, even when outwardly acquiescing to patriarchy as displayed by Ma'Shingayi, and by Maiguru's wifely submission to her husband and his kith and kin, is also displayed as a tool for resistance to patriarchy, although these women's voices constitute resistance to a lesser degree than Lucia's voice. In all, Dangarembga shows that the participation of women in story-telling and the recording of history is a major site of resistance against the persistent and nebulous imposition of colonialism and patriarchy.

## Chapter Ten

### Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates the dialogue between Black women writers and orature and that, true to African oral tradition, intertextual dialogue also exists among these writers. All of these suggest that a distinct literary tradition has evolved which has been carried through from the oral to the written. To suggest a female tradition is not to posit that there is “a feminine nature, immanent and recurrent, that can be used in history” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1987: 9). It is because of the history of racism and colonialism, as well as the dynamics of gender that there exists a Black female literary tradition which I am proposing can be traced from the pre-colonial oral era through writers like Phillis Wheatley to women who are writing today. Racism colonialism and sexism ensures that this link remains undiminished by geographic borders as women continue to signify on orature as well as on one another; they reinforce the need for a commonality of projects. For example, all that Florence Stratton (1994) lists as principal elements which engage African women writers such as “[m]arriage, motherhood, emotional marginalization, their resistance to oppression and role in the nation-state” (75) as well as the convention of the paired women as a way of interrogating popularly held images of women, also engage the Black women writers from the diaspora under review here.

It is apparent that the level of interaction between Black women’s works and orature is more far reaching than literary theorists seem prepared to acknowledge. While theorists like Chinwezu et al, Baker, Gates and Irele are content with the notion that the influence of orature on writings by Black people is confined to only the formal artistic

areas which do not necessarily have a good representation of women's voices, a close examination of the works of the seven women writers proves that, like Wanning Harries' assertion to which I alluded earlier,<sup>29</sup> theirs is a more "complex tradition" than can be easily explained with these limited theories. Going as far back as Phillis Wheatley who was mostly probably the first person of African descent to be published, it is easy to see that women have been open to all kinds of influences prevalent in the oral tradition. As in the case of her modern day counterpart Mariama Ba who openly acknowledges and situates herself within the tradition of the griots, it is possible to trace a connection between Phillis Wheatley's writing and the griot tradition of the Senegambia area from which she was captured. Writers such as Lorraine Hansberry, Toni Morrison, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and Tsitsi Dangarembga all respond to more than just the formal aspects of orature as do other writers such as Flora Nwapa. Rather, as people who have been nurtured by communities which are very rich in oral culture, these writers have continued to engage in dialogue with their vibrant oral heritage. Through such engagements, they have effectively debunked, where necessary, or highlighted where appropriate, a lot of the myths through which their societies have been and continue to be shaped. As modern day myth-makers, they have actively and constructively interrogated the body of existing myths.

The complex nature of the tradition reflected in these women's works mandates that a proper analysis of their writing can only be carried out against a backdrop of the hitherto neglected informal expressions as well as the historical and formal artistic forms. The works of the women I have reviewed underscore the importance of these informal forms such as the story-telling culture, music and the rich but often neglected dialogical

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<sup>29</sup> See chapter two.

or folk theorizing which thrive in homosocial spaces. The definition of orature also needs to be expanded to include lullabies, story-telling, creation myths, oral theatre, folk epics, folklore, and music including folksongs.

The exclusion of the informal influences of orature has grave consequences for Black theorizing. In the first instance, to discount the influences of orature in all its ramifications is tantamount to acquiescing to the superiority of a western hegemonic way of thinking. For while Europe “took control by defining and classifying space, making separations between public and private spheres” (Cohn quoted in Pennycook 1998: 70), the reverse was the case with most traditional African cultures. Unlike the West which depends on formal structures for the evolution of ‘high culture’, in traditional African societies the informal areas of orature were and remain as influential as the formal in impacting the devolvement of culture and should be a principal referent in theory and praxis.

