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Celebrating New Shades of Black:  
Alternative Aesthetics and  
Locations of Homeliness on the  
Road to Agency in the Me-  
Generation of Female Nigerian  
Authors.

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**UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA**  
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Escuela de Doctorado  
Universidad Zaragoza

# **Celebrating New Shades of Black**

## Alternative Aesthetics and Locations of Homeliness on the Road to Agency in the Me-Generation of Female Nigerian Authors



**María Eugenia Ossana Álvarez**  
PhD Supervisor: María Dolores Herrero Granado  
2021





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2021





To my selfless elephant(s)



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## INTRODUCTION

A long way has been trodden along African letters from 2005 when the Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina published a tongue-in-cheek essay entitled “How to Write about Africa” in *Granta* magazine. By the time Ben Okri offered his view in “Giving the World a New Kind of Literature,” an interview with Ainehi Edoro posted on *Brittle Paper* (2020b), a movement closely likened to a tsunami of African literature had already been witnessed. The former writer was ironically addressing the hackneyed African story — which usually sold well mainly in western middle-class niches. He facetiously harangued young promises to deploy several must-words such as “Tribal,” “Guerrillas,” “Timeless,” and “the Africa as a country” notion. He advised them not to forget to pepper the plots with frantic dancing, taboo subjects, naked breasts, starving flies-ridden children, corrupted continental governments as well as western NGO’s pragmatic good-heartedness. Fleeting touches of wild animals and awe-striking sunsets were to be crowned with a tinge of hope to save the day: the mention of Mandela and rainbows. By contrast, in a more serious although exalted tone, Ben Okri celebrated the possibility of redefining a new African literary canon. He referred to the explosion of African literary forum suffused with anger, together with the recently discovered liberating powers of narrating the continent in a truly African voice. He traced a fictional path which had started with protest and the nascent countries’ identity definition, stepped into social realism and pulled towards such variegated genres as “detective, sci-fi, polyglot, spirit inflected, epic poems, memoirs, autobiographies, travel writing” reaching the grounds for the “hybrid” and “experimental” (Okri 2020). He has placed on the shoulders of the contemporary generations the task of conjuring up “thought” and “vision” through a renewed emphasis on narrative form. A form that could “shape experience” (Okri 2020). Interestingly, Okri has hailed this vibrant moment an African literature Renaissance which could eventually contribute to the improvement of Africans’ lives as well as to bridging the gap in human letters: the missing or, at any rate, scattered African chapter. I fully adhere to and celebrate Okri’s views on African literature. Names such as the Nigerians living in the diaspora Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, Helon Habila and Chis Abani; the Zimbabweans Tsiti Darembenga and NoViolet Bulawayo; or Cameroonian-American Mbolo Mbue are not only instant sales globally but have also reached a substantial level of expertise and depth in their literary craft.

Hence, my budding PhD endeavour was bound to be restricted. My early explorations led me towards the most densely populated country in Africa: Nigeria. I chose to focus on Nigerian *female* writers since presently they are clearly outnumbering their men counterparts' literary productions. Furthermore, another reason behind the narrowing of my research scope was the fact that Nigerian women authors are currently emerging as undoubtedly continental and global referents in a country where women writers had been historically marginal. As Ainehi Egoro contends, these female authors are gradually becoming iconic “Afropolitans” —a term used to designate those who move at ease in the globalised world context. Most of them are fierce advocates for outspoken feminism, queer rights, human rights and are crusaders of political issues such as the global #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and African decolonial ventures —which eventually reached the United Kingdom and the US with the tag #RhodesMustFall. In addition, the Nigerian #BringBackOurGirls to end Islamist Boko Haram abductions or to bring a stop to state and police brutality with the tag #EndSARS protests are just but some examples of the sundry debates they are engaged in (Egoro 2020a).

My undertaking, therefore, seeks to demonstrate that contemporary Nigerian women writers —based in Africa or in the diaspora— are redefining the literary canon of the African country. As the title of the present thesis propounds, I will seek to substantiate through the analysis of three novels, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) by Oyinkan Braithwaite, *A Small Silence* (2019a) by Jumoke Verissimo, and *Freshwater* (2018a) by Akwaeke Emezi, three main variables: firstly, that blackness is a prominent aesthetic topos underpinning their narratives; secondly, that the fictional protagonists endure excruciating circumstances and find healing spaces to assuage their predicament; and thirdly, that they are determined not to be victims, but rather, attempt to emerge as empowered individuals —or at least, as human beings who can forge ahead with their scarred lives. The aforementioned fictions galvanise new aesthetic tropes which involve a fresh —sometimes spiritual, at other times, poetic or scathingly humorous— use of the trope of blackness. Darkness is oftentimes deployed as a locus for individual and collective discovery, as a new centre, as a source of acerbic social criticism or as part of “alternative archives” (Mbembe 2017). In addition, these fictional works also undeniably show that women are defying a staunchly patriarchal environment. Armoured with their words, many Nigerian women writers, and especially the three authors I have singled out, are both creating singular spaces for *homeliness* —a notion akin to home, belonging, family and community but without the burden of geographies,

borders and flags attached— where they could find support and comfort. Nigerian Fourth generation writers create characters which strive to gain agency by contesting stifling structures, by seeking to make sense of these chaotic and unjust times, by mirroring the mayhem and translating it into new aesthetic forms. They resort to alternative narratives unearthing precolonial ontologies, they devise peculiar sisterly bonds for healing on the road to regain full agency —although they may have to negotiate some ethical grounds on the way.

My research will thus seek to evince how this late generation of women authors —also known as the Me-Generation— enters into conversation with previous female Nigerian writers and are brave enough to push the limits of their imagined worlds. The methodology I used for this purpose has involved extensive reading and assessment of the most iconic literary texts and authors in Nigeria. Likewise, I have proceeded with research on critical theory related to the different historical generations. I have delved on issues related to narrative structure, narratorial voice and focalisation, characterisation and dominant aesthetic tropes. In addition, I have used theory frameworks from narratology, critical theory —such as the transmodernity-metamodernism paradigm— traditional and new trends in trauma studies, as well as literary theory in relation to history, sociology and philosophy. Furthermore, I have explored animism, some aspects of the pre-colonial Igbo world-view, the South African notion of *ubuntu* and the Akan concept of *musuo* in order to offer alternative stances from African archives.

Consequently, I have divided my PhD analysis into four chapters. In a definitely extended fashion, I will devote the first chapter to delineate the previous three Nigerian literary generations —defined as First-, Second- and Third-Generation of Nigerian writers (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005). In addition, I will introduce the main concerns and contributions of the current generation —dubbed as the *Me-Generation*. I will propose that this group of mostly millennial-born writers are mainly concerned with an inner journey of self-discovery and *sui generis* use of genres and thematic options. This fledgling generation appears in evident contrast with the others, which were primarily committed to the Nigerian independence project and the acrimonious critique of the extant postcoloniality circumstance of the country. On their peripheral corner, the women trailblazers sought to shake off —even though rather timidly— the strictures of marriage, motherhood and submission to men. I have deemed it necessary to devote some extended space to this contextualisation — together with its main literary and historical debates— since I consider that only

having an all-encompassing idea of what men —and especially women— have previously created, believed in and struggled for, retrospectively, could lead one to fully appraise the gamut of the Me-Generation contribution *within* the literary Nigerian milieu. By the same token, I humbly presume that this extensive, though by no means exhaustive, analysis will provide a useful overview of the historically literary production of a country with which western readers may not be widely acquainted. The second chapter will be dedicated to analyse the novel *My Sister, the Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite (2018). I postulate that this young writer has concocted a singular fictional locus where genre crossings are evident. Braithwaite has also deftly pushed aesthetic and ethical boundaries so as to enrich and contest patriarchal violence exertions. By the same token, she has yarned a plot in the voice of an unstable narrator who explains her debatable choices in a tone wittily mottled with black humour. Braithwaite’s novel, I contend, is a hybrid straddling domestic thriller and noir fiction with strokes of romance while transpiring derisive irony and social satire. An utterly peculiar sisterly bond emerges as a familial space for healing. The third chapter will be dedicated to the exploration of Jumoke Verissimo’s *A Small Silence* (2019). Verissimo offers a lyric contestation of historically discredited tropes in the West: darkness and silence. In so doing, I will argue, she endows her narratorial voice with the capacity to knit a weft of two characters’ crisscrossing, both searing experiences, and childhood remembrances. The two protagonists devise a singular space for memory and humanity sharing. Verissimo is an ideological writer. As such, historical remembrance is part and parcel of her story. What is more, the reader is invited to witness as well as to elucidate possible routes to individual and communal sanity. Eventually, I will concentrate on the debut novel of Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (2018a). The most experimental of the three fictions, *Freshwater* will be analysed with a view to demonstrating how its literary world reveals a fluctuating coexistence of Igbo ontological narratives together with western discourse palimpsestic emergences. As is evinced with the other two novels, this fiction is also difficult to categorise into clear-cut genres and is midway into auto-fiction and animist realism. I will strive to exemplify how the dexterous multiple narratorial —and predominantly demigod— voices immerse the reader in a world of ethereal and fragmented temporality, traumatic occurrences and an entirely original spiritual journey towards deliverance. Emezi zigzags along numen, identity, gender transition and motherhood contestation issues. As much as the other two novels, *Freshwater* also follows a road to gender empowerment and self-awareness.



I will now turn to further refine the task I hopefully wish to demonstrate. For this reason, I will focus on the broad similarities and differences between the chosen fictions. In addition, I will briefly delineate my position as reader. Eventually, I will delve on the somehow overt leanings I have taken towards literary criticism from the African continent in an attempt to de-centre, not only literary narratives, but also their critical assessment positions. As has been aforementioned, the three novels introduce ingenuous thematisation around blackness. Black subjectivity and literariness is redefined as a humour device, as a locus of introspection and self-knowledge and as a pre-colonial ontology with its demigods and whimsical energy imbrications. The difficulty in categorising the novels, especially *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, and even more so *Freshwater*, is another recurrent feature. *A Small Silence* could be read in more traditional terms, although it does not strictly adhere to social realism narratives. The commingling between lyric language and the introduction of unconventional tropes certainly places it as a well-deserved priority read. The three novels could be jointly considered as *narratives of the limit*, that is, fictional works which seek to de-centre orthodox aesthetics and ethical concerns and engage the readers in possible conversations away from western canonical strictures. The three novels deal with trauma and its aftermath. However, I believe that the narratives do not entirely fit into the characteristic postmodern style of lacunae and intruding remembrances of traditional western PTSD trauma literature. The protagonists Korede (Braithwaite), Desire (Verissimo) and Ada/Asughara (Emezi) do not deliberately *avoid* their wounds, they return and swivel round their pasts, which are very much alive and kicking, while they seek to counteract their pathos. The three fictional worlds unfurl in a liquid-like architecture of time. The plots navigate along dreams and childhood memories within a recognisable but somehow unhurried forward move. Furthermore, especially the female protagonists, strive to find spaces for sharing their experience. In *My Sister, the Serial Killer* homeliness is a blood bond between siblings. In *A Small Silence*, it is in a dark and silent room in a run-down flat that the protagonists —Desire and Prof— meet on a regular basis and liberate their memories without actually uttering them. In *Freshwater*, this liminal space is an alternative precolonial Igbo locus where the protagonist Ada finds her multiple ogbanje brothersisters. In addition, all the novels depict forthright characters who *will* offer resistance to patriarchal violence, and will fight back, even when this struggle may compromise their ethical mind-sets. The fact that the main protagonists in the novels are not passive usually brings them close to amoral behaviour or, at least, at moral intersections plagued with guilt and shame. However, most of the protagonists' reactions appear to be triggered by

their primal pull towards survival, or the protection of the ones they love. There is a persistent notion in the three narratives of harmful paternal figures —Father in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Father or Babangida (yet again) in *A Small Silence*, and Soren in *Freshwater*. So much so that, Freudian facile undertones aside, the main characters seek to *kill the father* (Herrero 2021) or, at any rate, *emasculate* several male protagonists who emerge as clownish or puppet-like — Saint Vincent and Yshwa (Emezi); Prof, Irete and their respective fathers (Verissimo); Femi, Peter, Somto and Gboyega (Braithwaite). The female protagonists of these fictions are embarked in journeys which are both difficult and cathartic. Interestingly, these novels seem to have no evident closure and the protagonists remain, in all likelihood, trapped in mazes of their own device. Last but not least, most of the narrative voices appear to be unreliable, thus, they succeed in entangling the reader in their back and forth, present and past, real and fictive disquisitions.

As was previously stated, I will seek to outline how the chosen fictions differ from one another so as to reflect on their singular contributions. When it comes to regarding realist prose, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and *A Small Silence* could be said to adhere to a more orthodox storytelling. They are not, however, the social realism crafted by previous Nigerian generations. Braithwaite's prose assumes at times a rather gothic imprint and, at others, a twirling structural discombobulation. Verissimo's prose is a long poem. In the same vein, although with a more feral sediment, Emezi's narrative flows along lyrical undertones. In addition, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and *A Small Silence* undergird a plainly feminist pull, whereas *Freshwater* advocates for gender transition and non-binary gender issues. As a cathartic relief, the first two novels incorporate humour to mollify the dramatic tension in their plots. *Freshwater*, on the contrary, reveals unfettered tragedy. Braithwaite's could be said to be a quick read —although deceptively so— while *A Small Silence* and *Freshwater* invite the reader to savour them piecemeal. While focalisation is plural and alternating in Verissimo's and Emezi's novels, Braithwaite's summons the reader to share —and eventually doubt— the quirky mind of the main protagonist, Korede. *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and *Freshwater* have been massive in sales in the West and have been translated into several languages. *A Small Silence*'s path is slower and, in my opinion, probably will resist the passing of time in a more enduring manner. Akwaeke Emezi has been turned into an iconic and extremely media-exposed spokesperson for the transgender collective in the West. However, she has been criticised by Nigerian critics and cosmology experts for allegedly “manipulating” Igbo ontology to explain her personal issues. She is

also accused of intending to direct her readership into believing what is deemed a very peculiar and distorted interpretation of the *ogbanje* condition (Ozo-Irabor 2021). It is also worth pointing out that Braithwaite and Emezi are multifaceted artists. Braithwaite is a poem performer and graphic designer while Emezi is also a performance artist and short film producer.

In the final section that follows, I will briefly refer to the position I advocate as a reader. Having lived and worked most of my life in a region of the so-called Third-World, I cannot but feel identified with many of the plights the Nigerian authors expose: the economic and political instability of the country; the impunity and immorally overt corruption of political actors, union leaders' lifelong positions and wealth boasting demeanour together with the ideologically patronised —and appointed by the powers that be— in the justice system; the systematic disregard for crumbling public institutions; the patriarchal mandates of selfless and devoted motherhood; the historical and structural breach between the rich and the utterly despondent and the insecurity that arises thereby; the increasingly curtailed cultural options and the daily stress of living in societies which do not seem to cater for the wellbeing of their citizens. In other words, societies which are in urgent need of a change and sanitation of their iniquitous foundations. Albeit with the necessary consideration of local idiosyncrasies and aspersions, it is my intention to provide my opinions and, hopefully, enriching reading assessment of the novels, not from a place of privilege, but from the position of one who claims to humbly understand certain communal dynamics and the *normal anomaly* these authors seek to subscribe. Eventually, I want to stress the fact that, as far as has been personally possible, I have sought to explore and claim literary theorisations by African critics. Prominent among them are names such as Simon Gikandi, Pius Adesanmi, Ato Quayson, Tejumola Olaniyan, Harry Garuba, Chielozona Eze, Akin Adesokan, Anthony Kwame Appiah, Mukoma Wa Ngugi, Achille Mbembe, Augustine Assah, Amatoritsero Ede, Toyin Falola, Ikhide Ikheola, Biodun Jeyifo, Catherine Acholonu, Mary Kolawole, Molar Leslie-Ogundipe, Obioma Nnaemeka, Caroline Rooney, Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Minna Salami, to name the only most salient in an ever-growing and extensive list. Their viewpoints are, at times, in agreement with western theorisations, at others, rightfully reclaiming the necessary and urgent, but by no means easy, exercise of decolonising minds and cultural practices. A final remark may be worth mentioning: it is my hope that this discovery journey of Nigerian letters I have undertaken could be as challenging, at times overwhelming, enriching and enjoyable for the reader as it has been for me.



# **INTRODUCTION TO NIGERIAN LITERATURE: FIRST-, SECOND-, THIRD- AND ME-GENERATIONS**

## **1. INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE: RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS AND DEBATES**

The present chapter will be devoted to providing a general overview of the main literary issues that have shaped West African literature from decolonisation times onwards. I will only restrict this preliminary section to literary contentions and divides which have ensued in the English-speaking colonised regions of West Africa. I am well aware of the oftentimes swift and impoverishing consideration of “Africa-as-a-Country” western construction, which blurs and utterly disrespects the rich diversity of each specific African context. That said, the aim of this introductory section is to focus on general issues that have been analysed by a sundry number of African theorists and authors as having had some influence on the local literary productions. Thus, I will refer to the colonial factor as the paradoxical origin of most West African writing, to the pervasive influence of the Marxist and socialist ideologies underpinning a great number of fictional works —especially during the stages of decolonisation and during the military regimes that were in power thereafter. I will also consider the debates on the use of pre-colonial traditional aesthetics and the hotly disputed decision on the choice of African or English language in search of a genuinely Africanist literature. I will briefly explore the West African writers’ concern with the inclusion of elements of their oral inheritance within the written genres. The main reason for this introductory segment is to provide a broader framework so as to better understand the continental parallel literary discussions which emerged in connection to the budding African Literatures in English. This analysis will, by no means, be exhaustive. However, it is my intention to delineate the main controversies that have arisen in the complex endeavour of attempting to define a West African literary voice.

In the following section, I will ponder on the difficulty of recognising an all-encompassing literature which can define specifically Nigerian identity traits. Subsequently, I will analyse the main variables deployed in relation to the labelling and differentiation factors which can help to construe the different generations of Nigerian literature. Eventually, I will describe the so-called three generations. Firstly, a brief historical contextualisation will be provided so as to purview the connection of socio-political events with the literary productions of

the time. Secondly, I will analyse the main literary prominent literary figures of each group, especially concentrating on women authors who have contributed to shaping and sparking an alleged on-going conversation with the contemporary Me-Generation female Nigerian writers.

### **1.1. Conditions of Existence: The Colonial Gaze and Empire Structures**

For all intents and purposes, West African literature is said to have been born after (and because of) the continental contact with the European colonial enterprise. Although an African pre-colonial literature —both oral and written— existed in Arabic, Amharic, Swahili and other African languages, what is now an established artistic domain known as modern African literature could not have emerged without the incursion of foreign imperialism. The Kenyan postcolonial critic Simon Gikandi contends that “[m]odern African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism” (2000, 379). African writing, either in African or European languages, was largely the product of colonial institutions which flourished after the Berlin Conference in 1884-5 and from the late 1950s and early 1960s on the brink of the decolonisation synergies which spread all over the continent. In fact, the radical change exerted by colonialism on African societies remains a central issue in the literary soul of the continent. The starting point may be found in institutions such as the Christian mission, the colonial school and the university. As early as the eighteenth century, former slave writers such as Olaudah Equiano deployed “writing both as the mark of the African’s humanity and as a point of entry into the culture of modernity” (Gates 1985, 9-10). As Gikandi points out, notions such as *sovereignty* and *autonomy* underpin most decolonisation literary texts. The iconic Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe strongly emphasised that “one of the key motivations for producing an African literature was to restore the moral dignity and cultural autonomy of the African in the age of decolonisation” (Achebe in Gikandi 2000, 381). For most West African writers, thus, independence times meant the possibility of recovering erased or ignored cultures and institutions and a unique opportunity to exercise their sequestered agency. Most interestingly, decolonisation provided many African authors with the chance to attain modernity. As many theorists came to realise, although the colonial inheritance had been adamantly enforced, the so-called traditional local fabric of the different African communities had not been expunged by the contact with European structures. Thus, this simultaneous co-existence of colonial and traditional mores is shown in the literature of the time.

As Gikandi observes, “the founders of African literature were the most Europeanised. What this meant was that African literature was not initially intended to provide a radical critique of European rule; rather, it was a discursive mode through which Africans could try to represent and mediate their location both inside and outside colonial culture” (2000, 383). On the one hand, this emerging literature presupposed “the enchantment of literacy,” the contact with “power, authority and influence” (Gikandi, 383) which first generation African civil servants experienced. These first writers are said to have been the first interlocutors between colonial culture and the masses. On the other hand, the cultural discourse of colonisation constituted a “monumental literary event” (384). Simply put, colonial conquest not only meant brutal military domination and economic exploitation but also the African internalisation of the “narratives of conquest” (384). Hence, the said narratives of national integrity and self-determination —the western notions of nation, culture and the individual— were the ones that emancipatory postcolonial movements used against colonial power.

