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'Inscription' as Speaking for Women: African Women Writers and their Writing Form

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ABSTRACT

African Literature has grown exponentially in the past 50 years, with key literary giants as pioneers establishing its literary field. Even in present research and scholarship, African writings have helped inform and articulate modes of literary and theoretical discourse. Even more so, early African women's works (Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba), were said to have laid the foundations for contemporary African women writers to continue 'speaking' boldly for Africa and its women. My article argues that the bold strides taken by early writers Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba through the epistolary form, were fundamental for contemporary third-generation African women's writing that continued this legacy of inscription. Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* (2007), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I do not come to you by chance* (2009) are selections of works whose literary topos employs the epistolary forms of letters, diary entries and emails as ways to articulate the nuances experienced in Africa. Drawing on the similar form of the epistle used by Emecheta and Ba, the results of the analysis of Adeniran, Adichie and Nwaubani's works will inform us of the ways in which pioneering writings by African women were trailblazing to the quest of African female inscription.

Keywords: African literature, African women writers, epistolary, inscription, third generation

INTRODUCTION

If Achebe's (1958, 1975) *Things Fall Apart* and *Morning Yet On Creation Day* can be seen as blueprints that laid the foundation for literary works to suggest the need to break away from (neo)colonial yokes of oppression, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba's semi-autobiographical and epistolary

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works *Second Class Citizen* (1974) published later as *Adah's Story* (1983) and *So Long A Letter* (1979) respectively, were integral to the legacy of African women's writing. This article will focus on how Emecheta and Ba's use of the semi-autobiographical and epistolary form in their early works played a central role in responding to the complex realities of women's disempowerment in society. These texts written by these second-generation African women writers paved the way for contemporary works by third-generation women writers to address the further nuances and ambiguities experienced by contemporary Africa and Africans. Emecheta and Ba's literary ruminations were critical of the limitations placed by many African societies on African women. Their works also sought to re-inscribe the image of the oppressed woman which offered further possibilities of imagining the new African woman beyond a victim-centered portrayal to that of agency and self-determination. Thus, this article is significant not only as a blueprint that traces the importance of inscription, which is writing for African women but also provides a canvas on the legacy of African women's writing forms, from its early inception to contemporary times. The overarching contribution of this article, therefore, is its novelty in providing a cursory overview of understanding the literary history (legacy) of African women's writing form to the African women's writing canon, which played a key role in the construction and nurturance of African literary aesthetics. In discussing these (African) women's writing forms, this article reemphasizes the need to discuss the roles of pioneering African female creative writers in using inscription to pave the way for challenging the various silences faced by women through writing. Pertinently, this article posits that these confident strides made by these early African women writers have allowed contemporary African women writers to use similar creative forms to continue articulating women's concerns through writing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this article, I use a few theoretical ideas to frame my argument. Pertinent to the discourse of early African women's writing is the Mother Africa trope which exposes the ways patriarchy binds women to the domestic realm and their biological functions as a wife, mother, and daughter. Early women writers like Mariama Ba and Miriam Tlali debunk the myths surrounding the nostalgic praise of motherhood by uncovering how women are muted and oppressed within this trope. Central to this idea is also Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie's *Six Mountains on A Woman's Back* which pinpoints the six categories in which women are oppressed. The mountain's discussed is influenced by both external and internal forces like colonialism and postcolonialism, traditional structures, the woman's backwardness, man, race and the woman herself. By identifying the mountains that force women to conform to a prescribed state of being, Ogundipe-Leslie offers an insight into women's commodified and objectified circumstances. These similar

categories are challenged in Emecheta and Ba's texts, revealing how systematic oppression must be fought by exposing its fallacies through writing. Womanist theory is also vital to understanding the African woman's story. Both Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in the 1980s coined the term womanism independently to theorize the Black and African woman's experiences respectively. Womanism's exegesis was necessary to discuss the African woman's condition. Early women-centered theories like feminism and even postcolonial feminism did not provide enough space for the African female dialogue, which is why Ogunyemi coined African womanism as a theory. Ogunyemi theorised that the African woman became a womanist after an emotional or tragic experience that pushed her towards agency and self-definition. This womanist experience will be seen in the texts discussed in the article. Collectively, these three major ideas used in this article help foreground my argument on the importance of early African women's writing on contemporary (third-generation) African women's literature.