Control of the arena of knowledge production was a major device with which Europe transformed itself into the center of the universe whilst driving everyone else into the periphery. Thus Europe was seen as eternally advancing, progressing and modernizing whilst the rest of the world was kept busy trying to catch up with it. The world became divided into “an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates” (Blaut quoted in Pennycook: 47- 48). Virtually all “our world-scale models, and many of our specific theories and factual truism, are accepted mainly – and in some cases only – because of their conformality to the values of the European elites” (Blaut quoted in Pennycook: 50).

Actually, by reducing the influence of orature to only the creations which emanate from the public space, what theorists like Chunweizu et al, Baker, Gates and Irele have inadvertently done is to subscribe to the rule or supremacy of the likes of Thomas Jefferson to hold on to the reins of knowledge production. In other words, to deny the role of the various facets of orature on Black literature is to buy into notions of the superiority of Western literary tradition as the definitive tradition against which all others must be measured.

Another major device which the imperialists used for control was writing. “Being in control of writing means having the power to determine what is said and what is omitted” (La Rosa: 62). The experience of Africans who were taken away as slaves illustrates that a principal part of the colonial agenda was dedicated to the domination of the production of knowledge. Recognizing that their captives were from predominantly oral cultures, the captors incapacitated them by prohibiting the use of their native tongue. This they consolidated by a ban, prohibiting them from learning to read and write. This gave the captors not only *carte blanche* to formulate theories about the humanity of the captives, but it also effectively ensured that the captives could not contend their spurious theories. This imperialist technique was the same in colonized countries. In Nigeria Nnamdi Azikiwe, who started the first indigenously owned newspaper, bears witness in his autobiography, My Odyssey (1970), to how jealously the colonialists guarded their hold on writing.

In addition, the use of language and abstractions enabled colonizers to dichotomize the world through a diffusionist framework. It allowed them to pitch concepts like thought/inventiveness against imitativeness, rationality/intellect versus

irrationality/emotional/ instinctiveness, abstract thought versus concrete thought, theoretical reasoning versus empirical/practical reasoning, mind versus body/matter, and, of course oral versus written. Europeans needed to define and classify space and to make separations between public and private spheres in order to effect control of the world (Pennycook, 67-93). In the same vein, so far the restriction of the analysis of the influence of orature to only the formal aspects of orature has served the purpose of not only precluding the contribution of women but it has also ensured prestige and privilege for those aspects which fall more readily in line with the “master’s tools.”

The device of placing a ban on who can or cannot make knowledge had been in existence in Europe for centuries and had been perfected on women. Historically, women were excluded from the philosophical tradition, as a result of which the tradition was marked by a negative characterization of woman. This view is reflected by Hegel’s pronouncement about women when he wrote that they “are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy and certain forms of artistic production. ... Women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality, but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions” (Hegel 1973: 263).

In the effort to generate theory for appraising literature by Africans and people of African descent, theorists not only have the potential to subject Western cultural norms concerning the generation of knowledge to scrutiny but also to launch indigenous cultural norms as an alternative way of generating knowledge. This advantage, however, cannot be gained if such theorists do not resist the temptation to box themselves into a counter discursive mode. According to Helen Tiffin (1995), a counter discourse exists to

determine relations with its material situation (96). This, she explains, is because the concept of "other" cannot exist without its relationship to its reference point as a subset, corollary, or reaction to the already existing dominant discourse. This view is akin to Pelligrini's observations about the constitutive and performative elements of a person or system concerning the limitations placed on Freud. Freud's analyses, Pellegrini proposes, were hindered by the fact that he was cornered into responding to anti-Semitism by the extenuating anti-Semitic circumstance under which he operated (Pellegrini: 17-34).

All the aforementioned represent some ways in which mainstream literary discourse and Black male literary criticism converge. As Henderson (1989) asserts:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the "other(s)," but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. The interlocutory character of black women's writing is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or "generalized Other," but a dialogue with the aspects of "otherness" within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the "Other" of the Same, but also as the "other" of the other(s) implies, as we shall see, a relationship of difference and identification with the "other(s)". (2)

In addition, for the Black women writers under review here, their art remains purposeful rather than art for art's sake. This quality is present in all seven writers starting from Phillis Wheatley, whose work was of such importance to her race as a whole as it impacted the way Black people were perceived, to Tsitsti Dangarembga who clearly continues this tradition. For these women, writing is still primarily a tool (see Mariama Ba quoted in Schipper 1987:47). As such, Black women's writings have evolved in a tradition which is quite unique and their works constitute what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson (1990) describes as "testimonial." According to Henderson, "[t]estimonial, in this sense, derives its meaning from both 'testimony' as an official

discursive mode and 'testifying,' defined by Geneva Smitherman as 'a ritualized form of... communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience in which [the group has] shared" (5).