In partial contrast to Gikandi’s position —and supplementing it, the Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe proposes the *invented* origin of African literature rather than its emergence as an “original project within the scholarly tradition” (2007, 60).<sup>1</sup> Mudimbe mentions that the anthropological texts about Africa written in the 18th century were mainly “commentaries on silent and [African] irrational organisations” which emphasised two main issues: “the ideological background of the [colonial] authors and the relative anonymity of the objects of the studies” (62). Consequently, he hypothesises that it was against this discursive label of exoticism, in tune with the binary civilisation/primitiveness, that the reality of an African author evolved. Moreover, Mudimbe’s main contention is that, in spite of the great complexity and massiveness of African writing, an evident *standardisation* and *uniformity* can be witnessed and perused. He claims that a dichotomy underpins what is categorised as contemporary African literature, which could be summarised as follows: First, *form* and *content* of oral literature are translated into a monocultural experience, “still called ‘primitive’ civilisation in anthropology” (63). Second, Christianisation brought about new literary expressions in African and European languages which appear to describe “the contradictions and the problems implied by the metamorphosis signified by colonisation” (63). Third,

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<sup>1</sup> Mudimbe’s hypothesis was put forward in his seminal book *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988.

although post independence African literature supposed an internal and major historical and sociological asset, its possibility of existence, according to Mudimbe, depends on the exteriority of this literature, that is, on the conditions of production and circulation provided and controlled by the West.<sup>2</sup> He critically asserts that a serious consideration and exegesis on African literature and literary criticism has to start by analysing their very conditions of existence, which in his terms have been deeply conditioned by the erstwhile coloniser's gaze and the ongoing neocolonial editorial production and circulation.

## **1.2. Marxism and Postcolonial African Literature: The African Writer's Burden**

In spite of the fact that many African literary critics have cast aspersions on Marxism on the grounds of its universalising discourse of progress, its penchant for stigmatising non-western peoples and values —or blatantly ignoring them, as is the case with Africa— its dogmatism, and its failure to account for the incompleteness of power dynamics or social structural contradictions, the Marxist influence on West African milieus encompasses and transcends the literary realms. The Marxist purview has embraced state-citizen relations, the dynamics of hegemonic discourses in the agency of national elites and the “dialectical interplay between society-as-context and literature-as-product” (Olaniyan and Quayson 2007, 461). In “Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature” Omafume Onoge proposes an approach to literature rooted in “an understanding of cultural consciousness” (Onoge 2007, 471). In other words, for Onoge literature implies and should urge a class struggle perspective. So much so that for him literary productions should be judged beyond formal and thematic variables. Instead, he suggests “a consideration of the very institutional processes of art creation and art-criticism” and the “democratization of the structures of artistic production and criticism” (472). To put it simply, when concerned with the work of playwrights, he advocates for a literary production and criticism which is in opposition to neo-colonial means of art production, and for the conversion of people into creators rather than consumers of art. Writing two decades after the continental independence movements, Onoge argued that the African writer's burden was —and had been— the betrayal of this inherited mission: to change his/her society's structural flaws. Whenever authors shifted to purely *individual concerns*, he

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<sup>2</sup> Occident and West are used as umbrella terms to refer to European and North American power and cultural core discourses in opposition to peripheral stances.



complained, they were bound to confront criticism for not being committed to the role of a teacher—a widely acknowledged manner of contributing to counteracting neocolonialism. As was mentioned previously, culture has been a potent colonial domination instrument which African scholars have considered constitutive of the very struggle against such system. Therefore, literature has been historically imbricated within the discourses of history and culture in a “dynamic synthesis” which aims to solve conflicts “in the search for survival and progress” (Cabral 2007, 486).

As Olaniyan and Quayson observe in “Writer, Writing and Function” (2007)—a chapter of their massive anthology on African literary criticism—African authors provide two possible explanations for the dominant conception of literature as a social pathfinder and agglutinant. First, they claim that since African literature emerged as a European *counter*-discourse, the notion of art for art’s sake is regarded with deprecation by African writers. Secondly, many authors adhere to the role of the artist as a teacher and “the voice of vision of his own time” (Soyinka 1967, 20). In his much-quoted essay “The Novelist as a Teacher,” Chinua Achebe rejects the European role of the writer as an artist living on the fringes of society, or in revolt against it. Regarding the relationship of the writers and their audience, he assumes they live in the same society. He further acknowledges the fact that much of his audience may be western since, he ironically observes, “African readers where they exist at all are only interested in reading textbooks” (2007, 103). He eventually emphasises that African authors do not have to write having in mind a foreign audience. Allegedly, the most prominent argument of his essay is that the role of the African writer should be to “counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better” (105). With a tone of complacency, he eventually remarks:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God’s behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don’t see that the two need be mutually exclusive. (105)

Stephanie Newell sustains that from the post-independent Ibadan-Ife universities generation—of which the authors Chinua Achebe and the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, and literary critics such as Biodun Jeyifo and Babafemi

Osofisan were prominent members— to the generation of poets after the Nigerian civil (Biafran) war (1967-1970), “Marxism has proved to be a resilient West African discourse for over half a century for other, subtle reasons relating to the complex relationship between literature, history, politics, anti-colonialism, the concept of ‘tradition,’ and the aesthetic expectations of audiences in the region” (2009, 165). However, Newell claims that a more socialist and African humanist critical stance has emerged in recent continental literature and literary theory. A revisiting of Léopold Senghor’s *Négritude* notions of “multiracial reconciliation and conviviality” implying a respect for difference and complementarity is proposed by the South African critic Kwaku Asante-Darko (2000, 152). By the same token, the iconoclastic Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare proclaims that the world is currently afraid of exerting an idealist and humanist ethos (Newell 2009, 210). These new African humanists focus on the plight of ordinary people, and highlight the “political agency of neglected and oppressed figures in history” (166). In addition, Newell considers the expectations of West African audiences. She claims that readers/spectators are clearly influenced by the role of authors as “moral educators who can solve an individual’s personal problems, offer advice on relationships, solve dilemmas, transform readers’ personal world for the better, and communicate lessons about life” (168). Hence, the figure of the writer is frequently associated to the Achebean *griot*, both an entertainer and an educator, who is usually critic of the ruler elites. Simply put, the study of the creative process of writing literature should bring to the fore its role as a mediator on the road to praxis, people’s agency and change.

### **1.3. Caliban’s Quandary: The Language of African Literature**

The plight of the slave in *The Tempest* flaunts a curse on his master Prospero for having taught him his language, a tongue with which he could jinx him at ease. Likewise, the fulcrum of the debate on the choice of language in West African literature was a tug of war which, on the one hand, led African writers to consider English as the unifying factor of literary productions while, on the other, it meant a cultural betrayal and loss. The situation was plaintively expressed by the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo: “[t]here is pathos in writing about people, the majority of whom will never be in a position to enjoy or judge you. And there is some wonder in not letting that or anything else stop you from writing. Indeed, it is almost a miracle, in trying and succeeding somewhat to create an aesthetic vacuum” (Aidoo 2007, 512). In many regions of Africa, colonial education meant learning English as the carrier of scientific,

philosophical learning. African languages were spoken in familiar and communal contexts. In fact, fluent English presupposed a warrant of social qualification to thrive. As the Kenyan writer Mukoma Wa Ngũgĩ argues, “the anticolonial struggle then was for greater access to, not the doing away with, colonial structures and institutions” (2018, 37). African languages represented the past and the English culture the possibility of entering into a modern future. The Nigerian scholar and activist Obi Wali, who also fervently defended the choice of African languages in literature, grimly concluded that “African writers have borrowed from the European tradition both form and content and [that] African literature is a mere appendage of European literature with African themes” (Wali in Ngũgĩ, 40). Wali also observes that “less than one per cent of the Nigerian people have had access to, or ability to understand, Wole Soyinka’s *Dance in the Forest*” (Wali 2007, 282), which is considered a Nigerian national epic play. So he raised the uncomfortable question: “For whom was the African writer writing?” (Wali in Ngũgĩ, 40).

### 1.3.1. Conferences to Define an African Literary Identity

The necessity to discuss and define a continental literature and identify the social and political role of it led to the organisation of many conferences whose agendas proposed discussions related to the category of African literature as such, the role of the writers —either continental or in the diaspora— the relation between African and European aesthetics or the political aim of literary writing, among the most recurrent. In 1956 the literary journal *Présence Africaine* based in Paris gathered many scholars such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, George Lamming, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Josephine Baker and Jean-Paul Sartre. In the same year, the German literary critic Janheinz Jahn started the journal *Black Orpheus*. The university of Nigeria brought together Nigerian writers such as Achebe and Soyinka to form the *Mbari Club* whose main concern was “to support the arts: to organize drama and musical festivals, to publish literature, to mount exhibitions, and to hold art classes” (Ngũgĩ 2018, 3).

However, the Makerere convention which took place in Uganda at Kampala in 1962 was to prove the most far-reaching in the definition of African literature. While Africa was toiling with decolonisation struggles, the conference suggested a general schedule related to “the African Writers of English Expression” (Ngũgĩ 2018, 3). The young writers who attended — Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, James Ngũgĩ, Bloke

Modisane and Ezequiel Mphahlele among the main participants —noticeably, only two women were present: Grace Ogot and Rebeca Njau— defined their most cherished goal: to agree on the parameters of African literary aesthetics which could be speedily put into service of the political and cultural contest of decolonisation and national independences. According to Ngũgĩ (2018), the use of English was never questioned as the chosen language of expression. In fact, no writer of African languages was invited and no writing in an African writing in translation was debated. As Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o claimed, “nearly all the writers present were the products of the English Department. We had been socialised into taking English as the linguistic norm, our literary starting point. We never questioned the linguistic premise” (Thiong’o 2015, email interview). The question remained as to how best make English represent and conjure up the African imagination. As Ngũgĩ contends, a tendency to uniform literature across multiple generations “has suffered a kind of Africa-Is-a-Country literary criticism that, in place of diverse aesthetics, reads it as anthropology—as representative of a single country, culture and language—coming from a single body politic” (2018, 13). The South African author Ezekiel Mphahlele contended that during the Makerere conference literary criticism seemed to place the emphasis on African sociology rather than on literature (Mphahlele 1963). “The Africa-is-a-country criticism does not know what to do with writers outside the Makerere tradition,” Ngũgĩ emphasises (2018, 13). He has coined the term “English Metaphysical Empire” to refer to the standards set by the Makerere writers which were, later, supported by publishing tendencies and the western readership. Ngũgĩ claims that the end of British rule in the continent was superseded by a cultural clasp. Heinemann’s African Series (AWS) and the canonisation of the Makerere writers “made it possible for the Standard English-only consensus to become the norm” (2018, 17). What is more, the realist novel has remained ever since the main narrative mode.

### 1.3.2. The Achebe-Thiong’o Debate

Chinua Achebe was a firm believer that the choice of English would enable the definition of a national literature. He was probably thinking about avoiding intestine tribal and ethnic rivalries while, at the same time, attaining a broader audience —either continental or foreign. However, Achebe warned, some caveats were to be had: “The English language will be able to carry the weight of African experience” (1975, 62). Thus, for the English language to carry this nuance, “it will have to be a new English,” he contended, “still in full communion with the ancestral home but altered to suit its new African

surroundings” (1975, 62). A decade later, he lamented: “the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature leaves me more cold now that it did when I first spoke about it [...]. And yet I am unable to see a significantly different or a more emotionally comfortable resolution to the problem” (1975, xiv).

Opposing this contention was the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who had written several novels in English, and subsequently transitioned into his mother tongue, Gikuyu. In his essay “The Language of African Literature,” Thiong’o criticised the omissions of the Makerere attendants and their exclusion of any debate related to the use of African languages in African literature. He claimed that the main aims of the convention were to define literature in terms of *subject matter* and the *racial origins* of the authors. The role of language and culture and the ensuing issue of audience was not duly considered. After describing his own school experience of alienation —by which he was taught to separate daily experience in his local Gikuyu and his intellectual musings echoing the works of the canonical western literary masters— he questioned the role of language and culture in the definition of self-identity. He argues that the close relation between culture and language allows for the gradual accumulation of “moral, ethical and aesthetic values” with which a group see themselves and their place in the universe (Thiong’o in Olaniyan and Quayson 2007, 293). The intertwined relation between culture and language could be traced, he pondered, within three variables. To start with, he emphasised that culture not only reflects history but also *generates* it. The second aspect he considers is that culture and language devolve a self-image of a people —either individually or collectively. The third argument he analysed considers how reality is conjured up through the particular manifestation of a “specific community with a specific history” (293). “How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship with nature and to other human beings” (293). For Thiong’o the alienation produced by the imposition of compulsory English at school —and the subsequent disqualifying effort to erase African languages— was a *disassociation* between the daily life, which was usually conducted in local languages, and an external higher imposed culture whose centre of power was Europe. Moreover, he contended that the neocolonial child was gradually taught to disregard his own world and culture/language; and thus, to see himself/herself in an identity quandary.

### 1.3.3. “Africanising” English

Thiong’o’s son, the writer Mukoma Wa Ngũgĩ, retrieves his father’s arguments and recurrently proposes that a “national literature cannot be in a language alien to that culture, particularly when that language has been imposed through conquest” (2018, 43). Achebe’s position was considered a pragmatic compromise since, given the quantity of African languages spoken in the continent, English could be regarded as a way of bringing those peoples together. In addition, since English was an international language, it could be used to consolidate the African struggle. In consequence, the challenge was how to *africanise* English so that it could fully convey the African experience. According to Ngũgĩ, there were two possibilities. One was to Africanise English and the other was “doing violence to English” (Marechera in Ngũgĩ 2018, 47). Achebe’s position was to respect the language as a medium fashioning it so as to describe particular African mores. On the other hand, the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera considered “doing battle with English” (48). Marechera claimed that for “a black writer the language is very racist; you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga duels with language before you make it all that you want it to do” (Marechera 2013, 7). Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o argues that a writer has “a duty to their mother tongues” since, he contends, the choice of language is not interchangeable or transactional and when choices in language are made there are consequences for the literary tradition. Another implication which he ruminates over is that “English could not carry African culture” (Ngũgĩ 2018, 50). In his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Thiong’o argues that “language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (1986, 16).

Fifty-eight years after the Makerere Conference, the question of language seems to have lost its appeal since most African contemporary authors, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, claim that they “take ownership of English”; that is, they consider English as sufficiently domesticated to be regarded as their own language. “English is mine,” she emphasises, “[m]y English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English” (2016, *thetrentonline.com*). Returning to the metaphor of Caliban, in the same manner he was able to describe the wonders and beauties of his colonised island, contemporary African writers and critics claim to have tamed English to fully express their circumstance.

## 1.4. In Search of the Lost Voice: The Debate on Indigenous Aesthetics

During the decades of and after independence, many African writers believed that colonisation with its structures —materialised in the Christian, western education, bureaucracy and political system— had robbed African societies of their “authentic” ways of doing and living. Therefore, there was an urge to return to these traditional systems and beliefs which were generally termed as Nativism. In literature, the imperative was materialised in a re-visiting of pre-colonial mores either in form or content. However, *what* was to be considered authentically traditional, and *how* such a new homecoming approach was to be achieved, once again, generated heated controversy.

### 1.4.1. Léopold Senghor and Négritude

Although Senghor was Senegalese and wrote in French, his philosophical and aesthetic formulations known as Négritude were the first approach to a pan-African-centred humanist theory. The Guyanan poet Léon Damas, the Martiniquan politician Aimé Césaire as well as the Senegalese writers Birago Diop and Camara Laye were also associated to the movement. Senghor was influenced by the western epistemological gradual distancing from rationality —which had arisen during the Enlightenment. The new notions of objectivity, the novel distinction between matter and energy emanating from the sciences of Heisenberg and the philosophy of Bergson were said to have greatly shaped his theorisations. As was postulated, the universe was not composed of matter and energy, but of spirit-matter. Senghor developed an approach which encompassed a philosophy of being and dialogue. He contended that

the African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially static, objective, dichotomic; it is, in fact, dualistic, in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is founded on separation and opposition: on analysis and conflict. The African, on the other hand, conceives the world beyond the diversity of its forms, as fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis. (2007, 198)

Senghor argued that, for the Africans, matter is only a system of signs translated into a single reality which he called “being.” Being was simultaneously spirit, life and force. The universe, he proposed, was “a network of life forces” which emanated from God who was the “source of all forces” (2007, 198). Senghor also believed in the dialectical relation between the individual and his/her

community. He argued that all human activities —family, tribal, national, world and universal—should be intertwined and helped by what he referred to as *subordinating* lower forces —mineral, vegetable, and animal. The relation of all these forces to man and the human society were imbricated with the Divine Being “through the intermediary of Ancestral Beings” (2007; original emphasis). Regarding art, he further contended that, for the contemporary European and African, a work of art should resemble the subject/object embrace which evinces the deep assemblage between man and the world.

Négritude was mordantly criticised by African writers and theorists on the grounds of using the same western discourse, but reversed into a positive dimension of the erstwhile negative image of Africa. In Abiola Irele’s terms Négritude was an African mediated discourse whose roots could be traced into Freudianism, Marxism, Surrealism and Romanticism (Irele 1981, 27). However, one of the harshest criticisms arose from women writers such as the Senegalese author Mariama Bâ. Senghor’s excessive idealisation of the African woman as a mythical mother —as the national icon of the continental “Mother Africa”— did little to recognise women’s political and economic commitment to the independence causes and their ensuing unequal situation after colonialism. All in all, despite its excessively aestheticised and romantic outlook, Négritude was an attempt to theorise on an African-centred continental and diaspora experience.

#### 1.4.2. On Nativism

The Nigerian critic Adélékè Adéèkó points out that the nativist trend observed in anglophone African literary criticism since the Makerere conference and the Heinemann African Series editions could be charted through the emergence of three main literary theory trends towards the native ways. He defined them as *thematic* or *classical nativism*, *structuralist* or *speculative nativism* and *linguistic* or *artefact nativism*. Classical Nativism foregrounds “the *local* and *public* subject matter” rejecting the so-called universalism in literary criticism standards. This tendency also espoused that aesthetics should privilege a “translucent communication” (2007, 236, original emphasis). The classical nativist authors were supposed to extol specific African lyrical rhythms, cultivate intense emotions and deploy concrete African imagery while rejecting an individualistic “puny ego” (Chinweizu 1980, 252). By contrast, linguistic nativism proposed “idealistic interpretations of the *formal dimensions* of ‘traditional’ theater, fiction, and poetry upon which contemporary practices



ought to be based” (Adéèkó 2007, 236). Alternatively, the structuralist nativists “search for the identity markers of modern African writing in the structural and hermeneutic *principles* that are derivable from traditional high arts such as rituals, divination chants, esoteric lyric, and the secular narratives of the Sahelian griot” (237; original emphasis). Soyinka could be an iconic writer belonging to this group. The linguistic nativists demanded “a radical translation of all arts that aspire to be called African into indigenous languages and cultural conventions”; that is, they called for a culture free from European languages (Adéèkó, 236). The main concern of the linguistic nativist was “inventing effective pedagogies for national development and creating instruments of rapid growth for literary artefacts in the indigenous languages” (Adéèkó, 237). Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o could be considered a defender of this stance. He is said to have condemned all African literary production—including his own—written in European languages. Adéèkó emphasises that the important lesson from all nativists in relation to the history of literary criticism does not lie in their originality or new poetics proposals, but in the philosophical challenge which implies devising a way to measure how a distinctive literary discourse could classically *persuade* and, at the same time, prove an immaterial conspicuous figuration (240). Conversely, the Ghanaian-American philosopher Anthony Appiah criticised the classical nativist position on the grounds of ignoring the “multiplicity of the heritage of the African writer” (2007, 245). He adhered to Gayatri Spivak’s conception of the “Third World intellectual” as a hybrid product of the historical encounter with the West. Instead of proposing a prescriptive literary theoretical approach, he suggested a *productive* mode of reading which could offer an alternative reflection on the particulars of African literature. Consequently, he put forward a reading which could acknowledge that the modern African text could neither be considered “as the simple continuation of an indigenous tradition nor as a mere intrusion of the metropole” (Appiah 2007, 247) but an entirely new multi-layered new writing.