Furthermore, the texts chosen for analysis in this article were based on the focus of forms of writing, the epistolary and autobiographical forms. The first two texts that are discussed in the earlier parts of the article hone in on Mariama Ba's and Buchi Emecheta's works (*So Long a Letter* (1979) and *Adah's Story* (1983) respectively) because it is the only two significant texts written during its time by African women writers that use the epistolary/ autobiographical form to showcase the importance of writing for writing ie the importance of inscription for African women. As a driving point for this article, my selection of texts in the latter half of the article was based on the significance as well as influence Ba's and Emecheta's writing forms and female representations had to third-generation women writers who employed similar 'writing forms' to continue to articulate the quest for speaking and representing African women through writing. Therefore, Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* (2007), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I do not come to you by chance* (2009) are selections of works that use the epistolary forms of letters, diary entries and emails as a means to articulate the various, complex experiences of contemporary Africa.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mariama Ba's epistolary text *So Long a Letter* (1979) is a key precursor in African literature. Written in 1979, Ba employs this unique genre form of writing for writing, using female writing narrators to speak for and against the injustices as well as misrepresentations faced by women, effectively countering the "masculine plural" (Anzaldua, 1987). Ba's epistle was her response to reconstructing notions and romanticizations set about within the *la femme noire* (which is also seen in Senghor's poem *Femme noir*), specifically the Mother Africa trope or pedestal which ideological binds women. Ba notes,

> The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in all its aspects … As women we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. …We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. (Ba, 1981/1990).

Ba aptly observed that in conflating the African mother with Mother Africa, patriarchy revered motherhood but simultaneously equated womanhood to motherhood, which in the course of history had muted and silenced women's voices from speaking, placing unrealistic demands on the African woman which had inadvertently left her defenseless, subjugated and submissive. On a similar note, another African woman writer Miriam Tlali, criticised the figure of Mother Africa,

> it is a problem when men want to call you Mother Africa and put you on a pedestal, because then they want you to stay there forever without asking your opinion- and [they are] unhappy if you want to come down as an equal human being! (quoted in Schipper, 1987).

Tlali further exposed the double bind within the symbol of Mother Africa which was an idealization as well as archetypal imaging, both dangerous and paralyzing to the African woman's identity, personhood and womanhood.

Questioning similar appropriations, Buchi Emecheta's poetics of writing back interrogated the legitimacy of this trope's frameworks and manifestations that place women in inferior positions. In *The Joys of Motherhood,* Emecheta (1979) created Nnu Ego, a female character who followed all the dictates of her culture through selfless dedication towards her husband and eight children but in the end, died tragically alone,

> Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother. (Emecheta, 1979).

In this satirical novel, Emecheta dispelled the myths and ideologies surrounding motherhood and mothering by exposing the 'realities' of motherhood. While *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) was exceptional for an early African woman writer's works, it was her first two semi-autobiographical novels *In the Ditch* (Emecheta, 1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974) which were compiled later in one volume *Adah's Story* (1983) that began Emecheta's vocation as a writer. These texts were seminal works for African and Nigerian women's literature in which Buchi Emecheta continued Flora Nwapa's dialogue for female personhood by challenging anachronistic practices in her marriage through the fictional character of Adah. In "African Women, Culture and Another Development", Omolara Ogundipe-