Like Henderson, I have chosen to describe women's writings as "healing tongues" first in recognition of the affinity which their works share with orature and also because I am positing that their writing is aimed at healing in that they set out to correct misconceptions about women, coloniality and their race. In addition, they also turn the search-light inwards to expose and critique communal problems, thereby paving a way for healing.

Henderson also proposes that Black women speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses and it is this discursive diversity, or simultaneity of discourse that she aptly refers to as "speaking in tongues." I am in agreement with this analysis, which she identifies as speaking in tongues or "glossolalia." According to Henderson, it is a practice associated with Black women in the Pentecostal churches and I have seen it practiced in African traditional religions where women go into a trance and speak in strange languages.<sup>30</sup> Henderson suggests this practice as a trope which explains Alice Walker's characterization of Black women as artists and creators who are rich in spirituality, which, as Walker explains, is the "the basis of Art" (5).

Henderson postulates that glossolalia can be characterized as "the particular, private, closed, and privileged communication between the congregant and the divinity" (6). This quality is reflected in the way in which these Black women writers signify on

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<sup>30</sup> I grew up in Port Harcourt, which is a major city in the Rivers State of Nigeria. In my boarding school, it was not out of place for voices to pierce the night and this was indicative that someone was in an Owu miri or mammy water trance. Such trances sometimes went on for hours at a time and during this period only other people who had some affiliation to the cult could translate the possessed persons' utterances. Speaking in tongues is also very common in traditional African churches.

one another and the orature of their societies as well as in their use of symbols and language which reflect local flavour. This element is as strong in the writings of the women from the diaspora like Toni Morrison and Lorraine Hansberry as it is in the works of African women like Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta. There is another connotation to the idea of speaking in tongues which Henderson describes as “heteroglossia.” Henderson defines this as “the ability to speak in diverse known languages.” While glossolalia might refer to Black women writers’ ability to “utter the mysteries of the spirit,” prevalent in the “private” sphere, heteroglossia reflects their ability to also express themselves in the multiple languages of public discourse. As such,

heteroglossia connotes public, differentiated, social, mediated, dialogic discourse.... It is the first as well as the second meaning which we privilege in speaking of black women writers: the first connoting polyphony, multivocality, and plurality of voices, and the second signifying intimate, private, inspired utterances. Through their intimacy with the discourse of the other(s), black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses—discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns.(6)

The writers I have reviewed engage orature in various ways both thematically and stylistically. Thematically, rewriting popularly held images of women is apparently one of their major projects. In interrogating the discursive dilemma of their characters, these women writers have taken on in various ways what Henderson describes as “the self-inscription of black womanhood, and the establishment of a dialogue of discourses with the other(s)”. In order to achieve “self-inscription they have disrupted and rewritten” (11) stereotypes of women prevalent in orature as well as in canonical writings by men. There are also several instances of how they turn the searchlight inwards in order to critique communal issues. Lorraine Hansberry illustrates this manner of critiquing communal issues in the presentation of Walter Younger, who is juxtaposed against his mother on the

one hand and against his sister Beneatha, an upwardly mobile young woman on the other. Toni Morrison also tackles similar situations in the portrayal of Paul D and his expectation as he attempts to forge a domestic setting with Sethe without first confronting the past in Beloved. Emecheta and Dangarembga similarly tackle how African men are so easily seduced by so called gains under colonialism that they fail to see how it demeans them and how it increases women's oppression.