#### 1.4.3. The Chinweizu-Soyinka Debate

In his highly rhetorical essay “Prodigals, Come Home!” (first published in 1973), Chinweizu warned African authors of the dangers of “masquerading cultural servitude” as “cultural development” (2007, 219). In addition, he added that many of his contemporary poet writers—either using English or African languages—were not dominated by an African sensibility derived from the African tradition. To him, these un-African characteristics were evinced in the use of form, attitude and sensitiveness. He valued the famous Nigerian poet

Christopher Okigbo's abandonment of the "meta-language and shallow ornament of contemporary British poetry" (Leroy cited in Chinweizu, 221). In turn, he focused on the language of African tropes with its characteristic flora and fauna. He contended that western Modernism had neutralised Nature as a central subject matter, it insisted on perversity and effrontery, it showed a fascination with nihilism; that is, a breakdown with traditional values, seeing "human existence as meaningless" (Chinweizu, 223). These traits, he assured, were neither part of African history nor the African past. Thus, he raised the question of for whom African writers direct their productions, or which tradition they consciously choose to function in. Chinweizu's inveighing was clearly aimed at Wole Soyinka's convoluted and excessively postmodernising literary style. Eventually, he propelled a diatribe for the prodigals to stop masquerading and, like Christopher Okigbo, return home.

In response, in his tellingly ironical essay entitled "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition" (first edited in 1988), Soyinka sustained that "superficial traditionalists" have wielded the stick of traditional aesthetics "with destructive opportunism rather than with intelligent concern for poetry" (Soyinka 2007, 227). He contended that African art—in its sundry manifestations—was not necessarily anathema to individual creativity and private reflection. In order to prove his argumentation, he mentioned how Mbari-house<sup>3</sup> sculptors isolated themselves "for a period of self-communion," awaiting divine inspiration to translate it into mud form afterwards. From the prodigal literary offspring allegedly having lost their aesthetic and formal compass—and the beacons pointing towards the nativist path—to the hybrid child of the postcolony, what becomes evident is that the return to a pristine pre-colonial aestheticised literary past was a difficult, as well as a rather meandering road, to tread.

### **1.5. The African Novel and Orature**

Although the contemporary African novel seems to be at its peak of popularity these days and has a considerable readership in the continent and abroad, the oral artistic manifestations—drama, oral poetry, performance, praise singers, oral historians and storytellers—have had a long and well-established

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<sup>3</sup> Mbari art was developed by Owerri/Igbo people. Traditionally, Mbari is a two-storey house which contains human life-size, mud statues offered as a sacrifice to the goddess Ala. See "In Mbari Art, a Celebration of Life" by Obi-Young (2020).

popularity in contemporary Africa. Consequently, as Stephanie Newell contends, a definition of literature, especially in West Africa, cannot be only circumscribed to the written text. Orality has been —and still very much is— part of West African culture. The undeniable role of *griots* as narrators, masters of ceremonies, genealogists and historians, composers and social critics is part of the continental artistic baggage. The griot is usually an important figure in the community who can “adjust and modify material to accommodate the immediate, contemporary audience” (Newell 2009, 61). In other words, s/he may downplay certain historical facts of his/her tale or choose to embellish the text accordingly if a prominent member of the community is present in the audience. Moreover, the griot can be a stable member of a community or an itinerant artist. Consequently, his/her oral artistry can be regarded as “a vast, dynamic field of creativity” which has proved to be difficult to define in all its complexity. The Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo has accurately referred to oral literature as a “multidimensional, multi-generic [...] holistic way of dealing with life and art” (Aidoo in Deandrea 2002, 17). Hence, western conceptions of art should be contested if one wishes to grasp the polysemy and morphing nature of orature.

One of the bias which critics and literary African theoreticians have striven to minimise or revisit is the orthodox western preeminence which is usually historically assigned to the written over the oral text. Mainly due to a long-established tradition of western anthropology, a model of movement —or so-called “evolution”— from a pre-colonial and vernacular model of orality to a modern, colonial and European one of literacy is said to have been generally acknowledged and privileged. Moreover, this dichotomy has been considered as mutually exclusive; that is, by attaching the oral medium (and genres) the characteristics of unreliability and subjectivity, the written text has been considered more objective and stable. However, at present, it is widely admitted that writing is not less biased than the oral word. As Newell argues, “[w]riting is not an external force, de-linked from human society or agency: it does not impact upon cultures without human mediation or ideological struggle” (2009, 68). Given the fact that orality can acquire an equal status in terms of artistic representation and cultural value in relation to written literature, another key issue to be considered is the African attachment to orality as a source of *authenticity* in literature. Thus, as the critic Abiola Irele argues, oral literature seems to be regarded as the “‘true’ literature of Africa” (2001, 31) and elite writers’ literature is frequently regarded by critics as “organically growing from oral sources” (Newell 2009, 67). Such is the case, Newell observes, of iconic

Nigerian authors of the prominence of Daniel Olurunfemi Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri, Sierra Leonian Syl Cheney-Coker, or Ghanaian Kojo Laing, whose literary works, however distant in time and geographies, deploy unmistakably oral African tropes in order to define their continental specificity (66).

However, the commingling between oral and written modes seems to offer some space for debate. Critics such as Eustace Palmer and the British anthropologist Karin Barber have firmly discouraged such a contention. According to Barber, African languages and oral traditions have been relegated to a secondary role whose main function is to provide “a source and a resource to the anglophone written tradition” (2007, 674). By the same token, Eustace Palmer has stressed that “the earliest African novels in English could not have possibly be outgrowths of the oral tale” (1979, 5). Thus, for the Sierra Leonian critic, the oral element has been in fact transformed into a decorative element whose function has primarily been to enrich the realist novel with an “Other” tradition of “Africanity” —usually materialised in the form of sayings or values which have remained, oftentimes, unanalysed. Moreover, Karin Barber takes a decidedly anti-postcolonial stance by saying that this model of criticism has had the effect of silencing the native literary voice “until he or she masters and subverts the colonizer’s language” (Barber 2007, 678). In practical terms, she argues, by casting the indigenous “outside or underneath the ‘mainstream’ literary discourses of modern Africa, it turns a blind eye to what is in fact the mainstream, the cultural discourses of the majority, in most Africa” (678).

A last consideration will be analysed in connection to the influence of orality on African literature: the relation of the text with the *audience* and the influence the former may exert on the latter. As Olaniyan and Quayson claim, there are two ironic issues regarding African literature and genres. The first is that prose and, more specifically, the novel, seems to be the most widespread genre in European languages in Africa. However, the intended audience —in English, for example— is a minority of the African readership —at least such was case during the early 2000s. In addition, they argue that, although more novels are being published, the more innovative areas of literary production in West Africa are drama and poetry, given the close connection these genres share with storytelling and orature. “The novel, it appears, is undetachable from its perceived Western origin and garb in spite of its extensive Africanization in structure, imagery, and language use” (Olaniyan and Quayson 2007, 321). In his essay “Background to the West African Novel,” the Nigerian critic Emmanuel

Obiechina emphasises the fact that literacy has brought about the rise of the novel as the most recurrent African literary genre. He also puts forward the notion that the emergence of it, in turn, has presupposed a change in the psychological self-perception of the African readership. “Literacy increases individual awareness of separateness from the collectivity and increases the power to enter imaginatively into other individualities in a way not possible within the oral culture” (Obiechina 2007, 326). Before the formal western school was established, African children learned about their traditional lifestyles by imitation or informal teaching, by initiation or through teaching rituals. “The individual therefore tended to see the world in terms of his own circumscribed milieu, and to apprehend only those experiences which had been culturally determined to him,” Obiechina sustains (326). For him, “[t]he chief effect of the introduction of Western education was to break the psychic insularity of traditional education and limited physical mobility, and to substitute for it a cosmopolitan and mobile psyche” (326). In other words, although orality seems to be vicariously much alive in African languages, cultural expressions and performances—even more so in the lyric genre—its presence on the vastly monopolised territory of the realist novel has been relegated to a so-called “indigenising” trend which is more evident in the inclusion of content than within the experimentation with form.

## **2. NIGERIAN LITERATURE: THE DIFFICULT DEFINITION OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY**

This section will be devoted to speculating and analysing the difficult historical and social dynamics which enabled the existence of the state of Nigeria as a consequence of the country’s colonial amalgamation, focusing on its perennial paradox of being a multi-ethnic context united by force. In order to contextualise this analysis, I will provide a succinct account of the historical events which led to the emergence of the country. Subsequently, I will refer to some crucially philosophical and political notions in connection to identity which are usually presupposed for the existence of a nation and a state. These definitions will hopefully remit a more accurate judgement of the particular junction Nigeria seems to be enmeshed in. At this point, I will expand on the valuable socio-political analysis that Chinua Achebe made on Nigeria’s deep-rooted structural problems. Eventually, I will concentrate on the role of a so-called Nigerian literature on the construction of a national self-representation and collective imaginary by alluding to the main variables that have shaped its existence.

## 2.1. Nigeria: From Ethnic Kingdoms and Caliphates to Amalgamation

According to Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton in *History of Nigeria* (2014), archaeological remnants have provided evidence that human societies inhabited the contemporary regions of Nigeria for several thousand years. The first evidence dates back to the Late Stone Age. These groups developed both into de-centralised kingships and highly centralised ones. The former usually had chiefs and councils of elders as advisers at the village level. The centralised states such as the kingdoms of Ile-Ife or Benin or the Islamic empires of Kanem and Borno, in the Sahel region, “developed kingship institutions that placed political and, to some extent, spiritual authority in the person of the king, who ruled from a capital city” (37). The southeastern region of modern Nigeria was mainly inhabited by the de-centralised Igbo communities. The kingdoms of Benin and Ile-Ife were loosely related to the Yoruba ethnic collective. In contrast, the northern regions —culturally linked to the Saharan territories— were inhabited by Hausa communities. Generally speaking, these states and kingdoms are said to have had “essentially indigenous African origins” (37) and to have been politically autonomous, although they frequently depended from one another economically and socially. Trade and intermarriage was not uncommon as well as spiritual and diplomatic ties.

The institution of slavery had existed in the region before 1500, although as Falola and Heaton observe, “these slaves tended to be assimilated into their new societies and tended to perform tasks similar to the ones performed by free men and women” (2014, 59). In the sixteenth century, the Europeans established on the Atlantic coast permanent trading posts. At the beginning, several goods — palm oil, gold, pepper and coffee among the most demanded— were commercialised while gradually slaves became the single exchange item. Two main centres of trade with the Europeans emerged in the Bight of Benin in the West (Yoruba land) and the Bight of Biafra (Igbo land). From 1500 to 1800 the traffic of slaves had become a commodity and many states depended on this trade for their sustenance. Although slavery had been abolished in the United Kingdom by 1807, the practice remained until the middle of the nineteenth century. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Sokoto Caliphate established its influence under the single rule of Islamic law and consolidated the erstwhile fragmented savanna kingdoms.

For the above mentioned reason, British colonialism in the extended Nigerian region started in the forest zone —southeastern areas— and its main aims were the promotion of the “legitimate commerce” of palm oil and palm kernels. The pacification and increasing intervention to regulate the political stability of the region was closely connected to the British commercial interests. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the military takeover of the southern territories had started. In addition, the annexation of the Sokoto emirates was, eventually, galvanised into the establishment of British Protectorates. As a matter of fact, the colonisation of Nigeria took almost forty years to be accomplished by deploying the tactic of “Indirect Rule,” that is, exercising power through local chiefs and kings. Due to local insurgencies, trade restrictions and the influence of French and German incursions, the different British protectorates were not solidified into a single state until 1914 with Frederick Lugard becoming the first governor general of Nigeria —a name rebrand stemming from the River Niger. The northern organisation of the Hausa regions had historically a hierarchical administration which resulted much convenient to the British interests. Consequently, the structures of the North were imposed on the southern regions, thus paving the way for future ethnic rivalries. Although Indirect Rule theoretically aimed at preserving indigenous institutions, the colonial regime radically transformed the political, economic and cultural patterns of the different peoples. “Cities grew, gender roles shifted, and a new class of middle-class elites emerged that was both indebted and frustrated by the colonial system” Falola and Heaton emphasise (134). As this very brief summary on the emergence of Nigeria may have elucidated, the forceful and artificial construction of the country under colonial rule was to be a structural flaw which would eventually lead to a civil war and countless ethnic clashes which have —and still claim— countless Nigerian wounds.

## **2.2. “What Makes a Bunch of People into a Nation?”**

In *The Lies that Bind. Rethinking Identity* (2018), the philosopher Anthony Appiah questions differing forms of identity that people take for granted such as creed, country, colour, class and culture as legacies of the modern rationale of the nineteenth century which, he believes, is high time for us to revisit. He points out that the late eighteenth century German romanticism, which emerged in reaction to the emphasis on reason and restraint characteristic of the Enlightenment, crystallised into a “great upwelling of feelings and ideas, especially in the middle classes” (81). A new surge centred on emotion, a new appraisal of nature, a passion for democracy and a celebration of folk traditions,

the soul and spirit of the folk —*Volkgeist*— or national spirit. The philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder explored —in the Storm and Stress (*Sturm and Drang*) spirit — “the idea that the German people were held together by a spirit embodied, above else, in German language and literature” (83). Hence, he contends that to be part of a *nation*, a group of people have to think of themselves as sharing some ancestry —an *objective* condition— but also a *subjective* condition; that is, shared sentiments which can join them “to live productively together” (77). The concept of state was built around the category of nation. In the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel observed that “[i]n the existence of a *people* the substantial purpose is to be a state and to maintain itself as such; a people without state-formation (a *nation* as such) has no real history...” (Hegel in Appiah, 73; original emphasis). In other words, Hegel believed that world history would evolve as all the world population would gradually seek to become part of a state. A notion that is so commonplace these days that is rarely contested.

However, Appiah poses two main difficulties in relation to the making of nations: the first is how far you need to go in order to consider people who are *inside* the group. Secondly, how one deals with the *heterogeneity within* the group. “The logic of shared ancestry,” he observes, “offers only three possible answers: *annihilate* them, *expel* them [...] or *assimilate* them, inventing a story of common ancestry to cover up the problem” (80; emphasis added). In addition, two variables related to the constitution of the modern state are considered today untouchable: “territorial integrity” and the “principle of self-determination” (90). The author finds a fallacy in the inconsistency that exists between the unquestionable national sovereignty and “the obscure and unstable definition of a people.” Paradoxically, “[w]e have the right to self-determination,” he claims, “but this idea can guide us only once we’ve decided who ‘we’ are” (90). If the romantic model does not hold possible any longer, and “we reject the notion that some natural unity gives countries their shape, we are left with a puzzle. What does hold countries together?” (99). His answer is through compromise and “a commitment to governing a common life *together*” (102; original emphasis). “What really matters in making a nation is,” according to French historian Ernest Renan (1882), “the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life” (Renan 1882, 8). Eventually, Appiah concludes by saying that “the unities we create fare better when we face the convoluted reality of our differences” (2018, 104). From what has been previously exposed, it stems that Nigeria is a state since it has geographical sovereignty and autonomy —with its constitution, federal institutions and national symbols. However,



what seems to be at odds with the concept of nation is the project of community—not to mention that the shared ancestry is also quite a divisive notion in the Nigerian milieu. To put it bluntly, the objective and subjective conditions which have historically defined nations seem to be in Nigeria either missing or in process of reconciliation.

In an exalted tone, Chinua Achebe wrote in *The Trouble with Nigeria* (2005), that the reasons for the deeply-rooted underdevelopment, stagnation and intestine struggles the country was mired in were tribalism, lack of committed leadership, cynic jingoism and the cult of mediocrity among the most important reasons. He contended that what racism was for Americans, tribalism was for Nigerians: “*discrimination against a citizen because of his place of origin*” (2005 8; original emphasis). He emphasised the fact that tribalism not only “exposes the citizen to unfair treatment and social injustice,” but also generates social decline by privileging mediocrity and the “subversion of efficiency caused by an erratic system of performance and reward” (21). He inveighed against the reckless Nigerian leaders in pursuit of money and their general inefficacy and disregard for the people. Belonging himself to the Igbo group, Achebe referred to the mistrust with which his community is regarded in Nigeria due to the Igbo alleged aggressive, arrogant, clannish, grasping and greedy nature. He observes that Igbo people have a less hampered demeanour due to their freedom from religion and traditional hierarchies.

Conversely, another iconic Nigerian scholar, Pius Adesanmi, reflected in *Who Owns the Problem?* (2020) on African contemporary circumstances—which he exemplified with realities against the Nigerian background. He extolled that African problems and priorities have been—and still are—very much defined by neocolonial foreign powers and comprador African elites. He claimed that for Africans to start solving their local problems, they should start posing and defining the continent’s own questions. His argument revolves around the fact that contemporary Africa’s structural problems are continually framed by foreign institutions; which he caustically called “The Mercy Industrial Complex”—“donor agencies, humanitarian organizations, aid and charity organizations, Bono, Jeffrey Sachs, career saviours of African children through adoption such as Madonna” (2020, 8). He rather rhetorically pondered whether these problems have become African because the continent is powerless against modes of representation, or because it is subjected to what he calls “epistemological violence” (8). “To solve a problem is to understand it in all its manifestations and ramifications, and this includes its origins and modes

of perpetuation,” he reasoned (8). He further argued that in order to propose a solution to, say, Boko Haram incursions in northern Nigeria, one has to go back to “the map of errors” issued in 1914 and the cultural modern institutions of discipline and punishment—the prison, the Church mission and the school—inherited from the Empire by means of which Africans were “civilised.” In other words, as he succinctly stated, “the postcolonial state has failed woefully in detaching itself and its institutions from the colonial socius of violence that birthed it” (9). Nevertheless, and regardless of the inherited or innate systemic inadequacies and foibles Achebe and Adesanmi attribute to the Nigerian state, what these two Nigerian scholars seem to have agreed on was the fact that the young country has been still undergoing the throes of faulty lines drawn from its inception—at the British amalgamation. In other words, the crux of the Nigerian quagmire has been the juxtaposition of different nations, so to say, together with the subsequent interferences of neocolonial foreign interests which have never abandoned the country.

### **2.3. Is There a Nigerian Literary Voice?**

Quite interestingly, one of the cultural materialisations that has attempted to construct a national representation—although explicitly evidencing Nigeria’s attribute of difference—has been the emergence and on-going socio-historical conversation engendered by Nigerian literature. An important caveat should be mentioned at this juncture. I will be referring to speculations which preeminently will focus on prose literature, leaving the lyric and dramatic genres outside the scope of this analysis. That said, it could be asserted that from its independence days to the present, if one could refer to a defining trait of Nigerian literature, it would be its underpinning commitment and militance, its close connection to historical circumstance, cultural ethnic difference and present socio-political structural dysfunctions. Different images of the country have been conjured up through its motley fictional representations, either from writers living in the country or in the diaspora. From the Achebean unearthed pre-colonial past and the hybrid condition of the postcolony, from the estranged displacement experienced by migrants abroad to the many vices denounced from Nigeria’s present neocolonial background. Although the first imagined nation could be defined as an attempt to resist—and at the same time bring to the fore—the colonial influence, this picture has increasingly morphed into a myriad of snapshots and previously silenced worlds—ethnic rituals, languages and customs, the inequities caused by patriarchal structures, the excesses of failed governance, the many wounds the country cannot—or is not yet

willing—to confront openly such as the Biafran war or Boko Haram, to name just two. Literature undoubtedly devolves an ever-changing polyphony of a country defined by Clara Joseph as a nation existing *because* of its differences (2001) or, as Obi Nwakanma has conjectured, having a slippery and Janus-faced complex identity (2008).