Leslie theorizes that there are six mountains on an African woman's back which serve as oppressive tools that ensure her subjugation and prevent her development. The mountains of tradition, patriarchy and the woman herself are some of the aspects which Emecheta (1983) addresses in *Adah's Story* which will be discussed in the latter part of this article. Through the use of the semi-autobiographical form, Emecheta created a new topos for African women's writing by dismantling representations of passivity and self-abnegation for those of self-definition and self-actualization. Hence, the veneration and glorification of the equation of motherhood with womanhood is demystified through both of these women's works, early examples of resistance that helped envision and create literary spaces for other female characters such as Kambili (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), Ofunne (Azuah, 2005), Enitan (Sefi Atta), Lola (Sade Adeniran), Olanna (Adichie), Kainene (Adichie), Tolani (Atta) and many other strong, independent female depictions.

Writing for Self-Inscription

The use of the epistolary and semi-autobiographical form by early African women writers like Ba and Emecheta foregrounded the notion of using various writing forms to put across the reality of the humiliation that characters like Ramatoulaye and Adah faced within incontestable circumstances of inequality, oppression and exploitation. Thus, in their first pieces of published works both Ba and Emecheta do not only use the genre of the novel but employ semi-autobiographical and epistolary techniques to cultivate a sense of intimacy as well as immediacy with their readers to insight change and re-inscription.

The idea of writing within writing or personal writing is a technique that has been used by early women writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) to reveal the private struggles of the female person to the public. When Gilman first wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), she was faced with many criticisms, particularly the bleak and depressing nature of her short story. However, her writing did exact change, when doctors stopped prescribing the rest-cure for women of her time who were experiencing postpartum depression. In a similar vein, Mariama Ba and Emecheta used these writing forms not only to critique Eurocentric notions of representations (postcoloniality) but more importantly the gendered discourse which affected African women and ensured their absence from participating in mainstream dialogue. Their works did not merely "[emerge] in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power" (Ashcroft et al., 1989), but also focused on the additional, multilayered oppression African women faced under patriarchy and traditions rooted in indigenous customs. In their writing back, Ba and Emecheta created a bridge between fiction and testimony through the semi-autobiographical and epistolary form, as "literature offers one of the most important ways in which these

new perceptions are expressed … the day-to-day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential" (Ashcroft et al., 1989). The semi-autobiographical and epistolary text then represents much of the author's 'self' or self-reflections that unsubscribe phallocentric ideology, while releasing female subjectivity. Ramatoulaye and Adah narratives depict a refusal to continue to be relegated to the margins and reduced to biological objects.

So Long a Letter (1979) and *Adah's Story* (1983) present Ba and Emecheta's vigorous arguments around the construction of African women's lives particularly against prevailing structures that ensure their voiceless, muted state. In speaking through forms that enhance their agenda for women's self-inscription and survival, each of these authors provides a distinct, critical perspective on women's subjectivity and agency. Not only is originality the merit of these texts but also its space-staking assignments, which solidify the African woman's writing legacy. Ba and Emecheta on the issue of 'voice', through these texts propose that it is imperative that women should speak and define themselves in ways that reflect their experiences and challenges, forms which are "sites of identity production" as "they both resist and produce cultural identities" for African women (Gilmore, 1994). The semi-autobiographical and epistolary texts become discursive domains where Ba and Emecheta unapologetically attempted epistemic ventures on the gendered subject. Through the use of the first person speaking position, the African female character launched a caustic attack against the 'mountains' on her back (namely that of tradition, patriarchy and the woman herself through years of internalizing strictures and structures of oppression), that kept her in a victimized position. This is evident in the following lines by Ramatoulaye's response to widow inheritance and polygamy in *So Long a Letter* (1979),

> I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand … I shall never be one to complete your collection [as fourth wife]. My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis: no extra burden; my "turn" every day; cleanliness and luxury, abundance and calm! No, Tamsir! (Ba, 1979).