Furthermore, stylistically all the women writers under review here revise conventional literary generic boundaries using elements which are found in orature in order to convey their stories. Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes is a good example of a work which incorporates elements from genres like drama and poetry into the novel. Another example is Toni Morrison's Beloved, which also incorporates poetry. The epistolary style in which Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter is written clearly allows her to incorporate several elements of the oral narrative. In addition, some of the works are clearly self-referential like A Raising in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry and Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi Dangarembga both, of which borrow heavily from the authors' experiences, like Phillis Wheatley's poetry which incorporates traces of her childhood in Africa. "Through this interventionist, intertextual, and reversionary activity, black women writers enter into dialogue with the discourse of the other(s). Disruption-the initial response to hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse-and revision (rewriting or rereading) altogether suggest a model for reading black literary expression" (Henderson 11).

The apparent disregard for strict conventions of writing displayed by the women writers under review here underscores the veracity of Henderson's statement that "the objective of these writers is not, as some critics suggest, to move from margin to center,

but to remain on the borders of discourse, speaking from the vantage point of the insider/outsider” (Henderson:15). This is similar to an approach proposed by bell hooks (1990), who writes that marginality is “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.” She goes on to suggest marginality “as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives.” It is clear that hooks does not see marginality as something which should be surrendered “as part of moving into the center but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist.” She challenges us to see marginality as offering “the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (341).

Black women writers resist conformity in their use of language. They refuse to acknowledge any rigid divisions between the everyday language of their communities and the so-called sacred territories of literature. Through their disregard for generic borders and in privileging voices of women as well as in the weaving of the spiritual (for example in Beloved by Toni Morrison, Joys of Motherhood by Buchi Emecheta and Efuru by Flora Nwapa), they also affirm the role of women in racial and colonial discourses. This they do by working universal issues into personal and domestic stories of women.

Their interrogation of orature takes various forms. Some interactions take the form of revision such as Aidoo demonstrates when she revises the folkloric image of motherhood or Buchi Emecheta’s more subtle approach in Joys of Motherhood. Again it can take the form of negotiation as demonstrated in Mariama Ba’s So Long A Letter in which she shows us more than one image of motherhood. All of these demonstrate the

need for a more inclusive approach to literary criticism which is fully cognizant of the vital conversations which women's writings represent.

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## Appendix

### Biographical Backgrounds

#### Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley was put up for auction in Boston in 1761 after being captured and transported from the Senegambia area of West Africa. She was said to have been about seven or eight-years-old at the time she was purchased by Susannah Wheatley, wife of a Bostonian merchant, John Wheatley. Susannah bought the young captive with the intention of training her to work as a house slave. However, Mary Wheatley, daughter of Susannah and John decided to teach Phillis how to read and write and quickly discovered that she had a prodigy on her hands as the young Phillis quickly learnt to read and comprehend even the most difficult passages in the bible (Odell 1834:9).

Without any formal education other than what Mary Wheatley was able to teach her, by 1765 Phillis Wheatley had written her first poem, and in 1767, the Newport Mercury published one of her poems which was sent in by her mistress on her behalf (Gates 2003:20). She went on to write and publish several other elegies on religion, piety and morality. She also commemorated deaths and celebrated the freedom of the United States from Britain. Her first collection, Poems On Various Subjects, Religious And Moral, which was published in 1773, was according to Gates, “the first book of poetry published by a person of African descent in the English language, marking the beginning of an African-American literary tradition” (2003:31).

Although she was exposed to many of the most influential members of the Bostonian society whose patronage she enjoyed, the reading public remained sceptical of

her abilities as a writer and she had to face an inquisition made up of eighteen of Boston's most heralded male intellectuals who set themselves up to investigate the veracity of her claims as the author of her works. It was only with their attestation that her poetry collection was allowed to be published. However, even with this attestation, no American publisher was willing to take her on and the manuscript had to be sent to Britain for publication (Gates, 2003).

After the publication of her book *Wheatley*, who was plagued by frail health all her life, was sent on a recuperative voyage along with her owners' son who was on his way to England. While she was in London, she attracted the attention of many more generous patrons and was even scheduled to meet the monarch when she had to return to America suddenly because her mistress had taken mortally ill (Odell 1834:18).