The role of literature, consequently, could be regarded as an attempt at “homogenising the nation’s culture by inventing a new culture, which is, in fact, a fiction” as Joanna Sullivan puts forward in “The Question of a National Literature for Nigeria” (2001). These new fictions or metaphors of the nation usually “rewrite the nation’s history on the palimpsest of forgotten pasts,” they “disseminate nationalism through print; harnessing literacy to reformulate a modern hybrid national culture,” she observes (72). In tune with Anthony Appiah (2018), Sullivan acknowledges that the Nigerian state has been reified “into a series of facts and numbers” while the nation “remains more ephemeral, a psychological bond, a state of mind, an act of consciousness” (2001, 72). As a matter of fact, what remains a constant in Nigerian identity is the failure of the nation to be crystallised or, in other words, the fictions of Nigeria’s nationhood are rife with conflict, ethnic clashes and loyalties functioning as the central organising weaknesses. In tune with this argument, the Nigerian editor Bibi Bakare-Yusuf clearly states:

I don’t think new Nigerian writers are preoccupied with the “new Nigerian identity.” The question of identity is a twentieth century preoccupation. What it means to be Nigerian is actually to be *fragmented*. It’s no longer the kind of stable identity we might’ve spoken about during the earlier generation of writers. Soyinka, Achebe or Cyprian Ekwensi, they wanted to stamp a particular notion of Nigerianness in terms of Igboness, or in terms of Yorubaness. (Bakare-Yusuf in Shercliff, 2015 *britishcouncil.org*; emphasis added)

What is more, Bakare-Yusuf claims that the contemporary shared experience at the school and at the youth service—a year all Nigerian youngsters spend in a remote part of the country doing community service after university training—are at the core of the so-called national Nigerian identity. These spaces of acculturation transcend labels such as Christian or Muslim, south or north since they “immediately build a bridge in what seems an unsurmountable divide” (2015, *britishcouncil.org*). Bakare-Yusuf emphasises that the objective of contemporary Nigerian authors is to “make people see themselves in each other, regardless of the labels we have to carry. I’m Christian, I’m from the south. We try to tell stories that bring commonality and people relax because they know

who the other is” (2015). Homi Bhabha proposed the term “DissemiNation” to account for the “scattering of people, who bear their metaphors across and beyond frontiers and boundaries of experience and cultures, towards and ingathering, ‘in the ghettos or cafes of city centers’ consecrated in the new metropolises of national culture” (Bhabha in Nwakanma 2008, 2). In the case of Nigeria, identities could be labeled as “travelling identities” since the idea of the Nigerian citizen is often derived from a body of competing ethnic and cultural identities: Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa among the most salient. These deep fissions remain from the colonial amalgamation. Thus, “Nigeria’s political history reflects a deep search for the coherent meaning of nation, and its context of affiliation or belonging” (Nwakanma, 2). The Nigerian novel, Nwakanma contends, could be said to evince this nation building as a “textual affiliation.” In other words, what lies at the core of the country is a search for “social and mythical meaning” as well as the “historical forces that have confluenced to shape, and continue to shape the idea of Nigeria as a product of modernity, and its inheritance of the conditions of poscoloniality” (Nwakanma 2008, 2).

The main variables which appear to have defined Nigerian literature are ethnicity, language, ideology and the quest for agency and, lately, a growing aesthetic trend involved in the redefinition of the Nigerian canon. Sullivan asserts that ethnicity has emerged as a dominant principle of identity formation precisely because of the absence of a “discernibly stable national identity” which has dominated the political and cultural agendas of the country (2001, 73). At this point, and having read a considerable corpus of Nigerian novels from independence to the present, I could affirm that although ethnicity is a constant trope, the differences between ethnic groups—at least from the perspective of a non-Nigerian reader—in literary depictions are probably more apparent than real. Many similar cultural traits could be said to be distinctly Nigerian, even though differing names could be provided in each community. These similar cultural traits are related to food, ways of dressing, music, marrying, naming and burial rituals, and political practices, to name the most prominent. If a pronounced distinction could be witnessed, it is the religious influence exerted on Islamic Hausas as opposed to the other two main tribes, the Yoruba and Igbos. Noticeably, Hausa authors are underrepresented in Nigerian literature in English. Although there is a thriving popular market of romance fiction in Hausa known as “Litattafan Soyayya,” authors from the northern regions are decidedly fewer, saved for a few names such as Zaynab Alkali and the contemporary Helon Habila, Azizah Idris, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Richard Ali and Elnathan John.

In addition, the issue of language represents a paradox which seems to shape national literature. According to Sullivan, two sides emerge on the debate. On the one hand, a Nigerian literature should account for all the oral literary traditions in the Nigerian languages while, on the other hand, there is a strong belief that only written texts in English can represent the nation above ethnic idiosyncrasies. In Ojel Anidi's terms "the debate which has dominated the African literary scene in the past fifty years about the use of the English language versus the vernacular languages in African literature has, to a large extent, been moderated. It is no longer a question of extreme 'radicalism' or 'accommodationism'" (2015, 27). According to the Nigerian critic, English in Nigeria is today a "binding force" which had solved pragmatically the question of the differing ethnic communities. By the same token, "minority ethnic groups have found in English a peculiar weapon with which to fight any form of 'neocolonialism' by the major ethnic groups in the country" (23). Moreover, the status of English as the new lingua franca provides Nigerian literature with a global readership. Anidi observes that "these utilitarian roles of English in the country" should presuppose a recognition of "the close connection between language and political/cultural emancipation" (27); that is, Nigerian writers should seek to devise literary means for "contextualizing and indigenizing the English language in their works" (27-28). From Achebe to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie several formal experiments have been tried in order to accommodate English to the Nigerian background. Examples of these features are code-mixing, code-switching, translations and transliterations. Interestingly, there is also a budding literary tendency to include Pidgin English as part and parcel of the linguistic reality of the country. As was previously mentioned, another variable that has been present in Nigerian literature—from its beginnings—is its decidedly ideological commitment to keeping historical memory alive and its distinctly explicit activist thrust. As Susan Andrade has observed in "the Problem of Realism and the African Fiction" (2009), mimeticism was closely bound to rationality and the independence crusade. Thus, realism was "the narrative mode for telling stories of the subjugation of rational people" (183). Although a decade after the Nigerian independence the disillusionment with the national projects was evident, the literary productions have adamantly kept siding with the realist mode and the ideological denouncement of the excesses of the new Nigerian kleptocratic elites. Much frequent have been the imprisonments or deaths of writers due to their activism through literature. Some famous examples are the poet Christopher Okigbo dying in the Biafran War, the execution of the Niger delta author Ken Saro-Wiwa during military

rule in the 1990s, and the repeated incarcerations of Wole Soyinka and Chris Abani, to name a few examples. Hence, the social realist novel has been the generally deployed genre from Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Ken Saro Wiwa to the contemporaries Helon Habila, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe, Toni Khan and Elnathan John, to consider but a sample of authors. Interestingly, the close imbrication of realism within historical epic-like fictions which span several generations or crucial moments in Nigerian history is also found in the literary productions of, say, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun* (2006), Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *In Dependence* (2008) or Rosanna Amaka's *The Book of Echoes* (2020). At this point, it is pertinent to mention that Ben Okri could be considered a hinge writer since his writing — probably tracing back his antecedents to Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka— has been a departure from the realist mode. The South African critic Harry Garuba defined his style as “animist materialism”: that is, texts “whose extra-worldly scenes, event and characters are rooted in an esoteric African cosmogony” (Garuba in Ede 2013, 159).

Apart from the proneness to frequently resort to realism, Nigerian literature can be likewise characterised by its thematic iterations. The most frequently (re)visited tropes can be grouped into four main categories: historical, socio-cultural, intimate tropes —usually related to trauma and gender inequalities— and new aesthetic concerns. In other words, the structural violence ensuing in the postcolony context; intimate, communal or family dysfunctions; the surviving influence of ethnic traditions; the diaspora experience, and in most recent fictions, the forthright inclusion of taboo topics related to sex and homosexuality issues, together with a new trend which implies a budding redefinition of aesthetics and form which I will refer to as new tropes and hybrid genres. This section will be an overview which will be pertinently expanded within the different generations in Nigerian literature in the following sections. As I have made apparent previously, neocolonialism and the socio-political malfunctioning of Nigerian society has been a much deployed literary more. Much literary concern has been expressed on the structural violence evinced in the country to people in general and women in particular. These recurrent topics have been referred to as a “self-anthropologising” trend by the critic and writer Amatoritsero Ede —a notion I will return to when analysing the authors of the Third-Generation (Ede 2013). In addition, the different dynamics at the communal or family level in relation to compulsory motherhood, the cult of the son, girl marriage and polygyny have provided much food for thought for many generations of Nigerian authors. The same has

been true for the dichotomy between global practices and extant traditional rituals and customs, the patriarchal rein exerted by the elders and the stifling social control of the in-laws, and lately, by the so-called “new-born” Christian faiths, frequent subjects in their plots. Furthermore, the diaspora experience with its constant redefinition of home from the distance, and the inclusion of many Nigerian writers as part of the new Afropolitan world-class is a habitual fictional concern. By the same token, taboo issues such as rape, homosexual and women explicit sex depictions have become commonplace in the late Third and Me/Fourth-Generation novelists.

Eventually, there is a new tendency to experiment with new forms and tropes—a trend that could be traced back to authors such as Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri—which are innovating at the level of theme and form. Writers such as Nneka Arimah, Helen Oyeyemi, Akwaeke Emezi, Tomi Adeyemi and Irenosen Okojie are well-known for conjuring up fantastic and, sometimes, gothic esoteric worlds in which form and style are defined by thematic experimentation. Other fictional works, such as those of Oyinkan Braithwaite, Hymar Davis and Jumoke Verissimo cannot be easily categorised into pre-existing genres since they appear to be willing to step into uncharted territories: a blend of thriller, detective noir and black humour; a mixture of auto-fiction and memoir with the prominent use of Pidgin English; and the imbrication of historical and familiar trauma in tune with a novel use of poetic mores and language respectively. Hence, one may be led to believe that the new generation of Nigerian authors are in the process of an aesthetic and formal redefinition of the Nigerian canon. One could assume that there has been a gradual slippage from theme as the determining variable—while the realist mode was the most commonly deployed narrative choice—towards a more imbricated thematic and structural experimentation which is emerging in contemporary late Third-Generation and what has been coined as the (Fourth) Me-Generation Nigerian literature. By the same token, contemporary writers, although significantly clinging to agency and partisan activism, have somehow traded the historical and identity pedagogical Achebean role for a more intimate gender or ideologically-based agenda.

#### **2.4. Nigerian Literary Generations: The Question of Periodisation**

The difficulties in the periodisation of literature have been historically the subject of discussion since, as is widely acknowledged, such generalisations frequently fail to accurately describe the literary landscape at a given moment in

all its nuance, variance and richness. Certain homogeneity or identity traits are imposed, so to say, to analyse a certain period which tend to retrospectively construct rather monolithic notions. However, there are certain ascertainable variables which could be singled out so as to pinpoint contradictions, continuities and affiliations with the extant corpus of inherited literature. Given that, as Harry Garuba claimed, “contradictions, indeterminacies and overlaps” will occur “and threaten an effort to create clear-cut boundaries, schools and generations,” certain categories can —and will— be used to mark certain noticeable distinctions in the literary production of Nigerian prose fiction in English from the period of the country’s independence up to the present (2003, 51). In order to define the three generations that have been chartered so far — and any possible speculation over a new trend already in motion— a number of variables have been singled out to encompass the definition of these characteristically similar productions. To start with, a crucial factor in delimiting the First-, Second-, and Third-Generation of Nigerian authors has been the literary outcomes in relation to the *colonial event* (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005). The different generations have been positioned differently when it comes to considering the dynamics of the decolonising process and the differing relations that authors have established with this historical event. Secondly, Adesanmi and Dunton have referred to the “temporal coevality” of writers (2005, 13); that is, there are certain moments related to the writers’ birth and publication dates which are closely imbricated into the socio-political environment and the ensuing fictional productions. Thirdly, the same critics consider the “ideological/thematic coherence” these fictions evince (13). Under this variable issues such as the politics of agency, the recurrence of certain tropes, the role of the writer and the intertextuality or dialectic relations established with previous literary works are weighted on. Eventually, a new emerging line of *editorial policies* has come to the fore corroborating the new roads of on-line publishing dynamics contrasted to the long-established traditional printing houses and their exertions on the literary productions.

As Pius Adesanmi observes, a distinctive factor which has influenced the nature of Nigerian authors’ writings has been their proximity to the colonial event. He proposes that some of them have been “ocular agents” in distinction from the “non-ocular” ones. The latter are “those who never witnessed the events [direct colonial rule] in question but who were born into the social, cultural, economic, political and spiritual processes and contexts that have been massively overdetermined by the said historical event” (Adesanmi 2005, 270). He defines the generation who had no overt connection to the colonial



establishment as “children of the postcolony” (270). Amatoritsero Ede observes that the “overwhelming impact of colonialism and the ideologies of decolonisation and cultural nationalism on the textual regimes” is clearly evinced in the First- and Second-Generation of Nigerian writers (2013, 72). The First-Generation’s self-proclaimed aim was to resort to literature as a decolonising instrument in the forging of a national identity. On the contrary, the Second-Generation writers’ relation to the mentioned landmark has the imprint of the disillusionment emerging after the failed national project; the hijacked ideals having been exchanged by the neocolonial military elites. The children of the postcolony or the so-called Third-Generation authors are said to be the “post-trauma” writers (Adesanmi 2007). To all intents and purposes, this generation constituted the brain drain the country witnessed as a result of the ruthless military regimes who persecuted and incarcerated intellectuals. Many critics refer to the the Third-Generation as the *diaspora* community. However, as will be expanded in detail in the following sections, there are distinctions to be made on this issue since there are many writers based in Nigeria whose concerns differ from the Nigerians living abroad. Biodun Jeyifo has defined the Third-Generation as involved with “arrested decolonization” (1996, 7); that is, their emergence coincided with the abandonment of the legacies of the ur-texts of the national liberation movements of the Third World. In other words, the imperative of historical revisionism which was the main concern of the first two generations —traditionalist and nationalist fiction and the ensuing Marxist bend— was no longer the “ritualistic centre” of the new generational corpus (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 16). The totalities of nation, history, gender were questioned and subsequently de- and re-constructed.

*Temporal coevality* has been another variable used in the mapping of the three generations. As Adesanmi, Garuba (2005) and Ede (2013) concede, there is a certain ambiguity in the association of the term *generation* with *age*. Age could refer to the year in which writers were born or the moment in which they started publishing. The 1980s have been considered the period during which the Third-Generation came to literary consciousness and began publishing (Raji 2005). As has been claimed by Adesanmi, those writers who were born after the 60s and published their books in the mid-80s and by the 90s could be generally referred to as Third-Generation (Adesanmi 2005). In addition, the *ideological* and *thematic coherence* manifested in the literary productions tend to show, in general terms, certain cogency when considering the different generations. The ideological adherence, the equations of “subjecthood and agency,” the “politics of identity” either in relation to the national or transnational contexts, the

deployment of “tropes of Otherness and subalternity” (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 15) as well as the role of the writer, and the degree of intertextuality with previous literary fictions serve to label the divides between the three generational categorisations. Hence, one could affirm that the First-Generation was characteristically pedagogical, utilitarian and highly ideological in its exertions. Their main concern seemed to revolve around the contestation of a denigrated image of Africa. By the 1960s the collapse of the national projects engendered a plaintive tone and the realisation that the enemy was to be found not only in the colonial inheritance but in the comprador ruling classes within the country. The Third-Generation was displaced and the nation was a concern from the perspective of the diaspora. Two other factors have been decisive in its definition: the inward turn into the intimate experience and an evident focus on and denouncement of the conditions of oppressed groups such as women and, lately, the homosexual community. The role of the writer as a teacher has been transformed into a writing-as-a-therapy dynamics which shifts the locus of experience from the external to the internal, from the ideological construction of community to the individual wronged agency. Moreover, as Madelaine Hron contends, although the realist mode is still much popular within Third-Generation writers, “they break with antecedents by employing ‘realist narrative strategies’ that ‘may be ambivalently, as simultaneously performing new identities and revisioning old ones’” (Bryce in Hron 2008).

Last but not least, the *new editorial trends* of online publishing are greatly conditioning and re-shaping the format, length and, especially the thematic choice of contemporary Nigerian literary fiction. Nigerian literary heavyweights such as Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe were first published by UK Faber and Faber and Heinemann in 1952 and 1958 respectively. The Heinemann African Writers Series had an undeniable influence on the —predominantly male-authored— African literary canon (Shercliff 2015, *britishcouncil.org*). In addition, the Macmillan’s Pacesetters series were also very much read throughout Africa even though they were issued and distributed from the UK. However, a new generation of Nigerian publishing houses —such as Farafina Books, Cassava Republic, The Bagus Nigeria, Ouida Books, Bookcraft, Kachifo, Parresia Publishers, Masobe Books or Okada Books— have started publishing contemporary fiction in Nigeria. Cassava Republic Press is a publishing house which has initiated a reversal from the traditional model. The editorial company has established a base in London from which to publish and distribute African authors in the West. As Shercliff observes, “[p]ublisher Bibi Bakare-Yusuf has brought Nigerian writing to the UK; thus, strengthening the

bonds between the two publishing landscapes, but without taking away the autonomy of Nigerian writers and publishers” (2015). In addition, the emergence of many literary magazines and journals such as *Jalada*, *The Lagos Review*, *Brittle Paper*, *Chimurenga*, *Omenana* or *James Murua’s Literature Blog*, to name the most popular, has contributed to both the dissemination of Nigerian and African Literature as well as the organisation of festivals and literary prizes. These new online platforms offer, as Olorunshola Adenekan (2012) and Toni Kan (2018) have argued, a wider choice of topics since taboo tropes are quite explicitly chosen and tackled in contemporary Nigerian fictions.

On the one hand, the flourishing of online magazines and literary journals provide an easy access to many authors, it allows them to contest hackneyed images of Africa —the usual site of poverty and violence. The possibility of online publications coexist in a blended and complementary fashion together with the paper edited book format. On the other hand, the online accessibility is oftentimes fleeting and contingent and, at the same time, may condition writers to produce shorter texts such as single short stories or poems due to the alleged limited time span attention that a readership using computers, but above all else, phones can devote. What seems to be the tendency is that online sites are usually seen as an opportunity for authors to make their work visible in a more democratic way so as to reach the editorial houses afterwards.

## **2.5. First-Generation Nigerian Literature**

In order to provide a more detailed examination of the so-far documented three generations of Nigerian literature, I will offer a historical contextualisation which can address the socio-political circumstances in which the texts emerged. I will refer to the main stylistic and thematic characteristics of the group and furnish the analysis with the most iconic authors and fictional works which have crystallised in a distinctive Nigerian voice. Since the aim of this thesis is to analyse the prose fiction by women authors, I will briefly allude to the male writers and concentrate on the main female authors in more detail. Additionally, I will focus on the feminist critical stance exerted in Nigeria and the continent at the time these literary works were published. The reason for so doing lies in the fact that feminist critique in Africa has been very much inspired by the black world diaspora, but has frequently followed a different path from their western counterparts. By the same token, the same Nigerian women authors have been oftentimes the feminist spokespersons for their generation.

### 2.5.1. Historical Context: Independence, the Elusive National Identity and Biafran War

After the Second World War, the British Empire had greatly relinquished power over the former colonies. In addition, Third-World nationalist movements had erupted in many regions of the world, Africa included. Since the 1930s, a very charismatic and European-educated expanding Nigerian middle-class had emerged. The colonial policy had given a great impulse to the creation of schools and a few universities. This emerging Nigerian elite exerted its influence and pressure over the colonial government. Thus, they were embarked in projects of increased self-governance towards reclaiming total independence. Although the movements which struggled for an indigenous country were pan-Nigerian in their inception, the regional and ethnic lines and loyalties were soon to become apparent. The Nigerian independence was achieved in October of 1960. However, as many historians have claimed, the country's birth was a fragile compromise "unified under a federal constitution in which politically conscious ethnic groups vied for control of the central government through ethnically based political parties" (Falola and Heaton 2014, 137).

In addition, Nigeria was labeled the "Giant of Africa" after petroleum was discovered in the Niger delta by 1958. Soon many people inside and outside the infant country saw promising revenues and conjectured its leading role in the African continent. However, the budding state did not constitute a nation since the alleged national identity was still to be defined. As Falola and Heaton observe, the country existed internationally, although the inhabitants remained aligned with their local communities. Moreover, the constitutions issued in the 50s "undermined the development of a unified national consciousness by determining that access to power at the national level was to be derived from holding power at the regional level" (2014, 158-9). The most numerous ethnic groups were the Hausa/Fulanis, the Yorubas, and Igbos—which mainly inhabited the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions respectively. These factions frequently were enmeshed in clashes and embarked in a fierce contest to control the country.

Many artists, scholars and politicians were very much concerned with the construction of a unified federal nation. However, the political structure of the different regions aimed at retaining power in the regional spheres. Hence, as Falola and Heaton claim, "[o]fficial corruption, rigged elections, ethnic baiting, bullying, and thuggery dominated the conduct of politics in the First Republic,

which existed from 1960 to 1966” (159). A *realpolitik* which resorted to fear and corruption engendered a weak national identity while ethnic/regional distinctiveness became more prominent. As a matter of fact, the greatest concern of most Nigerians —a concern that still presently survives— is being dominated by another ethnic group. “Southerners from the Eastern and Western Regions feared northern domination, and northerners feared southern domination” (Falola and Heaton, 159).