A careful reading of Ba's work presents us with valid points of criticism of widow inheritance as forced marriage, this form of practice within African tradition that further oppresses women and places another layer of limitation on them. Crudely put, the widow is handed over to her brother-in-law, which in practice is actually an extension of handing over the responsibility of a daughter to her husband because she is seen as incapable of caring for herself. Here, Ramatoulaye not only refuses to be treated as a weak subject in need of a man's protection but also exposes the ideological foundations of widow inheritance which continues the systematic and cyclical oppression of women in society, of coming under male, masculine protection. Through the writing

narrator (Ramatoulaye), Ba exposed the true conditions of widow inheritance and polygamous marriages, "what of your wives, Tamsir? Your income can meet neither their needs nor those of your numerous children. To help you with your financial obligations, one of your wives dyes, another sells fruit, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machine" (Ba, 1979). This literary episteme not only expresses women's responses to their everyday experiences but it also articulates the shortcomings within the social realities and practices faced by African women particularly with regards to gender roles, and African men's failure to fulfill their said duties and obligations. In this text then, it is the African woman who becomes the referential "I" as she effectively silences her brother-in-law, "Tamsir, purge yourself of your dreams of conquest. They have lasted forty days. I shall never be your wife" (Ba, 1979), exposing his failures and inadequacies. In speaking rather than to be spoken for, Ramatoulaye subverted the *la femme noire*, by rejecting the pedestal of Mother Africa and forcing Tamsir instead to occupy the silenced, muted space, "Tamsir got up without a word. He understood fully that he'd been defeated … when I quelled his lust for conquest" (Ba, 1979).

Roger A Berger's *Decolonizing African Autobiography* postulates that,

> Any reading of African Literature, or for our purposes, autobiography must be both specific and global – must account for the synchronic realities that emerge from the localized experience of specific writers and for the diachronic, historical developments that presented different imperatives for different historically situated writers … then African autobiographies—part of an ongoing historical process—are Africanized metaphors, both human narratives attempting to construct an order from life. (Berger, 2010).

While Emecheta's later work *Head Above Water* (1986) was her autobiography which explored her immigrant life in London, my article intends to look at the precursor to this text *Second Class Citizen* (Emecheta, 1974), a semi-autobiography of Emecheta's life seen through the character of Adah because it was one of her firsts texts that laid the synchronic as well as diachronic trajectory for envisioning African women's subjectivity and agency, the impetus for her other literary endeavors. In this text, Emecheta became more self-aware and confident as the text progresses, interweaving her personal struggles to that of her migrant experience, authorizing Adah to 'speak' for and of her condition. In an interview, Emecheta explained, "that the experiences of Adah in her second novel *Second Class Citizen* (1974) were, in fact, her own"[1] (Bazin, 1986). In many ways then, Adah is inextricably bound to Emecheta not only because she is her author but also her story, the merging voices offering

[1] This was published in *Opzij*, a Dutch feminist monthly in September 1981 where Buchi Emecheta said *Second Class Citizen* (1974) was "largely a personal document" in an interview titled "It's Me Who Changed".

an interesting dynamic between textual inscription and writer-reader conversation, the African female character/author no longer choosing to remain unquestioning and silent.

One of the most poignant moments of self-inscription in *Second Class Citizen* is when Adah's husband Francis burnt her manuscript, effectively bringing an end to her complicity (Emecheta, 1974). In her seminal article *Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English* Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi stated that the female person could become a womanist,

> after a traumatic event such as menarche or after an epiphany or as a result of the experience of racism, rape, death in the family, or sudden responsibility. Through coping with the experience she moves creatively beyond the self to that concern for the needs of others characteristic of adult womanists. (Ogunyemi, 1985).