After the death of her owners, *Wheatley* married an African-American grocer against the advice of her owners' heirs and lost touch with the *Wheatley* family. She died in penury after losing her three children (Odell 1834:19).

### **Lorraine Hansberry**

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago in 1930. She was the youngest child of Carl Hansberry who was a real estate broker and Joanne Perry Hansberry. Both of her parents, like other African-Americans prior to the 1932 presidential elections, voted Republican and held strong Afrocentric views which influenced their daughter's outlook.

The young Lorraine Hansberry grew up in a White, middle-class neighbourhood and attended a private school because her parents wanted her to have a sound education. However, moving into the White neighbourhood did not come without a price as first Hansberry's father had to overcome a racially restrictive covenant which attempted to

prohibit African-Americans from moving into the area. The legal struggle over their move led to the landmark Supreme Court case: *Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U.S. 32 (1940). Although they won the right to live in the area, the Hansberry family was subjected to a hostile welcome. It was this experience which formed the basis of the play *A Raisin in the Sun* which she wrote in 1958 but produced in 1959. Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin and worked on the staff of *Freedom* magazine. The play *A Raisin in the Sun* made her the first Black woman to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle's Best Play award. She died of lung cancer on January 12, 1965 (Amazon Books).

### **Ama Ata Aidoo**

Ama Ata Aidoo was born in 1940 in Abeadzi Kyiakor, in the central region of Ghana. Her father was a chief of Abeadzi Kyiakor and, because of her father's position, Aidoo grew up in a royal household with a clear sense of African traditions while also enjoying the benefits of a Western education. She attended the Wesley Girls High School in Cape Coast and the University of Ghana at Legon from 1961 to 1964, where she was an active participant in the school of drama and the writer's workshop. She produced her first play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* in 1964 and the play highlighted the conflict between traditional culture and Western education and values (Behrent 1997).

“Like many of her contemporaries, she was greatly affected by the disillusionment that followed independence, as it became apparent that the national liberation struggle had failed to live up to that which had been expected of it” (Behrent 1997). Since the publication of her first play, she has written one other play, two novels, a collection of short stories and two collections of poetry. She is also an avid essayist and has published extensively on African literature and the status of women in African

societies. She has also held several teaching positions in various parts of Africa as well as the United States. She served very briefly as a Minister of Education in Ghana under Jerry Rawlings' government.

### **Buchi Emecheta**

Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1944 to the family of Jeremy Nwabudike and Alice Okwuekwu Emecheta. Her father was a railroad worker, and her family hailed from Ibuza, an Igbo town in eastern Nigeria. Although Jeremy Nwabudike died when Buchi was very young and this might have meant an end to her education, the young Buchi was able to win a scholarship which kept her in school. She attended the Methodist Girls' High School after which she married early at about the age of 16 or 17. She was married to Sylvester Onwordi, a student to whom she had been engaged since she was eleven, and they moved to London soon after they were married. Although they had five children, the marriage only lasted about six years and she became a single mother at the age of 22. After living on welfare for a while, she found work as a librarian and took to writing in the early mornings while supporting her five children in between which she also studied for a degree in sociology at the London University. She graduated in 1970 (Attree 2003).

Her first book, In The Ditch (1972), is based on her experiences as a poor, single parent in London. It was followed in quick succession by Second-Class Citizen (1974), The Bride Price (1976), The Slave Girl (1977), which was awarded the Jock Campbell Award, and The Joys of Motherhood (1979). She also wrote Titch the Cat (1979) and Nowhere to Play (1980) for children. Some of her other novels are Destination Biafra (1982), Double Yoke (1982), Gwendolen (1989), Kehinde (1994) Naira Power (1982)

and The Rape of Shavi (1983). She has also written a number of plays for television, one of which is A Kind of Marriage produced on BBC television in (1976) and her autobiography, Head Above Water, appeared in 1986 to much acclaim. In the past she has worked as a community worker and taught in the University of Calabar in Nigeria for a short spell. She is probably the most prolific African woman writer (Williams 1997).