The First Republic was rife with venality. By that time, many Nigerians had been disillusioned with the national project and regarded the federal system as dysfunctional and futile. Increasingly, the road was paved for the overthrow of the ill-fated democracy and the establishment of several military rulers. In 1966, the “Five Majors” enacted the first coup d’état which devolved power to general John Aguiyi-Ironsi. In the same year, a counter-coup established colonel Yakubu Gowon in office. In 1967, a bloody civil war was declared when Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the independent Republic of Biafra, seceding the oil-rich Eastern region from the country. After three years of intestine warfare, the federal government —made up of the Northern and Western Regions and the Federal Capital Territory of Lagos— eventually regained the Eastern Region. As Falola and Heaton argue “overall the Nigerian Civil War did more to exemplify the problems associated with the national question than to solve them” (2014, 160).

### 2.5.2. Main Literary Concerns, Authors and Fictional Works

The period comprising the First-Generation of Nigerian literature coincides with several now canonical writers’ first fictional publications —most of whom were men. This period encompasses the literary works which emerged during the nationalist exertions over the colonial establishment in the 1950s until the 1970s after the ensuing Nigerian independence in 1960, the military coups (1966) and the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). The publications of Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, Timothy Mofolorunso Aluko, Onuora Nzekwu, Michael Echeruo, Christopher Okigbo, Chukwuemeka Ike, John Munonye, Phebean Ajibola Ogundipe, Mabel Segun and Flora Nwapa, among the most salient, could be regarded as the first Nigerian authors in search of a distinctive voice. In order to restrict my analysis to prose fiction writers, I will provide a rather brief overview of the novels and prominent influence of Chinua Achebe since he is considered the father of Nigerian literature. Likewise, a succinct account

of Soyinka's novels will be provided. At this point, it is pertinent to mention that Soyinka's canonical literary (Nobel Prize) status and production was mainly devoted to drama and poetry rather than prose. Two predecessors will be focused on: Daniel Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola. Their fictional works can hardly be categorised as belonging to the realism characteristic of the Achebean tradition; however, their role as trailblazers in Nigerian literature cannot be omitted. Subsequently, I will focus on the literary productions by women writers, especially Flora Nwapa's novels, since she can safely be regarded as the first female author to step into a uniformly male-dominated literary landscape while proposing, although in a subtle and conciliatory manner, an independent portrait of her fictional protagonists. At this juncture, it should be emphasised that the selection of authors and main literary prose works has been restricted to those who wrote in English and have had a canonical status in the Nigerian curricula. By no means does this analysis seek to be comprehensive. Rather, it is a modest attempt to evince the gigantic and multifarious richness of Nigerian Literature.

As Madu Krishnan has observed, the Nigerian State was conceived by the nationalist movements in search of an identity and Nigerian literature was to play a crucial role in this project (2013). In other words, nationalism was a top-down dynamics which had not yet crystallised into a nation. Hence, he contends, African nationalisms have always been "multilayered, diverse, and ever-shifting, marked by tensions between the vertical imperatives of governmental nationalism and the horizontal cacophony of irreducible and lived experience" (2013, 78). Ogaga Okuyade argues that from its emergence, the African novel has been *utilitarian*; that is, its main purpose has been both to entertain, but also to remain closely involved in pressing socio-political issues (2014). Moreover, he considers that exemplar writers such as Chinua Achebe sought "to restore and rehabilitate the battered identity of the African personality as re-orchestrated by the colonialists" (Okuyade, xvi). Noticeably, as Achebe emphasised, the avowed aim of the first generation of Nigerian writers was to counter-represent Africa in a defensive manner so as "to help [my] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement" (Achebe 1975, 15). The Nigerian novel written in English was also conceived as a tool to counteract corruption and ignorance. The British critic Bernth Lindfors observes that both Achebe and Soyinka were concerned with the role of the modern writer in the nascent state. "Soyinka felt the writer should be more concerned with creating an accurate image of his own time than a 'historic vision' of the past" (1982, 7). As Soyinka claimed, the

African writer “needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past [...]. The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores *and* experience of his society and the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself” (Soyinka 1967, 13; original emphasis).

In “Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and the New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel” (2008), Obi Nwakanma postulates that Igbo novelists were prominent in the configuration of the Nigerian canon. After the Second World War the nationalist movement led by Nnamdi Azikiwe was concerned with the imagined nation in tune with the Pan-African movements in the continent. Nwakanma proposes two variables which contributed to the flourishing of the Igbo-nationalist novel. On the one hand, the Onitsha Market literature with its small presses which spread a social “imagined nation.” This literature sought to recuperate the communal past and laid bare the schism produced by the colonial incursion. On the other hand, Azikiwe (known as the Great Zik) emerged as an iconic leader who represented the educated middle classes and was the first president of Nigeria. Influenced by the American Harlem Renaissance, he greatly contributed to the forging notion of a unified nation.

The popularity and emergence of the novel at the time may have been a consequence of the nationalist demands—in colonial times—for more and better educational structures. In response, “more schools and colleges were built, more literary work was done, and more students were sent abroad for higher studies” (Lindfors 1982, 3). In addition to books, there were arts festivals, literary journals such as *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, *African Literature Today*, *Research in African Literatures* or *Nigeria Magazine* as well as university publications—*The Horn*, *Ibadan* and the *Muse* which stimulated students’ participation. The Ibadan *Mbari* group of writers was formed and many international conferences on literary criticism were held throughout Nigeria (Lindfors 1982). The most important characteristics of the writing at the time was the indigenisation of English to show a distinct Nigerian cadence, the colonial factor as a thematic recurrence and the re-examination of the native pre-colonial tropes and cultural baggage.

A contradiction was perceived, however, in the deployment of the novelistic form—which had been historically associated to the western individualistic, rational and linear determinants of form—with the representation of

Africanness. In a clear summary, Simon Gikandi has claimed that “the men and women who founded the tradition of what we now call modern African writing, both in European and indigenous languages were, without exception, products of the institutions that colonialism had introduced and developed in the continent” (2000, 379). The South African critic Harry Garuba contends that the African critical reception of the independence times was concerned with the “domestication” of the novel so that it could delineate its own continental form (2009, 247). In his essay “The Critical Reception of the African Novel,” he proceeds to consider the variables which were to define an African novel. The first was related to some representation of the *oral tradition* in the written prose, either by resorting to the inclusion of proverbs, idioms, folk tales or cultural rituals or appropriations of these oral resources to be reconfigured and transformed in the fictions. Secondly, critics decided on a set of criteria to assess the traits of a truly African novel. They included characteristics such as the use of African languages or the *indigenisation* of English, the writing for a primarily *African audience*, the inclusion of authentic African contexts and the avoidance of the principle of art for art’s sake; that is, the African writer was expected to deal with African dire socio-political issues. Thirdly, the African novel was “a poetics of cultural retrieval and rediscovery” so as to contribute to the nation formation paradigm (2009, 252-3). The emancipation from colonial strictures was evident as was also the difficulty of retrieving a pristine voice given that the very African novel was to emerge *from* and *against* the colonial background.

Although exceeding the scope of this introduction, it is worth pointing out that cheap Indian pamphlets and movies in English started to arrive in the 1940s and 1950s to West Africa gaining much popularity. At the same time, British and American popular romantic magazines and B-grade movies were imported and became available, especially in urban contexts. A new literature produced by young newly-educated men flourished and came to be known as the “Onitsha market literature” in Igboland (Newell 2009). These new Igbo writers produced romance and ‘how-to’ booklets, especially dealing with topics related to marriage, bride dowries, problems with ‘harlotry’ and, in general, on how to avoid deviant women behaviour. Newell claims that the Christian educational system in Nigeria gave these young authors leeway to categorise and pigeonhole women and fix them into subservient roles. There were also many traditional oral tales which were turned into pamphlets. Some exceptions to the rule were observed, such as Ogalí’s *Veronica, My Daughter* (1964, first published in 1956), a story whose female character was intent on opposing her



paternal authority. Paradoxically, these writers were promoting single marriages, combined with their romantic love. While Achebe and his fellow writers were reacting against the structures of colonialism and Christianity, these non-elite men authors were depicting those times of considerable political and economic turmoil. The audience of these booklets were mainly men since women had not acquired fully literary education by these times. As a matter of fact, women education was then openly discouraged on the grounds of causing laxity and an erasure of traditional values.

*Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola: The Precursors*

Fagunwa is not a well-known writer outside Nigeria. His most important fiction, *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbo Irúnmalé* —or *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*— was published as early as 1938 and translated to English by Wole Soyinka in 1968. He always chose to write in his mother tongue, Yoruba. As a matter of fact, he was quite a prolific author. He authored five long narratives, two travel books as well as short story collections, folktales and graded readers for primary schools. Berth Lindfors claims that his influence on Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka is evident. His narrative plots tend to blend traditional and modern elements. His fictions are mainly adventure stories which frequently involve a hero or group of heroes who have to cross the ‘bush’ or forest usually inhabited by supernatural beings. After being confronted with strange rituals, customs and ceremonies related to spiritual realms, the protagonists return to their original places having gained insight from experience. Lindfors remarks on the immediate parallels evinced in his oeuvre with some western travel stories such as *The Odyssey*, *Gulliver’s Travels* or *Robinson Crusoe*, although he observes that John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and the Yoruba folktales are Fagunwa’s most immediate influences (1982, 15). Yoruba popular characters such as the *enfant terrible*, the “juju compass,”<sup>4</sup> the singing birds, the gatekeepers and the deer-woman who marries a hunter are commonly found in his plots (Lindfors 1982). The obvious didacticism of Fagunwa’s fictions are in tune with his life-long job as a school headmaster. Interestingly, what many Yoruba critics have ascertained is his special gift to convey the rhythm and musicality of the African language in an almost poetic fashion.

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<sup>4</sup> “Juju” is a term attributed to objects which are believed to have magic powers, either benign or evil.

Unlike many of his fellow writers, Amos Tutuola's formal education was scarce. In 1952, the much debated and criticised *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (2014) was published in "uneducated, broken, non-university English" which was considered by many African and western critics as vulgar (Ngũgĩ 2018, 72). The novel tells the story of an alcoholic man who travels to the land of the dead in search for his palm-tapster. Following the structure of Yoruba folk tales, Tutuola's main protagonist encounters many mythological and supernatural beings taken from Yoruba lore. His second book was published in 1954 —*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*— which was considered almost a plagiarised version of Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. Ngũgĩ observes that western concerns in publishing Tutuola's fictional tales could have been anthropological since they may have been interested in understanding the psychology and culture of the African mind. Tutuola's misspellings may have been one of the reasons why, Ngũgĩ suggests, Faber and Faber "wanted to establish a text written by an African native who had yet to fully learn English" (2018, 74). As Ngũgĩ concludes, this western "genuinely" regarded literary production was clearly deemed through paternalistic and racist lens. However, many contemporary critics opine that Tutuola's language inconsistencies could be have been read as a way to retain his linguistic Yoruba cadence and worldview. Hot debates notwithstanding, Tutuola was the first writer to be published in English in the West. Soyinka regards him as the forerunner of magical realism, defying "rigid compartmentalisation," linearity and evincing a constant "quiet but steady revival" (Soyinka 2014, viii).

### *Chinua Achebe: The Icon and Trailblazer*

Chinua Achebe became a symbol of African and Nigerian Literature. He concocted a definitely distinctive African voice infused with an impeccable English prose, peppered with indigenous proverbs and sayings from his native Igbo and the depiction of the pre-colonial societies and their colonial encounter as well as the post-colonial unresolved cultural tensions. Achebe has been praised for his instinctive conjunction of history and literature, for the elegance of language —"a supple English moulded and fitted to the poetic necessities, the cultural resonances and sensibilities of an African language and experience" (Thelwell 2013, 2137). Moreover, Achebe is said to have turned the postmodernist western novel into "an instrument of serious moral discourse and cultural discourse" (2140). He imbricated historical explanations, moral and political issues, described the national experience through recourse to

indigenous and popular culture (2155). Many critics have gone so far as to observe that Achebe *invented* African Literature.

Many of his contemporaries' works of fiction —Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* and *Burning Grass* (1961), Chukwuemeka Ike's *Toads for Supper* (1965), Unuora Nzeku's *Highlife for Lizards* (1965) and Elechi Amadi's *Great Ponds* (1969) — are said to have had *Things Fall Apart* as a model. Achebe's well-known trilogy: *Things Fall Apart* first published in 1958, *No longer at Ease* which was edited in 1960, and *The Arrow of God* published in 1964 have been re-edited and translated into several languages. *A Man of the People* was first published in 1966 and completes the landscape of postcolonial Nigeria. The by now canonical *Things Fall Apart*, released on the eve of Nigeria's independence, has sold three million copies in English and has been translated into fifty-two languages. The novel depicts the conflict of faith, identity, loyalty and values engendered by the contact with the coloniser. As Ekwueme Thelwell puts it, the reader is smoothly conducted into a world where gods, ancestors and man coexist, where tradition could be very cruel in order to preserve moral and social balance by ancestral custom, ritual and law, where the word has value (2013). By and large, the four novels could be considered as having separate plots. However, regarded as a whole, they are set to depict the process of estrangement the Igbo communities experienced from the first contact with the white colonialists and missionaries, the gradual loss of power of native chiefs to the fragile political and cultural context of the nation on the brink of independence and the hybrid condition of the Nigerian protagonists in post-independence Nigeria. In the books he wrote after the civil war—*Girls at War* (1972) and *The Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)—he was mainly devoted to denouncing the structural flaws of the broken nation emerging from the civil contest under the usually corrupt military rule.

Kalu Ogbaa observes that Achebe used the usual elements of fiction —“plot, point of view and language, tone and voice, setting characters, and symbols and imagery— to convey its themes,” he “gave them a unique quality of ‘Africanness’ which makes the novel a hybrid genre in terms of verbal art, cultural elements, and overall contents —a quality that separates it from the British corpus” (1999, 3). In “Chinua Achebe: The Invention and Mastery of Modern African Literature” (2013), Emeka Aniagolu exposes what are, for him, the Achebean main contributions to the creation of a particular African novel. He mentions the careful imbricated introduction of four literary qualities: the proverbial and the poetic narrative, the transliterate technique and the art of

purposeful complexity. The *proverbial narrative* is shown in the “employment of the African (and especially, Igbo) conversational style of integrating proverbs into description, dialogue, philosophy, explanation, imagery, allegory and context, with particular reference to storytelling” (598). In traditional Igbo society this oratorical use of discourse has symbolic, aesthetic and literary value and functions. Secondly, the *poetic narrative* serves the engagement of allegory with moral questions or their opposites in search of a relative instead of an absolute resolution of a conflict (607). The Achebean prose privileges collective memory and pre-literate oral tradition and its means of preservation. In addition, by resorting to the *transliterate device* or technique, “Achebe did not merely translate extant texts from his original Igbo language into English. He drew entirely from Igbo oral tradition for which he had to, of necessity, provide interpretive (hermeneutical) and idiomatic vehicle to deliver his reader, especially his non-Igbo/non-African reader, to the cross-cultural destination of their meaning, ethos and pathos” (2013, 692). Eventually, Achebe is said to have mastered the *art of purposeful complexity*. Anialogu defines this trait as “the literary technique of deliberately weaving together into a quilted fabric an impressive tapestry of complementing, conflicting, confirming, confounding, hopeful and disappointing stories of heroic and flawed characters, motives, tying them together into a delicately balanced, ironic and powerfully evocative narrative” (699). Undeniably, the Igbo writer’s mastery of English expertly channelled the African zeitgeist. As Nelson Mandela beautifully put it: “There was a writer named Chinua Achebe, in whose company the prison walls falls down” (2000, proceedings of Achebe’s 70th Birthday Conference/Celebrations at Bard College).

### *Wole Soyinka: Ogun and Activism*

Although his plays, essays, poems and memoirs have been the prominent bulk of his oeuvre, Soyinka has left his particularly muscular and always demanding prose in three novels: *The Interpreters* (published in 1965), *Season of Anomy* (1973b) and *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth* (published in Africa in 2020). His staunchly ideological stance and activism led to his imprisonment from 1967 to 1969 because of his alleged sympathy with the Biafran cause and, eventually, to his temporary exile in the US in the 1990s. In the first two fictional works, he harkens back to the mythological Yoruba pantheon to speak up for the contemporary ills of his country. Ogun, the Yoruba god of creation and destruction is closely bound to the complex characters and plots of his novels. Ogun’s ambiguous personality provides Soyinka with a protean source

to proclaim the dynamics of social change, representing the dichotomy of both individuality and oneness. According to Narullah Mambrol, *The Interpreters* could be considered a dark comedy in which the Nigerian author seeks to depict the characters' "refusal to accept the wholesale imported western values and mores, as well as a sense that the indigenous worldview should mould the new state" (2019, *literariness.org*). *Season of Anomy*, on the other hand, is structured around two antithetic worlds: Aiyero, a rural backward environment, and the modern African city. Although there is no sentimentality in the rural depiction, Soyinka's faith lies in the still extant communal fabric of the rustic context. The city is excessively westernised, corrupt and tyrannical in its practices (July, 1981). Almost fifty years after the publication of *Season of Anomy*, Soyinka — a man in his mid-eighties— has produced a "tasty and pulchritudinous satire" (Nwelue 2021, *thelagosreview.ng*). The blurb of the novel —which has presently only been published in Africa— promises a story "of pact and alliance formed between four friends, to make an impactful change in their nation." Their paths crisscross while intermingling "with prominent religious, community and government leaders", while "the tide begins to turn against them, with dire consequences" (Bookcraft Africa 2020). As Nwelue remarks, the novel is decidedly political, observant, flawlessly written —"full of words you may never have heard or seen or read anywhere" (2021)—and especially peopled with the upper class. Soyinka's prose is not an easy reading. It is as elitist as full of wisdom, and always strictly reserved for a few initiated.

### *Voices from the Periphery: Phebean Ajibola Ogundipe and Mabel Segun*

The critic Augustine Assah establishes two phases as regards the thematic and ideological concerns of African women's literary fiction. The first prose works could be said to have had the imprint "the politicisation of the domestic" (2011, 193) and comprise the fictions produced between 1947 and 1974. The dates account for the publication of Phebean Ogundipe's short story "Nothing So Sweet" and 1975, in Assah's terms, is the year characterised by the radicalisation of this private realm due to the International Year of the Woman (196). The second phase is issued from the 1975 onwards. Rigid as these landmarks could appear at first sight, they could serve the purpose of delineating the timid and conciliatory first attempts to denounce issues such as that of subordinated women to the private spheres towards a gradually more overt challenge of the patriarchal status quo. Ogundipe's short story is considered epoch-making since it tackled issues which became fiercely debated afterwards: "girl-child education, child marriage, forced marriage, polygyny,

intergenerational conflict, construction of hybrid identities, and, above all, female resilience” (Assah, 197). “Nothing So Sweet” is the story of a girl’s arranged marriage at the age of two. The illiterate future husband would be in charge of her education in return for his wife’s monitoring his business. She is ignorant of such an arrangement until her education stops. From this moment on, she resists the family agreement for a long time to no avail. Once married, her only hope lies in her European friends of a nearby mission. Her husband, who associates the mission with the colonial government, sets her free. What is remarkable in the protagonist’s plight is her resolution and will to create a space for negotiation. Apparently, many African women opted for running to Christian missions in order to escape such circumstances. The title of the story, “Nothing So Sweet,” makes reference to an open-ended freedom in the protagonist’s final words: “I was free, free...” (Mupotsa 2005, 135). As was observed by Assah, Ogunjipe’s short story also depicts many of the stylistic features which later female Nigerian authors would further use and refine: first-person narration, female perspective, voice and agency as well as “indigenous Yorùbá idiom into the mainstream standard English used as diction” (2011, 197).

Mabel Segun’s main bulk of literary writing was written during the 80s. She has written fiction and poetry for adults and has co-authored books for young readers such as *My Father’s Daughter* (1965), *Olu and The Broken Statue* (1985), *My Mother’s Daughter* (1986), *The First Corn* (1989) and *The Twins and the Tree Spirits* (1991). She is said to have founded the Children’s Literature Association in Nigeria in the late 70s. In an interview she had with Wale Okediran (1997), Segun emphasises that in 1954 —twelve years before Flora Nwapa’s first novel *Efuru* was released— she had already had three poems translated into German and published in the anthology *Shwarzer Orpheus*. In addition, she reinforces her condition of being a forerunner of Nigerian literature since she pointed out that, by 1958, she had already published in another German anthology. She seemed intent on stressing her pioneering literary role by saying:

Before these foreign anthologies were published, I contributed short stories, poems and essays to the Ibadan University College magazine, the *University Herald* (1950-54). In 1962, I was the only female writer included in *Reflections* —still before Flora’s debut with her novel. In these early days, poetry and short stories were usually published in anthologies. Single author collections were rare. (Okediran 1997, 231)

First publications queries notwithstanding, Ogundipe and Segun were undoubtedly the first crystallising results of the independent country in search of a story that needed to be told, indeed, from the female perspective.