Buchi Emecheta narrated how the years of exclusion and invisibility could no longer keep her silenced once she began writing, "she could not go back now. She had known the feeling she had when she finished the story, she had tasted the fulfillment of seeing others read her work, and had felt an inner glow" (Emecheta, 1986). In burning her first manuscript, Francis had not received the desired results of submission, "I was afraid you'd dig them out of the bin. So I had to burn them" (Emecheta, 1986), but instead was confronted by Adah who "remained adamant to her resolution. Her money was for herself and her children (Emecheta, 1986). One can postulate that, as Adah witnessed the burning of her manuscript, the "feeding of crumpled sheets into the stove and watching the burnt papers flying lifelessly about the room like blackbirds" (Emecheta, 1986), it ignited the womanist within her. Instead of accepting her domain as fixed, "brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breastfeed her baby" (Emecheta, 1986), Emecheta not only debunked the Mother Africa trope that equated her womanhood as synonymous with motherhood but also challenged the various mountains that impinged on her agency. Emecheta did not reject her role as mother but instead looked at writing as a source and act of mothering. She is a writer and mother, writing seen as her 'brainchild', her legacy for African women but also income to take care of her children. *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) like *So Long A Letter* (1979) lays bare the inequities that attempt to strip African women of their dignity. In revisiting the sites which are used to oppress women, in these texts the family specifically marital relationships between husband and wife, characters like Adah, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou refuse to remain immutable (Nnaemeka, 1994).

It is also important to note that a reflection of the biases women had to contend with could be seen in the ways in

which male critics responded to African women's writing. In his deplorable response to Emecheta's stance as a feminist with a small 'f', Taban lo Liyang remarked,

> I hope that at the end of the day we will still have African motherhood intact and African sisterhood intact so that at least even after all the problems they will still bring up another child who will still remember the mothers and the sister who brought him up. I am trying to say this because I suspect that feminism may destroy that which up to now has enabled Africa to withstand all the buffeting from other cultures. I think I should appeal to us to keep the African household intact at the end of the day, otherwise we may have our younger sisters going off and joining in dances in Lapland which concern the people of Lapland only. (Petersen, 1988).

Clearly, this response is sobering as it reflects the very foundation of Emecheta and Ba's concerns. As an early African male writer and critic, Liyang did not see the African female writer as his equal counterpart, quick to reduce her to domestic roles of wife and mother in order to uphold the African household. Pertinent to the discussion is also his disparaging implication that African women's works 'may' be a negative influence on the younger generation. Similar parallels can also be found in Femi Oja-Ade's (1982) criticisms of Emecheta and Ba's quest for agency and freedom through their writing, inherently discrediting their concerns as unfounded and baseless. Again, the African woman writer contends against multiple encounters of indignation, ironically from within the internal circle of male writers and critiques themselves. The question that follows is, why did mainstream discourse insist on placing early women writers like Emecheta and Ba within the axis of silence, when it should have been working together with them against Eurocentric definitions that (continue to) marginalize Africa? Also, if women are so integral to the task of biological mothering as suggested by Liyang, should not their roles as orators of their culture be as equally important since they are deemed the cultural bearers of their communities? Undoubtedly, following first-generation writer Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba refused to be circumscribed by these gendered ideologies and used writing as redemptive of their personal as well as collective narratives. It is in the footsteps of these trailblazers then that other early African women writers like Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera took on the dialectic inquisitions that further paved the way for contemporary third-generation women writers. Mariama Ba and Buchi Emecheta's speaking through writing is then indeed an internal act that is transmitted externally as a heritage for other African women's voices.