### **Toni Morrison**

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18<sup>th</sup> 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, a northern community located near Lake Erie (Black Collegian 2006). She was the second of four children in a Black working-class family and is said to have displayed an early interest in literature (Buffalo Edunet undated). Her parents, George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford, had migrated to Ohio from the South to escape racism and to find better opportunities in the North. George found employment as a shipyard welder, but he often had to work three jobs at a time in order to make ends meet. (Buffalo Edunet undated).

From her father, the young Chloe gained a Marcus Garvey-like perspective on Whites and from her mother, Ramah Willis Wofford who was a church-going woman who sang in the choir and at home, she was exposed to many songs and many Southern Black folklore as the Woffords were proud of their heritage (Buffalo Edunet undated).

Lorain was a small industrial town populated with immigrants from Europe, Mexico as well as other Southern Blacks and she attended an integrated school. However, in her first grade, she was the only Black student in her class and the only one who could read. She was friends with many of her White schoolmates and did not encounter

discrimination until she started dating. She graduated with honours from Lorain High School in 1949 (Buffalo Edunet undated).

She went on to study humanities at Howard, majoring in English with a minor in classics. It was while she was a student that she changed her first name because many people could not pronounce it correctly. She adopted Toni, a shortened version of her middle name. Also while at Howard University, she was an active member of the Howard University Players, with whom she made several tours of the South. Those tours exposed her to the life of the Black people there (Buffalo Edunet undated) and these have continued to influence her work. She graduated from Howard University in 1953 with a B.A. in English and then went on to attend Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where she received her master's degree in 1955 (Allen 1997).

She became textbook editor for a subsidiary of Random House in 1965, and from 1968 to 1983, she worked as senior editor in the trade department of Random. She is also well known as a critic who specializes in African-American literature (Allen 1997). In her position as senior editor, she was instrumental in getting the works of several young Black writers published ((Buffalo Edunet undated).

After teaching at Texas Southern University for two years, she taught at Howard from 1957 to 1964 (Encyclopaedia Britannica 97). It was while at Howard that she met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, whom she married in 1958. Her return to Howard coincided with the civil rights movement as a result of which she met several people who were later prominent in the struggle such as Andrew Young. Young later became one of Dr. Martin Luther King's closest associates, then mayor of Atlanta, Georgia and later still, the US Ambassador to Nigeria. Also, while at Howard, Stokely Carmichael, who

later became a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was one of her students. Another one of her students, Claude Brown, wrote Manchild in the Promised Land (1965) which has become an African-American classic (Buffalo Edunet undated).

After her first son was born in 1961, she continued teaching and also joined a small writer's group as a temporary escape from her failing marriage. The marriage eventually ended whilst she was expecting her second son. At the writers' group, each member was required to present a story or poem for discussion each week and one week, having nothing to show, she quickly wrote a story loosely based on a girl she had known as a child in Loraine who had prayed to God for blue eyes (Buffalo Edunet undated). This story was the foundation of one of her most popular books, The Bluest Eyes (1970)

Her writing soon attracted the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America. From 1971-1972, Morrison was an associate professor of English at the State University of New York at Purchase while she continued working at Random House. In addition, she also started writing her second novel, Sula (1973), which focused on the friendship between two adult Black women. The novel also examines, among other issues, the dynamics of female bonding and it was nominated for the 1975 National Book Award in fiction (Buffalo Edunet undated).

From 1976-1977, she worked as a visiting lecturer at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut (Buffalo Edunet undated). It was also during this period that she wrote her third novel, Song of Solomon (1977) which borrowed from insights which she gained from her sons as it featured some major male characters in search of their identity.

It won the National Book Critic's Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award. In 1981, she published her fourth novel, Tar Baby, which was set on a Caribbean island and explores conflicts of race, class, and sex (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1997).

In 1984, she was named the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at the State University of New York in Albany and it was while living in Albany that she wrote her first play which was based on the true story of Emmett Till, a Black teenager killed by White racists in 1955 after being accused of whistling at a White woman. Dreaming Emmett premiered on January 4, 1986 at the Marketplace Theatre in Albany (Buffalo Edunet undated).

Beloved was her next novel and it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. In 1987, she became the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton, and so she became the first Black female writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League University (Buffalo Edunet undated).