*Flora Nwapa: A Soothing yet Unyielding Dissent*

She is commonly regarded as *the* pioneer woman writer in Nigeria —albeit running the risk of contradicting Mabel Segun. Nwapa was one of the first African female authors to publish a considerable oeuvre in the West in English —together with other continental writers such as Marie-Claire Matip from Cameroon, Rebecca Njau from Kenya, Yvonne Vera from Zimbabwe, Bessie Head from South Africa or Mariama Bâ from Senegal, to name the most prominent. For this reason, Nwapa has been considered a forerunner for other women writers. In her most well-known and iconic novel *Efuru* (published in 1966), Flora Nwapa describes in a direct and bare prose —interspersed with traditional proverbs— the subtle though inexorable change the village communities were experiencing with the arrival of the whites, their new religion and laws. In many ways, the main protagonist, Efuru, is a traditional woman who accepts wilfully and with honour the ancestral rituals of her lot. Hence, she is circumcised before marriage, she is criticised because she cannot bear children and she happily accepts polygamy. However, in many tenuous ways, she starts to defy traditions by preferring western science to native *dibias*, she adopts a daughter, she marries her first husband against the prescribed rituals and dowry, and is shown happily swimming in the river with her second husband. Two important tropes are reinforced throughout the novel: Efuru's consecration to Mammy Wata or *Unhamiri*, the goddess of the lake, who represents material bounty even though she is a barren woman, and the fact that Efuru's connection to *Unhamiri* provides her with a kind of special place in the community which brings her respect. Thus, her "(re-)productive" role is forgiven by becoming a priestess. In addition, Nwapa delves on the strong bonds among women, both sometimes against the patriarchal system and, on other occasions, strongly complicit to it.

In Nwapa's later novels and short stories, her female characters become more openly defiant of the tight communal native culture, they prefer the urban contexts and are economically independent. They are educated, they do not follow tradition, they get jobs and earn money and they refuse to marry, and have many lovers. In some short stories, she also deals with the civil war consequences. In her second novel, *Idu* (published in 1970), the two women

characters —Idu and Ojiugo— suffer from communal and family pressure to conceive a child and are under constant threat of their husbands’s having second wives to have descendants. These main characters also rebel against prescribed rituals. *Never Again* (published in 1975) is Nwapa’s personal experience of the Biafran war. *One Is Enough* (1981) and *Women Are Different* (1986) deal with the increasing independence of women —who choose the lax city environs— and their rejection of permanent ties with men, even though motherhood remains yet a matter of negotiation. As Stephanie Newell observes, “‘barrenness’ represents a crisis point in the domestic value system” which engenders a series of questionings on the socially objectified role of the woman’s body (2009, 154). All in all, Nwapa was the first Nigerian writer, who withholding the label of feminist, started to consider female independence and a different role for her lot, other than being a mother or a wife. The critic Chikwenye Ogunyemi claims that Nwapa “tries to maintain a delicate political balance between the sexes” which is also “an important feature of the original myths” (1996, 133).

In her essay “Women and Creative Writing in Africa,” Flora Nwapa challenged the view of women depicted by her fellow Nigerian writers. She dryly pointed out that Achebe, Soyinka, Clark, Ekwensi and Amadi made uniform portraits of women as prostitutes, or intolerable characters by frequently focusing on the “physical, prurient, negative nature of woman” (2007, 528). She firmly believed in the crucial role women could play in their societies —apart from being mothers and wives. She refers to the powerful influence of the *Umuada* —all daughters born in a clan, married or not— or the *Umunwunyeobu* —the wives of a clan. She strongly advocated for their function as peacemakers and as courts of appeal. In addition, she refers to the healing powers and leadership role exercised by priestesses in the riverine areas. Nwapa explicitly defined the intended common thread in all her fictions as “women’s struggles for survival by whatever means as they respond to the tremendous changes in society” (Nwapa 2007, 529). She acknowledged the fact that African female writers *had found a voice*, however, she deemed, barely heard in the continent. She thanked the western feminist sisters at home and abroad for the encouragement and the visibility they promoted though, she mused, without the commitment of African men, the task seemed to her rather futile. Eventually, she urged female authors to depict the aggression African women were frequently exposed to by men, to show that women can be leaders in their communities by exploiting the indigenous traditions which, she believed, could



forge and thrive along “democracy, tolerance, sharing and mutual support” (532).

Nigerian female authors of the First-Generation had to grapple with a male dominated arena and what Uduopegeme Yakubu has termed “arrested sexuality” (2001, 154). He contends that Nigerian men writers refrained from representing women sexuality in their fictions either by their “lack of capacity or interest” in creating female characters who are sexually independent and non-dependant on men. His article “Decolonizing the Female Sexuality: What Nigerian Female Writers Don’t Write” (2001) endeavours to establish how a group of Nigerian female writers have sought to disrepresent or misrepresent women sexuality. He argues that the close relationship between epistemology—the representations of the authority of God, tradition, masculinity and reason—and sexuality, entailing certain gender roles as justified and essentially patriarchal, considered men as the “primary *knowers*.” “Women become knowers of the ‘right sexual experience’ only within the context of knowledge prescribed by patriarchy as legitimate” (154; original emphasis). Yakubu considers how “arrested sexuality,” closely related to heterosexuality, has been “the dominant and accepted mode of sexual expression and has served as a major agency for women’s oppression” (2001, 154). He analyses how the Nigerian male-dominated literary canon depicts women in heterosexual relationships, which consider them as “men’s sexual pleasure and objects of sexual violence or danger” (154). Thus, he emphasises that many female writers, and especially those of the first generation, started to “write to right” women (155). Moreover, Oloruntoba-Oju et al. (2013) contend that the frequent relegation of fictional female characters to the domestic spheres—as nurturing mothers and wives—has had the effect of creating a *stereotyped* mother, daughter, sister, rural woman or city pariah as a romanticised or static entity clinging to the old ways of life. Interestingly, Assah observes that the irruption of the First-Generation women writers into the public literary arena also sought to recover their language of social discourse; that is, “the erasure, subtle or brutal, of the mismatch between women’s recognized role as first imparters of speech/culture/oral literature and the generally institutionalized patriarchal marginalization of women’s speech in power relations” (2011, 194). In other words, writers such as Nwapa broke the silence of an essentialised portrayal of women. However, as critic Mary Kolawole has pointed out, the female writers’ approach at the time was invariably a *negotiation* model, not openly confrontational. This inclusive dialogue—often called “palaver” (Ogunyemi 1996)—presupposed men and women acknowledging the need to improve

women's plight, opportunities and (mis-)representations (Kolawole 1999). Flora Nwapa's angered question resounds: "Are there no women in Africa today who can say? 'To hell with men and marriage / I don't want to have children / I want to be free and do as I please.'" To what she prophetically mulled over "Perhaps the time has not come yet" (Nwapa 2007, 530).

## **2.6. Second-Generation Nigerian Literature**

### **2.6.1. Historical Context: From the Oil Boom to the Second Republic**

After three years of civil war, Nigeria emerged politically and socially wounded though economically dazzled by the oil boom expansion. The crude oil reserves had been discovered by the 1950s in the Niger Delta region. As it became apparent, the exploitation of this natural resource, coupled with the chronic ethnic rivalries, were the most conspicuous causes of the Igbo/Biafran secession. The country changed abruptly from having a mainly agrarian economy to depend almost exclusively on the petroleum revenue. Although Nigeria was hailed to be Africa's titan, oil wealth was never distributed among the population at large, and a kleptocratic elite of politicians and entrepreneurs profited single-handedly from international contracts. Falola and Heaton (2014) emphasise the fact that a growing political disregard divorced three different regimes—two military and one civilian—from the vast majority of Nigerians, who have remained up to the present, mired in state fraudulent elections and structural dysfunctions. Essential services such as the sustained supply of water and electricity are not yet steady in provision in many parts of the country.

After the Biafran war, General Yakubu Gowon remained the new federal leader of state. Five years later, and due to the increasing corruption of the oil "rentier" mismanagement policies of his administration, a bloodless coup installed General Murtala Mohammed—a northerner—in office. The latter had announced a new era of "honest government and a transition to civilian rule" (Falola and Heaton, 188). Unfortunately, such good intentions were thwarted a year later when a counter-coup led by General Olusegun Obasanjo—of Yoruba ethnicity—killed his predecessor. Hence, national unity, an effort to uproot corruption and a process of transition towards democracy were the professed aims of the new government. The 70s and the 80s were times of the Afrobeat jazz singer Fela "Anikulapo" Kuti—who was politically influenced by the Black Power movement in the US—and its fierce defiance to the military regime.

In 1979, the Second Republic was constituted and Obasanjo transferred power to Alhaji Shehu Shagari. The democratic government was embarked on several federal projects to build national unity through universities and mass media stations in every state. However, the country was stagnated due to an oil-caused recession and incurred in heavy international debt. Although Shagari won a re-election in 1983, the warped circumstances of the process led to bloody ethnic clashes which called again for military intervention. Four months after the presidential election, General Muhammadu Buhari was appointed head of state. During the 80s, many activist organisations erupted in the Niger Delta region denouncing the environmental wreckage exerted by the international companies in connivence with governmental policies. As can be evinced, political volatility and economic stagnation were the signs of the times.

#### 2.6.2. Main Literary Concerns, Authors and Fictional Works

The time span referred to as the Second-Generation Nigerian Literature could be delimited within the novels written in the aftermath of the Biafran War in the 1970s to encompass the plays and poetry anthologies written in the 70s and mid-80s. Immediately after the civil confrontation, especially famous were writers of Yoruba extraction. Igbo writers' fiction was for a time scarce. When they did start to write, they were mainly concerned "with the spectres of arrested decolonization, failing collapsed states, economic stagnation, widespread autocratic misrule and the delegitimisation of the grand narratives of emancipation" (Jeyifo in Nwakanma 2008, 7). According to Stephanie Newell (2009), from the 80s onwards, the characteristic realist prose of protest —so in tune with the Nigerian novel of the independence and post-independence times— gradually morphed into a more *avant garde* or experimental style which was to be included within the third generation. In general terms, as mentioned before, the 1970s witnessed a flourishing of theatre and playwrights among whom we could mention Tunde Fatunde, Olu Obafemi, Wale Ogunyemi, Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotoso or Bode Sowande, who were intent on conveying the excesses of the Nigerian ruling elites. The plays of this period were grounded on Marxism/socialism and frequently invited critical audience participation (Richards, 1996). Likewise, poetry also excelled at the time. The collections of the consecrated Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Uche Nduka, Ogaga Ifowodo, Toyin Adewale-Gabriel, Obi Nwakanma and Epaphras Osondu, to name but the most prominent, evinced the disillusioned tone which ensued after the Nigerian independence euphoria. Niyi Osundare was hailed as "The

People's Poet" since his self-professed concern was to avoid the obscurity of his predecessors —Soyinka, Clark or Okigbo. He is said to have shared with the poets of his generation an ideological commitment of denouncement and the use of features of orature (Balogun, 2004). Stephanie Newell claims that Second-Generation writers both "expressed despair at the political corruption and violence spreading through the region" (2009, 23), and that there was also a parallel optimism which saw literature as a way to combat the doomed state of affairs. Art, in their opinion, was not to be divorced from politics, and those were no moments for *iregbe* (idleness and experimentation). Osundare, Jeyifo and Osofisan were among the main literary voices of the moment who thought that "art should be accessible, forward-looking, and committed to positive social and economic transformations" (Newell 2009, 161). Appiah has defined this second stage literature as "deligitimation fictions" (2007, 663) since they not only rejected western standards, but also the African nationalist bourgeoisie projects. He opines that Second-generation Nigerian literature was hardly postmodernist. Rather, it was deeply humanist and ethical while in search for an end to human suffering and poverty.

Although many male writers expressed the oppressive zeitgeist through novels —Festus Iyayi, Isidore Okpewho, Kole Omotoso and the northerners Abubakar Gimba and Labo Yari could be said to be prominent— the female authors saw in the novel genre a suitable tool to vent the pent-up neocolonial situation of women. Prominent among the authors of this generation were Adaora Lily Ulasi, Buchi Emecheta, Funmilayo Fakunle, Helen Ovbiagele (a popular author of the Pacesetters collections), Hauwa Ali and Zaynab Alkali, among the most representative. Some writers such as Christie Ajayi, Remi Adedeji, Audrey Ajose, Ifeoma Okoye, Teresa Meniru, Rosina Umelo, Rosemary Uwemedimo, Martina Nwakoby or Helen Ofurum wrote stories for an audience of young adult and children. These writers matured and grew up exponentially in the 70s. Their narratives were constructed upon those of the previous authors and started a "shift from the colonial to the contemporary world, the rural to the urban, the illiterate characters to the educated [...]. No longer are they compelled to tell the sagas of their ancestors, [...] since their predecessors have accomplished that duty" (Ogunyemi 1996, 288). It is worthwhile noticing at this juncture that these writers came from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they were "on the frontiers of literature, competing in a man's world at a moment when Nigeria [was] in deep crisis" (Ogunyemi, 285). Ogunyemi calls these women authors, such as Zaynab Alkali, "sweet mothers." She defined them as "a hybrid of the Woolfian *Angel in the*

*House* and the matriarch who can criticize and discipline her ward when circumstances warrant it” (286). In Augustine Assah’s terms, the new generation of authors politicised the private realms associated with women and rejected silence (2011). At the same time, they questioned the failed nationalist discourse which had promised women liberation. In other words, the struggle for independence women had fought hand in hand with their male counterparts did not devolve them the emancipation men had allegedly acquired. Although silence *was* broken, Chikwenye Ogunyemi observes that the women authors of the first and second generations have been mainly ignored by readers and critics in Africa and abroad. Their literary works were mainly intended for women and sought to acknowledge and give visibility to their burdens. The heroines of their novels are mainly mothers —though not passive victims of this condition— and their efforts are mainly directed towards the wellbeing of the community, instead of the individual self. Stylistically, the focalisation, the narrators and the protagonists are invariably women, and their universes and experiences prioritised are, likewise, women-centred. At this juncture some closing observation should be made concerning some writers who, having published their fictions in the late 80s or in the 90s, are thematically and ideologically more in tune with the Second-Generation authors. Such is the case of Simi Bedford, Eno Obong and, to some extent, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo.

Additionally, most of the Second-Generation authors, Ogunyemi claims, would not declare themselves to be openly feminists. Their stance was more akin to a Womanist position, one which propitiates dialogue with their male counterparts. These writers still accepted the self-effacement of women for the sake of commonweal. “The lesson that needs to be passed on is that a strong community is born only when support is mutual, and strong women are not chased to the periphery” (Ogunyemi 1996, 19). By the same token, Second-Generation writers also denounced the “continued collaboration between inept and corrupt black leaders and white men” which have “exacerbated the problems of colonialism and postcolonialism restricting African females to a woman’s space” (Ogunyemi, 6). Interestingly, what Second- and Third-Generation women writers have in common is an evident urgency in endowing women with agency. Even though their fictions may rise fierce opposition, they would participate, Ogunyemi points out, “without waiting for a formal invitation” (7). By the same token, most writers of both generations would resort to communicating in a language that is characteristically Nigerian. They offered traces of Yoruba, Igbo, and Pidgin English as well as English in an effort to build bridges between communities inside and outside Nigeria.

In the same fashion that Onitsha produced a popular market in the 40s and 50s, Hausa popular literature, also known as “Kano Market Literature” flourished in the the 80s and 90s in northern Nigeria —since most of the novels were, and still are, written and sold in this city. These romance fictional works are written in Hausa and are commonly known as *Littattafan Soyayya* —which means books about love. This fiction has been criticised on the grounds of corrupting young girls. However, the stories are said to explore issues that very much concern Muslim women such as polygyny, girl and forced marriages, purdah, and the education of girls (Musa 2019).

*Adaora Lily Ulasi: A Detective Mind in a Man’s World*

During the 70s, Ulasi worked as a journalist, and as such, was compelled to brace ahead in a male-dominated milieu. During the military regime of Yakubu Gowon, she “wisely chose to use the British colonial era as a safe place to attack postcolonial and neocolonial hegemonies established” (Ogunyemi 1996, 187). Ulasi mainly wrote detective novels. The bulk of her plots pivoted around murders and the discovery of the motives behind. She was engaged in describing the dynamics of power relations between white colonials and black tribe chiefs, not visibly taking an overt position towards any of them. Her prose is accurate with a special gift for dialogue. She also intended an approximation to Nigerian Pidgin, which critics such as Ogunyemi have observed was not very precise or accurately mirrored. Ogunyemi has labeled Ulasi’s novels with the term “juju fiction” since the writer invariably includes the supernatural element of Igbo beliefs and magic without giving a scientific explanation to the strange events, dreams and rituals unfolding in her plots. Her characters are mainly men, although her women are usually strong-willed and independent. It has been pointed out that Ulasi’s feminist stance is rather indirect. However, she seems to surreptitiously feminise her men characters. As Ogunyemi proposes, her “sexual politics involves making the men feel what life is like for women” (1996, 201). In three of her novels *Many Thing You No Understand* (first published in 1970), *Many Thing Begin for Change* (1971) and *Who is Jonah?* (1978), Ulasi chose the colonial landscape and the British interference with Igbo leaders and communities. In Yemi Mojola’s opinion, *Who Is Jonah?* is Ulasi’s most accomplished novel in terms of the detective structure (1988). The plot unfolds around the murder of a British colonial officer and her Nigerian lover’s deaths. A ruthless British police officer —MacIntyre— is in charge of the investigation. After having arrested two Nigerian suspects, Jonah Isu and his

son Joseph, the latter unexpectedly, and in mysterious circumstances, disappears leaving no trace. Almost satirically, Ulasi disempowers the imperialist establishment—with its superiority in arms and information services—when confronted with the indigenous juju exertions. Unluckily, Adaora Lily Ulasi's books are currently mostly out of print. Her concerns with women's causes could have been suggested in an oblique manner, even though her dexterity at structure and prose is remarkable and the uncanny tone of her fictions built with nuance.

*Buchi Emecheta: A Riled, Courageous Mother*

Emecheta lived most of her adult life in England. She studied and raised her children single-handedly since she had had a very turbulent relation with her oftentimes fictionally depicted sexist and violent husband. *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and her autobiography, *Head above Water* (1984) expose her private quandary as an unhappy wife also tolerating racial discrimination. At a very young age and having given birth to five children, Emecheta not only divorced her husband but also studied sociology and wrote incessantly—even when her ex-husband had burnt the first manuscript of her novel, *The Bride Price* (1976). As a matter of fact, many of her female characters are said to be a biographical version of herself. Her heroines are wilful and struggle for survival against stereotyped and often flat male/husband characters. In *The Joys of Motherhood* (published in 1979), she fiercely criticised the double yoke of African patriarchy and the colonial post-independence Nigeria establishment. At a time when African mothers were considered the guarantors of tradition, Emecheta was intent on dismantling this symbolic status. Her character Nnu Ego suffers the burdens of motherhood twice. First, she cannot bear children and is repudiated by her first husband. Secondly, she endures her prolific descent which she can barely raise. Having spent all her life following patriarchal mandates, she finds herself alone in old age with the bitterness of ungrateful children who forget about their mother's efforts in their upbringing. In *Kehinde* (released in 1994), Emecheta contrasts the experience of living in England to that of Nigeria. She expounds her ideas on women's education and against polygyny. Her character Kehinde openly defies the stifling pressure of communal tradition and seeks a life on her own returning to England with her children, in spite of the lingering threat of racism and unemployment. All in all, Emecheta's characters are more determined than Nwapa's and defy the Nigerian status quo more brazenly.

As Chikwenye Ogunyemi has pointed out, Emecheta's novels are called "been-to" fictions, that is, the motif of the journey or the return to Nigeria, having experienced another reality, presupposes a loss or an indelible change. "In the hazardous venture for the material world, the character loses something valuable —the original self, innocence, and contentment— as s/he becomes gradually engrossed in the upheaval of a new existence, that spells displacement and unbelonging" (1996, 221). If Emecheta criticised the Nigerian society with the detachment of someone who observes from the distance, she also describes the intersectional mores of race, gender and class on African women in England. For someone who defined herself as a feminist with small "f," she appeared to have been much committed to denouncing sexist excesses as well as improving the situation of her lot.