From Speaking to Being Heard: Women Writers after Ba and Emecheta

In *Hearing Black Women's Voices: Transgressing Imposed Boundaries*, Carole Boyce Davies postulated "we need to foreground the need to HEAR WOMEN'S VOICES as well as MAKING WOMEN'S VOICES HEARD" (Davies, 1995). Davies was apt in observing that the act of speaking necessitated hearing. Drawing on bell hooks, Davies further noted that it was "transgressive speech … [that] challenges situations of oppression, challenges power and talks back to authority when necessary" (Davies, 1995). In many ways, this reminds us that in using the epistolary and semiautobiographical form, Ba and Emecheta were beginning the process of transgressive speaking by re-producing and re-constructing their subjectivities which were initially shaped by repressive, male discourse. It is within these parameters as well that their female protagonist's Ramatoulaye and Adah, represent the growing importance of women's voices and story-telling, which imbued the third generation with the similar legacy and tradition of oral literature. In this section of my article, I intend to consider the ways in which Sade Adeiran's *Imagine This* (2007), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I do not come to you by chance* (2009), are some examples (but not exclusive) of texts by third-generation African women's writings that continued the earlier generation's quest for *self-presentation* and *hearing* by drawing on similar methods of construction, through both form and content that is intent in breaking the conditions of silence. The collective analysis of these texts is meant to offer a brief review of the ways in which Ba's and Emecheta's texts have influenced contemporary writers in form and content.

The first text considered in this study is Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* (2007). Adeniran used diary fiction very much like Ba's epistolary form of letters to 'imagine' change for the young protagonist from an early age. In writing in and to her diary Jupiter, Lola began a dual process of writing and reading from her diary which became an emotional and intellectual space that not only allowed her to navigate her life story for herself from the age of nine to adulthood but also served as an alternate, secure space from her abusive circumstances. Lola's diary writing allowed for the female subject to "[represent] the record of an 'I' who constructed a view of herself in connection to the world at large. Diary writing, as a quotidian cultural practice, involves reflection and expression" (Dijck, 2006). Lola took on the referential 'I' from an early age, observing and reflecting on her life as well as those who crossed her path. She was particularly scathing in her depiction of her physically and emotionally absent patriarchal father who saw her as a reflection of her mother who walked out on their marriage. Interestingly, Adeniran inserted a letter from Lola's mother in the diary, further highlighting the importance of the theme of female voice and agency. Constance Olufemi wrote "it has taken a lot

of courage to do this … you have destroyed my pride as a woman … you have separated me from my children" (Adeniran, 2007). Adeniran addressed many issues in this letter. She noted that second-generation female characters like Lola's mother Constance could exact change only by leaving her marriage and even her children. Within the (emotionally or physically) absent mother trope which seems to be a recurring imaging in third-generation Nigerian women's writing (seen in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Atta's (2005) *Everything Good will Come* and Unoma Azuah's (2005) *Sky-High Flames*), Lola's change began at an early age as she challenged different aspects of her family relationships to achieve self-definition, beginning with writing in her diary, attending university and finally leaving the country to begin a new life for herself (Nadaswaran, 2011). The end of the novel-diary was the beginning of her life, acknowledging "I started this journal as a little girl … you're the only thing that has kept me going and kept me sane … I could pour out my thoughts feelings and frustrations without fear", while simultaneously declaring "I do know that [I'm] no longer a lost little girl looking for salvation … The time has come for me to start my life. THE BEGINNING" (Adeniran, 2007). Adeniran's undertone is similar to Ba's in *So Long A Letter* (1979) "I can feel new buds springing up in me … I shall go out in search of it. Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter" (Ba, 1979). The emerging female protagonist achieves her self-actualization (within the theme of female voice and agency) at an early age unlike Ba's Ramatoulaye, growing and maturing with her diary writing yet Adeniran's literary signposting is unmistakable as she draws on the similar redemptive scope of writing and new beginnings.

Third generation writing also continues to focus on the constraining conditions of women within the family. Jane Bryce posited that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*'s "opening sentence signals its entanglement with Achebe and his project of reclamation, but relocates it firmly in the home" (Bryce, 2008). Bryce's assessment of Adichie's assignment within the family may be accurate but Adichie's opening lines in her text "things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (Adichie, 2004), signify more of an 'entanglement' with the legacy of first- and second-generation women writers rather than just with Achebe. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) was in many ways a response to Achebe's treatment of women in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* (1979) continued to interrogate the preoccupation with motherhood seen in Efuru. Through Kambili's narrative, the thematic pulse of *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) is unmistakable as Adichie continues to re-vision the young Igbo protagonist. Kambili's diegesis of her family leads her from a journey as an observer to the assessor. The novel touches on many uneasy subjects, such as the devout catholic patriarch's