In that capacity, she taught creative writing and also took part in the African-American studies, American studies and Women's Studies programs (Buffalo Edunet undated). She has since written Jazz (1992), a work of criticism, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), Paradise (1998) and Love (2003) She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 for her works.

### **Mariama Ba**

Mariama Bâ was born in 1929 into a well-to-do family in Dakar, and her father later became one of the first ministers when Senegal became independent. She was raised by her grand parents according to traditional practices because she lost her mother at a

very early age. Her early education was in French but she was also sent to a Koranic school and although she was a promising student, true to the culture at the time her grandparents did not see the need to educate her beyond primary school. Fortunately her father prevailed on them to give her an opportunity to continue her studies (Books and Writers).

On completing her secondary education, she won the first prize in the entrance examination and was admitted to the Ecole Normale de Rufisque, a teacher training college near Dakar. It was during her days in the college that she published her first book. It was non-fiction and dealt with colonial education in Senegal. At school, she also wrote an essay, which created a stir for its rejection of French policies in Africa (Books and Writers).

She completed her education in 1947 and went on to work as an elementary-school teacher. She also married a politician, Obèye Diop, and they had nine children. She did not enjoy the best of health and was forced to resign from teaching after twelve years due to poor health. She then took up work as a regional school inspector by which time her marriage had also failed and she was raising her children alone (Wikipedia).

Perhaps it was her childhood experience which made her sensitive, from a very early age she started speaking out against the inequalities between the sexes resulting from African and Islamic traditions (Wikipedia). She was also active in women's associations, promoted education, and championed women's rights in her speeches and newspaper articles in local newspapers.

She died of cancer in 1981 and six months after her death, So Long a Letter won the Noma Award for Literature. Her second novel Scarlet Song (1981), which focused on

an interracial marriage, was published posthumously the same year. Her other publication, 'La fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites', an academic essay, was also published in 1981.

### **Tsitsi Dangarembga**

Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in 1959, in Mutoko, a town in Zimbabwe, still known as Rhodesia at the time of her birth. At the age of two, she moved with her parents to Britain where she began her education and where she lived till she was six when the family returned to Rhodesia. After completing her A-levels in a missionary school in the City of Mutare she went back to study medicine at Cambridge University. She however abandoned the program because she felt alienated and homesick. She returned to Rhodesia in 1980 just before it became Zimbabwe under Black majority rule (Grady 1997).

On returning home, she began a course of study at the University of Harare in psychology. During her student days, she became an active member of the drama group affiliated with the university. It was as a member of this group that her early writing found an avenue for expression as she wrote many of the plays that were put up for production at the university. One of the plays which she wrote and produced was entitled The Lost of the Soil (1983). She also joined another theatre group called, Zambuko and participated in the production of two plays, Katshaa!, and Mavambo (Grady 1997).

About the same time, she started experimenting with prose writing and in 1985, she published a short story in Sweden entitled The Letter, followed in 1987 with a play which was published in Harare entitled She No Longer Weeps. Nervous Conditions was published by the Women's Press in 1988 and was the first novel to be published in

English by a Black Zimbabwean woman. In 1989, it won the African section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize.

She went back to school to take a course on film production at the Deutsche Film und Fernseh Akademie in Berlin. She wrote the script for Neria (1992), which became the highest-grossing film in Zimbabwean history. It is the story of Neria, a widow's struggle to stand up against her brother-in-law who tries to use her difficult situation for his own advantage. Neria is able to stand up against her former in-laws with the help of her female friend (Books and Writers). While studying, she produced several films including a documentary for German television. She made a widely acclaimed film entitled Everyone's Child (1996), which has been shown worldwide at various festivals including the Dublin Film Festival (Grady 1997). With Everyone's Child, Tsitsi Dangaremba once again made history in her country as it was the first feature film directed by a Black Zimbabwean woman. "The story followed the tragic fates of four siblings, after their parents die of AIDS. The soundtrack featured songs by Zimbabwe's most popular musicians, including Thomas Mapfumo, Leonard Zhakata and Andy "Tomato Sauce" Brown" (Books and Writers).