*Zaynab Alkali: A Voice from the North*

Zaynab Alkali was born in the northern state of Borno and pursued her education at Bayero University in the state of Kano while also teaching at the University of Maiduguri (Edwin 2006). Her first book —*The Stillborn* (published in 1984)— won instant recognition from the prestigious Association of Nigerian Authors Award. Being herself a devout Muslim, Alkali portrays motley Muslim female characters in her fictions. Interestingly, Li —the protagonist of her first novel— is a self-determined and wilful adolescent who contests hackneyed images of Muslim women. While her mother appears to bear the burden of an unhappy marriage and self-righteous husband, Li could unabashedly confront her father and openly dislikes polygamy. Her sister Awa refers to her as having masculine traits. Another protagonist in *The Stillborn*, Grandma —in fact, one of Li's grandfather's wives— is depicted as "[s]hrewd and dominating, she had driven three other wives from the household and had ruled father and son with an iron hand" (Alkali 1984, 8). Grandma's physical attributes and attitude could be associated to the Mammy Wata stereotype; sensuous, independent and with no children. The novel's plot develops as a bildungsroman which starts with a defying young Li who wants to leave the village in pursuit of a city dream, continues as a still resolute married woman who learns to patiently wait for her husband's return, and eventually reaches her adulthood with acceptance of her destiny re-negotiating the terms of her marriage.

As Rotimi Johnson has observed, Alkali's concern "goes beyond the theme of women's emancipation to dwell on the human predicament in a society



undergoing rapid transformations” (1988, 649). The emerging new world of the city is contrasted to the old ways of the village. The novel is wisely interspersed with a repertoire of proverbs and popular sayings which clearly serve Alkali’s purpose of further questioning both world-views. In addition, Shirin Edwin (2006) argues that Alkali’s characters in *The Virtuous Woman* (1987) and *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997) evidently contest clichés thrust upon Muslim women by African feminist critics. Edwin seeks to demonstrate how these women protagonists, who follow the Islamic faith, are seemingly independent, they pursue the education much favoured by men characters, travel and are open to mobility, feel at ease with polygamy and remain prominent members of their communities, thriving economically and emotionally. Unexpectedly, considering Alkali’s style and characterisation from the perspective of a reader who has not lived in Nigeria, the cultural differences of the families and northern communities of the country do not seem to be categorically different from authors of other ethnic origins.

### *2.6.3. Feminist African Literary Criticism*

The section that follows is a general analysis of how African female writers and African literary critics responded to western feminism and the main strands and concerns of African feminist theory and African feminist literary criticism. The reason for the inclusion of this scrutiny is to address and explain the reaction and evolution of feminism in Africa and the diaspora and its exertions on literature. During the 80s and the 90s several scholars and writers in Africa and the American diaspora sought to define a feminist agenda in tune with the specific needs and contexts of black women. Two main reasons compelled female African writers and critics to challenge definitions of the so-called “African woman.” The first was the acknowledgment that, for too long, African literary criticism had been an eminently male-dominated realm which had oftentimes rendered women writers —and literary characters— into a trite, and sometimes almost invisible, representation. The second reason was the growing need to challenge the definition of African women’s issues by white —or black— western feminisms. Even though many affinities with the international feminist movement were emphasised, African feminists saw it fit to delineate African agendas located on the specificities of each literary and socio-political milieu. As has been widely suggested, if something could be said about African feminist literary theory is not only its oppositional stance towards African masculinities and western feminisms, but also its conspicuous reference to the plurality of discourses produced by West African female writers. As Carol

Boyce Davis has observed, the term “uprising textualities” serves to emphasise that the most creative and disturbing African fiction works emerged outside the dominant discourses and genres; that is, they were the so-called *peripheral narratives* positioned in contrast to white, patriarchal and Euro-feminist standpoints (1994).

As a consequence of the extremely negative view that western feminism frequently had in West African media, governmental policies, and some literary academia—usually associated to man-hate, single or divorced women, female sex work, lesbian and anti-maternal positions—many African authors have decidedly pronounced themselves as *non-feminists* or tepidly so. Women writers, at least those publishing in the 80s and 90s, sought to break free from “the limited range of stereotypes circulating in African popular and literary culture, and reinstate the story of ‘being a woman in the real complex sense of the term’” (Ogundipe 1987, 8). Two Nigerian male literary critics particularly confrontational and aggressive towards feminist authors were Charles Nnolim and Ibekwe Chinweizu. By the same token, very popular African writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo or Buchi Emecheta openly declared their repudiation of western feminism on the grounds of its being openly related to sex and “copycats of white women” (Ogundipe 1990, 68). African writers did not appear to be willing to operate outside their own social and political African contexts. Instead, they preferred terms which were more palatable to their own realities, such as *Stiwanism*, *Motherism*, *Femalism*, *Gynism*, *Nego-Feminism* or the most popular African interpretation of Alice Walker’s *Womanism* with its affirmation of motherhood. Such a variety of labels could account for, Stephanie Newell contends, the “African women’s sustained quest to establish new spaces for expression of gender identities that are neither ‘westernized’ in their influences, nor complicit with the ways in which women have been idealized or stigmatized in African nationalist discourses” (2009, 153). Newell summarises the standpoint of African writers and critics alike by saying that literature by West African authors invites to “participate in debates about gender: positioned as women between the local and the global, they highlight the ideological tensions affecting African women without necessarily promoting easy solutions or cures” (158).

In his essay “Feminism, Postcolonialism and the Contradictory Orders of Modernity” (2007) Ato Quayson holds the view that representation in postcolonial and feminist theory has had two main meanings. One is political and the other discursive. The first has to do with civic representation in

democratic systems. The second is concerned with the images, tropes or concepts constructed “to project an image of some person or persons” (586). Quayson stresses the crucial importance and consequences that discursive representations usually have on the domains of everyday life for the affected subjects and their agency. He affirms that discursive representation seems of vital concern for third-world women because of the political consequences it may exert on their lives. Chandra Talpade Mohanty takes issue with the contention that some feminist writers “discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular ‘third-world woman’” (1994, 197). This homogenisation, Quayson observes, contributes to reifying, say, African women as *the other* of the western female in cultural, material and discursive terms. The actual scenario is, therefore, a complex negotiation “between an implied hegemonic Western feminist discourse and the heterogeneous conditions of the Third-World women” (2007, 586). Quayson also observes that certain African nationalistic discourses have “subtly subsumed concerns about women under what turned out ultimately to be patriarchal concerns under the impetus of a nationalist agenda” (2007, 587). Hence, women’s agency and subjecthood has usually been denied or alienated on behalf of those discursive terms. Interestingly, another key notion the Ghanaian critic focuses on is the special juncture African women seem to be placed at, which he defines as a context of “residual and emergent values” (588); that is, at a crossroads between traditional remnants and the globalised new structures and cultural representations.

### *Stiwanism, African Womanism, Motherism and Nego-feminism*

One of the earliest African feminist voices was the Senegalese Awa Thiam with her non-fictional *Black Sisters Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* published in 1978. She exerted a scathing criticism of traditional oppressive practices such as polygamy, forced marriages and female circumcision. Moreover, she included individual voices of African women and sought to evince how they experienced patriarchy as well as the impact of colonialism. Additionally, she articulated the concept of *multiple jeopardy* to explain the three-fold oppression brought to bear on women on account of their sex, class —capitalist exploitation— and race —appropriation of their countries by colonial or neo-colonial powers (Guy-Sheftall 2003). In 1981, Filomina Steady proposed a brand of African feminism in tune with nature, women autonomy and cooperation as well as emphasising the centrality of maternity.

She also questioned African cultures without denigrating them. In addition, the Trinidadian critic Carole Boyce Davis articulated a cogent definition of feminism in her introduction to the journal *Ngambika* (1986). African feminism for her presupposes a common struggle *with* men in order to counteract foreign domination. She underlined that certain “inequities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others” (Boyce Davies 1986, 10).

The 90s were particularly prolific in the emergence of African feminist frames of reference. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie —also known as Molaria Ogundipe— was particularly concerned with defining what African feminism was *not*. She literally claimed that its was not “a cry for any one kind of sexual orientation” and it was not homophobic or heterosexist; it was not “the reversal of gender roles, ‘gender’ being defined simply as socially constructed identities and roles” (2007, 545). In addition, it was not penis or gender envy; it was not “necessarily oppositional to men” (547). It was not “parrots of Western’s women’s rhetoric” (547), or opposed to African culture and heritage. Rather, *Stiwanism* —an acronym for “Social Transformation Including Women in Africa”— was consciousness of being Third-world women —acknowledging the flaws in her culture— emphasising the equality with African men and the joint struggle they should undertake over what she calls the *six mountains* on women’s backs: colonialism, tradition, lack of education, men, race and women themselves.

Turning to *African Womanism*, which was the strand Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi borrowed from the black American writer and critic Alice Walker, it could be defined as an ideology designed *for* African women *by* African women so as to solve issues that are specifically African, either in the continent or in the diaspora. As Chielozona Eze explains:

The African woman’s life, unlike that of her American relative, is shaped by a ‘mother-centered ideology, with its focus on caring –familial, communal, national, and international’ aspect of human relationship. The operative idea behind the concept of Womanism is that the African woman is by nature more disposed toward care and mediation than her western (white) counterpart. Okonjo Ogunyemi lists other issues which the African woman has to contend with, and which define the African woman. These include: ‘militarism, ethnicism (sic), (post)colonialism, poverty, racism, and religious fundamentalism.’ (Ogunyemi in Eze 2015, 315).

Mary Kolawole maintains that Womanism better describes and accommodates to the black woman “reality, identity and dynamics of empowerment” (2002, 96). The approach is for her inclusive, it emphasises cultural context, the centrality of family and the importance of including men in the dialogue. She deplores feminism as a “man-hating” gender ideology. In other words, Womanism is ‘suasive’ (persuading and dissuading) and is not gender polarised. She posits the view that her ancestors had a long history of feminist struggle that has neither been included nor made visible by western feminism.

As far as the term *Motherism* is concerned, the critic Catherine Obianoju Acholonu coined it in 1995 so as to convey a notion that was—in her own terms—central and guiding for African women. She argued that Africa’s role in the world was closely imbricated to the quintessential African continent as a mother. Hence, she proposed that motherhood was pivotal to African arts and was, likewise, an alternative to western feminism. Thus, Acholonu’s Motherism denoted motherhood’s “nature and nurture” (Acholonu 2002, 110). For Acholonu freedom was not divorced from the mother-child space-love and she considered any discussion on African woman as inherently presupposing the motherhood condition. As regards the notion of *Nego-feminism*, the critic Obioma Nnaemeka proposed this African feminist strand by 1999 in her essay “Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa’s Way” to account for the necessary *negotiation* between men and women and the “no ego” position also at stake in the debate. For Nnaemeka

negotiation has the double meaning of “give and take/exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around.” African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise, knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal landmines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. (2003, 377-8)

Nego-feminism seemed to avoid revenge and foster forgiveness—allegedly what most intelligent people do in Nnaemeka’s regard. Moreover, it is an approach which not only negotiates with men, but also with other African feminist tendencies and with western feminisms as well. In that sense, it is considered a step forward in the reconciliation and avoidance of unfruitful and nuanced previous discussions. Alkali et al. observe that Nnaemeka’s position calls for “a change in the goals of the sexed body” (2013, 248). Nnaemeka’s feminist position fosters a common ground for an ongoing conversation between the sexes having in mind psychological and cultural perspectives. All in all, as Eze accurately summarises, these tendencies and nuanced positions

have been African attempts to counteract or negotiate with western dominant feminist goals. What is more, these discussions should be understood as part of the national and postcolonial projects of self-identity definition. In agreement with what Eze rhetorically poses, I also wonder: “has the African woman not become a victim of the grand project of nation-building? Has the African woman not merely become a figure of conviviality at her own expense? What about the needs (joys) of the mother? What about her pain?” (2015, 316). The so-called Third-Generation of authors will not disregard the trope of motherhood, far from this. However, they will embrace a more global agenda in tune with African specificity albeit overtly proffering their role as feminists — with capital “F”— and without the compulsion of minting news names.

## **2.7. Third-Generation Nigerian Literature**

### **2.7.1. Historical Context: From the Brain Drain to the Fourth Republic and #EndSars**

During two years, from 1984 to 1985, the Buhari administration declared his “War Against Indiscipline,” at the end of which, “Nigerians were supposed to have developed a sense of work ethics, patriotism, nationalism, anti-corruption, patience” such as “waiting in lines for goods and services” (Falola and Heaton 2014, 214). Such were the standards Nigerians were asked to endure. In August of 1985, the old cycle of replacement began anew. A counter-coup overthrew Buhari and installed Major General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida —another northerner— in power. He was to implement the infamous Structural Adjustment Programme —commonly known as SAP— monitored by the World Bank and the Breton Woods decisions. Paradoxically, there were oil shortages in the country and the essential structural facilities were in general further eroded. By this time, religious as well as ethnic identities had gained momentum. The *shari’a* law had been established in six northern states and the so-called “born-again” Christian churches sprung up in the rest of the country. The fear of “Islamisation” of Nigeria was an extra ingredient which strongly imprinted on the socio-political agenda. In the southwestern regions of the country, clashes between Christians and Muslims erupted escalating to unprecedented violence.

In 1993 there was an abortive attempt to establish a Third Republic with the election of Chief Moshood Abiola. However, riots between Hausas and Yorubas led to yet another military government in office: that of General Sani

Abacha, one of the most debased Nigerian rulers of all times, sadly-known for his ruthless and utmost disregard for human rights. The 1990s were gloomy regarded for governmental and police abuse and the “brain drain” of intellectuals to the US and Europe. It is estimated that “between 25 and 50 percent of all Nigerians with university educations lived outside the country” (Falola and Heaton, 223). Additionally, Abacha abolished all democratic assemblies and institutions and incarcerated his political rivals —prominent among them were Olusegun Obasanjo and Chief Abiola. A brutal incident crossed over the international agenda. During this time, many residents in the region of the Niger Delta were expressing their discontent with their environment degradation due to the oil business. In 1995, the well-known writer and Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was incarcerated and hanged without trial. After this incident, Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations. Economically, the country suffered from local oil shortages and inflation rates were over 150 percent per annum. Abacha’s main concern was to annul every possibility of democracy return. However, by 1998 the debilitated regime — accused of having an estimated of three billion dollars in foreign accounts (Falola and Heaton 2014)— collapsed. After an alleged heart attack, Abacha died and the next military rulers paved the way for the return to democracy.

The Fourth Republic, however, had as a democratically elected leader a previous military chief, Olusegun Obasanjo. His administration lasted from 1999 to 2007. The new leader was said to have alleviated the economic downfall, although he could not eradicate the structural political flaws of the country. Abuja was turned into the capital in an effort to de-centralise administration, even though Lagos remains the biggest city in the country. Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was president in 2007 but had to leave office in 2009 due to health reasons. Goodluck Jonathan was elected in 2011 and after him, another ex-general has been appointed president: Muhammadu Buhari. The present leader of Nigeria has been accused of using the same military forces and procedures against the civilian population.

Two important social issues have transcended the Nigerian frontiers and gained momentum in the international news and Internet social media. The kidnappings and killings of Boko Haram —a radicalised religious Islamic group which has operated in the northern and mainly rural states of the country since approximately 2009 (Mazza 2018). Its proffered aim is to establish an Islamic State in all the states of Northern Nigeria. It is estimated that “more than twenty thousand people have been killed and over two million displaced by fighting,

and, in a disturbing trend, thousands of women and girls have been abducted and raped” (Mazza, 293). Another crusade young Nigerians are engaged in is the #EndSars demonstrations. SARS (the acronym for Special Anti-Robbery Squad) was created in 1992 to deal with the problem of violent crime. Unfortunately, the unit is said to have kidnapped, tortured, raped and killed many young Nigerians all over the country in clandestine detention centres. According to figures from Amnesty International “there have been at least 82 cases of torture, ill-treatment and extra judiciary execution by SARS between January 2017 and May 2020” (Bisi-Afolabi 2020, *republic.com.ng*). Economic, social and political obstacles notwithstanding, Nigerian people in general and artists in particular are well-known all over the world for their creative vim. Not only do they excel in music and pictorial art, but they also have a well-established popular film industry commonly known as “Nollywood.” As regards literature, frequent festivals and writing workshops are stimulating a humongous and diverse production in the country and the diaspora. Editions of *LIPFest* poetry festival, *Aké* Arts Festival, the *Farafina* creative writing workshops, *Kaduna* Books and Arts Festival, and NLNG Prize for Literature’s poetry editions are just a few of the many organisations that promote and encourage the literary arts.

### 2.7.2. Main Literary Concerns, Authors and Fictional Works

To start with, I will refer to the temporal starting point the Third-Generation of Nigerians is said to have emerged from, while also defining its specific traits, thematic as well as stylistic concerns. I will briefly mention the authors who have published internationally, both those living in the diaspora and those based in Nigeria. To continue, I will refer to Ben Okri, an author who could be defined as a hinge writer. Significantly, he started a period of experimentation with style which has been gradually influencing the extant Achebean exertions on Nigerian literature. In addition, I will refer to four female authors who have contributed to re-shaping the literary landscape of novels in English in Africa and internationally: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Nnedi Okorafor and Chika Unigwe. These writers, as I will expand further on, have prominently wielded clout within an emerging Fourth-Generation. Eventually, I will focus on the international authority Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has gained within the feminist arena, together with the more recent contributions of another Nigerian writer, blogger feminist, Mina Salami. Not only have they expounded original visions of African feminism, but they are also significant referents of the feminist movement internationally.



The ground-breaking introduction by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton entitled “Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations,” and published in 2005 in the South African scholarly journal *English in Africa*, signalled and first theorised on the discernible change evinced in comparison with preceding Nigerian literary productions. This mutation was made apparent by the mid-1980s up until the year 2001, which has been deemed pivotal on the birth of Third-Generation Nigerian Literature. Two variables coupled from this year onward to change the literary landscape: “First was a significant generic *shift from poetry to the novel* and second was the considerable *international acclaim* with which several novels by previously unknown or little-known writers were greeted” (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 8; emphasis added). As Ogaga Okuyade (2014) puts forth, the death of Abacha brought about the return of democracy and with it the hope of a new era to the country. Most of these writers were born after the 1960s — the year that marked the Nigerian independence. This is the reason why they are generally regarded as “the children of the postcolony,” that is, the first generation of Nigerians —and most Africans— to be “severed from the colonial event” (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 14).

The decade spanning from 1985 to 1995 saw a new dawn of Nigerian poetry —embracing the Ibadan-Nsukka axis. Among the most salient poets Afam Akeh, Amatoritsero Ede, Nike Adesuyi, Kemi Atanda Ilori, Chiedu Ezeanah, Remi Raji, Kunle George, Onookome Okome, Sanya Osha, Nduka Otiono, and Sola Olorunyomi could be mentioned. They were clearly inspired by “the catalytic presence” of second generation poets such as Niyi Osundare and Odia Ofeimun (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 8). The South African writer and critic Harry Garuba and his influential anthology *Voices from the Fringe* (1988) beckoned the undoubted status of these Nigerian poets. By contrast, Nigerian theatre was scarce at the time, while a dearth in prose fiction was witnessed. In Adesanmi and Dunton’s terms, apart from some novels by Biyi Bandele, Okey Ndibe and Maik Nwosu and an anthology called *Breaking the Silence* by Toyin Adewale and Omowunmi Segun published in 1996, prose was not prominent during this decade. What seems to be remarkable about Adesanmi and Dunton’s theorisations is the conspicuous omission of the internationally multi-awarded Ben Okri, who had started publishing in the early 1980s, and continued throughout the 1990s up to the present time. In an interview with Nnorom Azuonye (2007), Adesanmi conceded that from 1988 to 2000 a great number of poets emerged although “[t]he only novel by any member of the generation that

attracted attention at the time was Omowumi Segun's *The Third Dimple*" (2007, *sentinel poetry.org*).