abusive nature, Kambili's romantic feelings for her catholic priest and finally Beatrice's poisoning of her husband. My reading of the opening lines of the novel hones in on the broken figurines on Beatrice's étagère, the outward mirage of perfection juxtaposed against the internal chaos in the family caused by Eugene that not only physically shattered but also symbolically became the catalyst for Beatrice's un-silencing. Things fell apart in the Achike household because the mother in the family refused to endure her husband's abuse anymore. Eugene's abuse caused Beatrice multiple miscarriages. It was her final miscarriage that drove her to poison her husband, a similar echo of Adah leaving Francis after he 'kills' her brainchild. Kambili too negotiated her own womanhood throughout the text (once again reinforcing the theme of female agency like Lola in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* 2017). She carried Father Amadi's letters with her because "they remind [her] of [her] worthiness, because they tug at [her] feelings" (Adichie, 2004), helping her arrive at an independent conclusion, that she did not need to consult anyone about her choices because she had the right to do so on her own, "I no longer wonder … I just go ahead" (Adichie, 2004). Kambili's growth and Beatrice's agency finds its parallels in Adeniran, Ba and Emecheta's characterizations, suggesting the continued dialogue of speaking and hearing by African women writers. While Adichie throughout the text explores Kambili's quest for personhood, the 'epistolary form' used to end the novel seen in the letters Kambili writes to Father Amadi, reflects the ways in which Kambili inscribes agency for herself through independent decision-making.

Adaobi Trica Nwaubani's *I do not come to you by chance* (2009), extends the literary history of African women writers' to "dialectically question postcolonial Africa's political failures or the betrayal of nationalist hope" through a novel interspersed with emails (Okuyade, 2014). In exploring the corrupt fabric of Nigerian society through the 419 internet fraud, here it was Nwaubani as a female author that put forwards the theme of female voice and agency through her writing, speaking about the conditions of postcolonial Nigeria. She traced the downward spiral of her male protagonist Kingsley into amorality, expressing her discontent on the misgoverned nation which now impinged on its people. Kingsley's amorality was depicted through the modern epistolary form – the emails he composed and sent as a scammer "I DO NOT COME TO YOU BY CHANCE. UPON MY QUEST FOR A TRUSTED AND RELIABLE FOREIGN BUSINESSMAN OR COMPANY" (Nwaubani, 2009). Kingsley is a byproduct of his nation's failures, the lack of jobs and social welfare that left his father Paulinus "retired and wasted, nothing to show for" (Nwaubani, 2009). As Kingsley helplessly watched his father die due to the lack of proper medical care, he was jolted into awareness that the only way to survive a corrupt system was to be corrupt "in real, live-action" himself (Nwaubani, 2009). Nwaubani's delineation signals the shifting trends and development

in African women's literature, indicative of the daunting task of "[engaging] imaginatively and constructively with pressing socio-political issues (Okuyade, 2014).

CONCLUSION

My article has used seminal works by Mariama Ba and Buchi Emecheta as examples of works to consider the ways in which early women writers began the quest for self-inscription and paved the path for other women writers to continue this legacy. The epistolary and semi-autobiographical form is particularly pertinent in introducing early writing, seeing as how these styles elicited hidden misogynistic structures that ensured the cyclical and progressive oppression of women. In exposing these limitations, Mariama Ba and Buchi Emecheta undeniably created comparative parameters within a new tradition of women's writing which was inherited by third-generation women writers as a means to continue probing and resisting the multi-faceted anxieties as well as challenges faced by contemporary African women. Third generation writers are tasked not only to continue the heritage of their foremothers but to carve new traditions of their own that unrelentingly question systems and strictures around them.

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