According to Adesanmi and Dunton, the so-called "revival of the Nigerian novel" was heralded by the phenomenal international acclaim of three writers who have been since instantly canonised: Helon Habila with his novel *Waiting for an Angel* (2003), which won the Caine Prize in 2001 and the Commonwealth Book Prize for the African region; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* released in 2003—which became an instant bestseller in the US as well as being a multiple award-winning writing; and Chris Abani's *Graceland*, first published in 2004, which followed suit with the same critical enthusiasm. In addition, Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and Akin Adesokan *Roots in the Sky* (2004) were especially popular. Particularly remarkable are the contributions of Unoma Azuah, Lola Shoneyin, Teju Cole, Helen Oyeyemi, Chinelo Okparanta, Abi Daré, Tola Rotimi Abraham, Umaka Olisakwe, Leslie Nneka Arimah, Irenosen Okojie, Tomi Adeyemi or Akwaeke Emezi, to name but some internationally consecrated authors. It is worth mentioning that some of these writers are actually not from Nigeria, but were born in the West to Nigerian parents or migrated to the West at a very early age. The point in question is, however, that their fictions are about Nigerian issues, loci and protagonists. The topics chosen in these fictive works frequently deal with structural deprivation of human rights in Nigeria at the social and private spheres. Likewise, a conspicuous novelistic thrust has been emerging with authors based in Nigeria. Promise Okekwe's *Hall of Memories* (2001), Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* (2001), Bina Nengi-Ilagha's *Condolences* (2002) and Toni Kan's *Ballad of Rage* (2003) were consecrated home-based literary accomplishments which describe the postcolony circumstances of the country. Currently, a growing number of authors based in and publishing in Nigeria are literary-established authorities, such as Molara Wood, Richard Ali, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Elnathan John, and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, or budding authors in the make such as Oyinkan Braithwaite, Isaac Newton Akah, Jessica Tagbajumi, Edify Yakusak, Ifesinachi, Okpagu, Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia or Hymar David, to provide just a sample. At this point, it seems worth pointing out that Elleke Boehmer (2009) and Daria Tunca (2014) have coined the term "Post-Achebean Generation." Undoubtedly, Achebe "ha[d] become a dominant point of origin, a *hyper-precursor* [...] in whose aftermath virtually every African author self-consciously writes" (Boehmer 2009, 142; original emphasis). Most of the authors of the Third-Generation still evince in their fictions the imprint of

Achebe's dictum of the writer as a social and political catalyst. What is more, as Daria Tunca considers, not only have Nigerian writers been defined by this iconic figure, but also African critics have measured the younger writers' productions against the standards of the Achebean prose (2014).

At first sight, it might seem that the Third-Generation resembles the Second-Generation authors. As a matter of fact, there are some affiliations, intertextuality and bifurcations in relation to the previous generations in terms of subject matter, theme, form and narrative technique. Pius Adesanmi strongly believed that the most salient difference was "the dispersal of the thematic core" or "a decentralization of narrative" (Adesanmi in Azuonye, 2007). Furthermore, the question of character's subjecthood and agency is further explored as well as the questioning of nationhood, ethnic loyalties, history, identity and gender issues. As Chris Dunton (2020) argues, *intersectionality* is discernible. In other words, simultaneous sites of oppression such as those caused by gender, race, class, ethnicity or religion are brought to the fore. An aesthetics of trauma and the circumstances of postcoloniality, war and incarceration are still central in the new fictional worlds and in dialectical dynamics with the previous literature. By contrast, there is a severance from the colonial event towards a transnational and nomadic condition. Consequently, migrancy, the re-definition of home and the Janus-faced doubleness and liminality condition or "interstitial experience" (Dunton 2020, 1) of the new writers of the diaspora are fully explored. The issues of racism and "transitional identities" (Fongang 2018) are oftentimes tackled; that is, the refusal of Nigerian characters to assimilate entirely to western culture of the diaspora while, at the same time, there is a re-visited questioning of what it means to be Nigerian. It can be safely affirmed that the new fictions evince a shift from the ur-text of the indigenous aesthetics and village life —the much allegedly anthropologising stance. Contemporary authors are, hence, crafting a different narratorial pace when compared with previous novelists. At the same time, there is a tendency that Spivak has termed "untranslability" or "radical specificity" (2003, 37), which accounts for the ultimate rejection to elucidate a specific culture in terms of western understanding. Authors such as Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri and, and more recently Akwaeke Emezi, have emphasised the assumption that their specific African/Nigerian realities could be layered and not fully apprehended by western standards. In the same line, Caroline Rooney (2003) has proposed the notion of "complementarity." She uses the term —borrowed from quantum physics— to describe different logics which "cannot be absorbed into an overarching, totalising system of universals" because "they operate by separate

rules” (Rooney in Newell 2009, 206). More importantly, Rooney goes on to argue, “the existence of one logic does not require the elimination or delegitimation of the other logic” (206).

Additionally, the contexts of the Third-Generation are decidedly urban, chaotic and entropic and the child narrator is also a frequent recourse. Dunton has claimed: “Nigeria is the powerhouse of the contemporary African novel” (2020, 5) and women writers are, likewise, exponentially increasing in prominence as well as in numbers. Hence, it is not surprising that the agenda of gender inequality echoes in an angrier, plainly militant and “voice-throwing” feminism aimed at rupturing the hegemonic patriarchal status quo (Assah 2011, 195). What is more, Third-Generation authors are insidiously writing about taboo issues such as the woman body as a site of violence, and also physical pleasure, the rejection of motherhood, homosexuality and transsexuality. Sisterly bonds, frequently those of twins, are recreated in all its nuances —not certainly in idealised terms. By the same token, family interference, especially that of in-laws over the nuclear marriage, and social pressure to conform to extant practices such as polygyny are oftentimes recreated and inveighed against.

As far as technique is concerned, omniscient narration with multiple focalisations is a frequently used resource. In some instances such as Nnedi Okorafor’s novel *Lagoon* (2014b) the so-called “Rashomon effect” is accomplished with exquisite dexterity. Not only are human characters’ perspectives portrayed, but also animals’ vision of reality, and even mythical entities yarn the story together. The use of unreliable narrators is another commonly used feature, usually employed to deal with trauma stories. Furthermore, some other novels resort to metafictional concerns. Such is the case of *Invisible Chapters* by Maik Nwosu (first edited in 2001), *Half of A Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2006), *Born on a Tuesday* by Elnathan John (first published in 2015), or *Welcome to Lagos* by Chibundu Onuzo (released in 2017). These meta-fictional explorations dwell on the process of writing the book of Nigeria that cannot be accomplished from the perspective of a protagonist who is a writer (Nwosu); the question of who should be entitled to record Nigerian history is posed by Adichie; a journalist who wants to tell the truth about Nigeria’s government corruption is considered by Onuzo; and eventually, John broods on the obsession of a character to get his story about Boko Haram right, as if the process of telling in fiction had a kind of essence to be grasped (Dunton 2020). In short, women have taken the torch and their

message has become no longer conciliatory. They seem to be intent on being heard and they are no longer restrained by morality, political correction or compromising with men. Third-Generation writers are doomed with diaspora concerns and broadening their horizons in terms of theme and form.

*Ben Okri: A Hinge Writer*

For many reasons, Ben Okri's literary oeuvre remains as baroque as conspicuous and internationally acclaimed. Both Nigerian and cosmopolitan, he lived between Nigeria and England up to the end of the 1970s, when he definitely emigrated to England. In all likelihood, this may be one of the reasons why some Nigerian literary critics noticeably omit him when addressing authors of the Second- or Third-Generation. As a matter of fact, scholars such as Daria Tunca (2014) include him under the Second-Generation since he is said to have been "born into the colonial event but [whose] formative years were mostly shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and stasis" (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 14). Albeit, Tunca concedes that the "grey zones" that emerge within the generational categorisation should alert one of the artificiality of these terminologies. My contention is that Ben Okri could be thematically included within the Second-Generation, while stylistically he is more in tune with Third-generation authors such as Chris Abani, Helen Oyeyemi or Irenosen Okojie. For these reasons, I will consider his oeuvre together with the Third-Generation writers, emphasising the fact that he could be regarded as a hinge —or crossroads— writer who has acquired an incontestable canonical status.

Immersed in African indigenous world-views, politically committed and with surrealist aesthetics, his literary prose is frequently difficult to categorise. It has been referred to as either postmodern, animist materialism or animist realism, related to "spiritual realism, magical realism, visionary materialism and existentialism" (Okri 2021, *benokri.co.uk*). As he has emphasised, he wishes his writings to be undefinable since he has a penchant for the unfinished and hybrid works of art. The collection of short stories *Stars of the New Curfew* (first published in 1988) marked the beginning of his potent new voice, which was further consolidated with the notorious trilogy of novels *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993b) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). However, he is also known for his poems, essays and, even, for having created a new literary form he has termed *stoku* —another hybrid at a crossroads between the short story and the haiku.

In his writings, Okri mixes equal doses of social criticism with layers of ancestral oral and mythical —numinously slanted— undertones. At the same time, he resorts to symbolic or allegoric seams which appear to coexist simultaneously without evincing an overt competition for preeminence. This tapestry of “the matrix of the ancestral mode” (Okri 2016, ix) simply seems to allow the reader to witness different realities mirroring or clashing; or, rather, as Okri has claimed, merely a glimpse of reality as he conceives it. “I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality,” he declares while he further ponders:

What is reality? Everyone’s reality is different. For different perceptions of reality we need a different language. We like to think that the world is rational and precise and exactly how we see it, but something erupts in our reality which makes us sense that there’s more to the fabric of life. I’m fascinated by the mysterious element that runs through our lives. Everyone is looking out of the world through their emotion and history. Nobody has an absolute reality. (Okri, *benokri.co.uk*)

As the South African critic Elleke Boehmer has acutely observed, “his sense of the vibration that comes off words [is] infused with the power of imagination marinated in history” (2017). As a matter of fact, he has defined his own writing as being more akin to music since he believes his prose seems to resist the coherence of the written text (Wilkinson 1992). Other singularities of his literary style are a syncretism it evinces from apparently opposing elements, such as technology and magic, modern and ancient, urban and rural, Western and indigenous (Barhoun 2013). As a way of example, his *abiku* character Azaro —the protagonist of the above mentioned trilogy— is living alongside numinous and earthly worlds coterminously. Azaro’s identity is split, as it is the time and space he inhabits. He lives on the margins of the bush and the urban ghetto immersed in a time “of eternal recurrence” or “regenerative transfiguration” (Barhoun, 57). Provocatively, Okri’s views seem to be in tune with the so-called *subaltern time* construction of history; that is, a view of historical discourse which is “enchanted” with the supernatural as another mode of conscious belief or ideas (Chakrabarty 1998). In line with this view, Okri has proposed that “[i]t’s quite possible that it [colonialism] didn’t invade our spiritual, aesthetic and mythical internal structures.” “There’s been too much attribution of power to the effect of colonialism on our consciousness. We’ve looked too much in that direction and have forgotten about our own aesthetic frames” (Wilkinson 1992, 86).

Other characteristic traits of his writing are his short, almost laconic dialogues, which openly contrast with the overflowing prose of his dream-like, overpopulated fictive worlds. Additionally, a dialectic intertextuality becomes apparent in his oblique references to other Nigerian authors of Yoruba origins such as Soyinka or Amos Tutuola. In the foreword to *The Famished Road* for the 2016 edition, he mulls over having eventually found the tone for his writing, by means of which “the visible must be used to invoke the invisible” (ix). What at first sight may seem chaotic is, he claims, a serene inner tone. This state of respite is due to the fact that his fiction starts where many others finish: death. In fact, *The Famished Road* is “beyond death” (x). He also believes in the depiction of absurdity and grants that his prose may have an overall elegiac flavour not devoid of humour. In an interview with Vanessa Guignery (2015), Okri claims to have repeatedly used the archetype of the journey in his fictive worlds—especially the *inner* quest—as the essence of change. In addition, he states that his role of writer reveals many facets: being a social critic, a shaman, and a man of letters closely bound to history and Myth—with capital M—as the most concentrated wisdom of the human race (Guignery, 1056). Ben Okri has written about the Nigerian civil war and its aftermath, the political structural flaws of the country, the poverty and cruelty exerted by the military elites, while crafting a singular style, voice and tone. The magical beings and strange protagonists that crowd his plots oftentimes show the absurdity of the real and the almost tangible existence of dreams. He started a path of experimentation, which deserves him a place of prominence and authority in the Nigerian—regardless of which generation—literature.

### *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Chinua Achebe's Heiress*

Tope Folarin argues that the groundbreaking African novel *Things Fall Apart* and its author Chinua Achebe reached canonical status worldwide and remained during a long time the “accessible” voice of the continent for western as well as for African readership. By “accessible” he does not imply aesthetically or linguistically poor. Rather, he means what is “expected”; that is, what the average western reader anticipates from a black African author by reference to that high standard of previously achieved fiction. In Folarin’s opinion, Achebe was the lonely referent—although many other African writers have since been equally talented—until Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie came into the scene in 2003. After reading *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and, even more so, *Half of A Yellow Sun* (2006), Folarin claims, he could immediately feel identified with his

African contemporary's visceral prose. "She was a powerful female writer who was emerging in a field in which males had excelled" (Folarin 2016, *lareviewofbooks.org*). She was, in short, Achebe's heiress, the new accessible African writer.

In direct dialogue with her predecessor, Adichie reveals in her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* how a family falls apart because of the religious zealotry of a Christian father. Like her laureate predecessor, she deals with the deep fissures that colonialism left in Nigeria. Religion is in Adichie's novel the cultural variable which causes the main conflicts in the plot. The protagonist's father Christian scars intrude and shatter the man and his family. Adichie shows at an intimate level what Achebe's chief Okwonko endures at the communal one — and, allegorically, at the national or continental domain. In like manner, Adichie contrasts two worlds: the traditional with its rituals and remaining customs, and the intrusion of the colonial culture as a factor of division and conflict. Kambili is the main protagonist and narrator —a fifteen-year-old diffident girl— whose father, Eugene Achike, is a prominent and respected public figure though a cruel and tyrant parent and husband in the intimacy of the family. Two female characters are opposed in Kambili's gaze: her independent and educated aunt Ifeoma, and her subservient and much abused mother Beatrice. *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming of age novel which, although having over-dramatic undertones, has opened up the path for a new generation of Nigerian women writers.

In *Half of A Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie chooses again the private and familiar relations of two sisters —Alanna and Kainene— a boy servant —Ugwu— and a British expatriate, Richard, to revisit the Nigerian Civil War from their everyday perspective. The historical, ideological, and political events are intermingled with the personal circumstances of a family. Rivalries and jealousies are yarned within the ideals of the newly-born republic of Biafra. The increasingly distressing situation of the characters is narrated in a fluent prose with different focalisations which provide a changing picture of the war. The recourse of *mise en abyme* is Adichie's metafictional interjection to pose the question of who should narrate the story of Nigeria. Throughout the book there is a persistent intention of writing an account of the war, a book initially written by the British character, Richard, and which ends up being authored by a subaltern voice, Ugwu. Adichie succeeds in giving a human portrait of a much fictionalised historical wound of the country. The novel is epic in its scope and deeply universal in depicting human follies and ties. In this respect, Adichie's novel adheres to the new trend of contemporary fiction described by Peter



Boxall as the “new commitment to the materiality of history, a fresh awareness of the reality of the past, and our ethical obligation to bear witness to it” (2013, 12). Hence, history in contemporary fictions such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* is not just another fictional story but a “material force” that shapes and determines the fictive story. Adichie’s novel and the account within the novel’s plot are a remainder of the ethical turn towards history. The historical seems to have a reality which, although elusive, one should insist on understanding and re-telling from different perspectives as a way to grapple with the present, the past and the future. Eventually, the novel evinces an effort at (re-)defining Nigeria.

Adichie’s third publication was a collection of short stories first published in 2009 with the title *The Thing around Your Neck*. The main thematic concerns in the anthology revolve around the Nigerian émigrés experience in the United States, including their efforts to be admitted to the country, as well as the racism they experienced there. One of the stories, “On Monday of Last Week,” evinces undertones related to lesbian love, and “Jumping Monkey Hill” is a pungent criticism to the editorial policies in Africa. In an interview with Daria Tunca (2018), Adichie admitted to having been asked to publish this collection for the American readership since most of the stories were connected to this country. She has conceded this is her least successful book (Tunca, 190). The fourth novel is another epic tale of diaspora and love. In *Americanah* (first edited in 2013), Adichie revisits in a more explicit way the recourse of literature within literature, this time by including the main character’s blog within the plot. The motif of the novel is the journey from Nigeria to US and back to Nigeria. The diaspora experience is compared with the coming back home (a much revisited trope in the Nigerian writers living abroad), while America is shown in clear daylight with its racist demeanour and effete elites. However, Nigeria is not shown in a more forgiving light with its government corruption and failure to provide citizens with some minimal standards, such as electricity or water. The migration experience is at the centre, just like the search for home and love. As regards the narrative style, Adichie’s two first novels do not show omniscient narrators. She has emphasised in a questions and answers section in 2006 that she has “always been suspicious of the omniscient narrative” on the grounds of it being “a little easy and too lazy” (Birnbaum 2006, 25). She has made it explicit that she has always wanted her characters to be driven by impulses “which they may not always be consciously aware of” (26). *Americanah*, however, is narrated by an omniscient narrator and focalised through the two protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze.

After writing these three successful novels, Adichie has been much involved in her newly-acquired role of world feminist referent. She is a regular contributor with essays and short stories in prominent journals and newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *the Wall Street Journal*, to mention the most salient. Particularly corrosive and satirical are her two short stories on the Trump era called "The Arrangements" (2016) and "Janelle Asked to the Bedroom" (2017a), published by *The New York Times*. Adichie paints an acerbic family portrait of the 45th American president and his apparently beleaguered and racist wife. In a more declarative activist fashion, she has written two short essay-manifestos: *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) which emerged from her celebrated TEDxEuston talk "The Danger of the Single Story" (2012) and *Dear Ijeawele. A Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017b). In these short essays she exposes her feminist conception, which will be further analysed in the section "African Feminism." In 2020, she published a short story entitled "Sikora," which is a well-rounded piece of writing about the emotional strain of being a single mother. Sikora is a Nigerian successful professional living in the US and sharing an assumed stable relation with her boyfriend Kwame, until she gets pregnant and decides to have the baby. From this moment on, her life begins to crumble. The narration is interspersed with memories of her troubled relation with her mother, and her idealised image of a polygamous father living in Nigeria. The remembrances are seamed to the present circumstance, which is marked by a profoundly etched description of the delivery, regarding both the physical and the emotional strain it brings about. Her latest publication, *Notes on Grief* (2021), are the author's reflections on the extreme pain and speechlessness engendered by the death of her father. Adichie has not written extended fiction from 2013, albeit she has not lost an iota of her depth to portray human relations in all their beauty and subtlety. Moreover, she has proved to be a generous trailblazer for many young Nigerian writers by organising the *Farafina* writing workshops in Lagos. Together with Achebe and Ben Okri, she is one of the most popular Nigerians to achieve world-status recognition.

### *Sefi Atta: A Scathing Cosmopolitan Longing for Home*

Sefi Atta has not gained the international acclaim Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has, although she may be considered one of the most talented prose and playwrights of the Third-Generation. Her exquisite realism is cunningly seasoned with scathing irony, intelligent humour and a galvanised feminist pull.

In addition, she has a gift for dialogue and perusing intimate family crisis. She has always taken an undisguised stance over issues that concern women, who are her main fictional protagonists. They are frequently strong women who defy the status quo, either in Nigeria or in the diaspora. Additionally, her tone is suave, intimate and corrosive at the same time. She exposes racism and much as sexism and class. She adroitly describes the foibles of the Nigerian middle-class whom she dissects with dexterity and wit. By the same token, like most of her contemporaries, she is politically committed, and social criticism is another variable she never omits in her fictive worlds. In an interview with Elena Rodríguez Murphy (2012), she clearly stated that she would never drop the labels “Nigerian, African, and Black” for, she contended, “I do not care if they limit me, I will not drop those labels in order to be accepted” (111). She also asserts that her primary audience is Nigerian:

I think there is a limit to which, an extent to which, I will accommodate people who do not understand Nigerian cultures, without alienating Nigerian readers, and my use of Nigerian Englishes is simply because my primary audience is Nigerian and they would recognize those voices and they would derive some pleasure from seeing those voices being recorded on paper, basically. (Rodríguez Murphy 2012, 107)

Her first novel *Everything Good Will Come* (first published in 2005) spans over a historical period which goes from the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War (1971) through the flimsy second republic and the subsequent military coups (the 1985 coup of Babangida) and 1995 during the ruthless and corrupt government of General Sani Abacha. The plot depicts the lives of two friends who decide to face the patriarchal system of Nigeria in two different ways: one by trying to adjust to polygyny while trying to handle the situation the best way she could negotiate. The other stands up a fight against the pressures of marrying, being a mother or a dutiful wife.

In fact, in Atta’s fiction the trope of the two friends with different projects of life is recurrent. In *Swallow* (2010) the pair of women share dire economic hardship and abusive or non-committed couple relations in the hectic city of Lagos. Albeit the two protagonists, Tolani and Rose, may be portrayed as nondescript, struggling-to-survive women, Tolani’s mother emerges as an independent and headstrong feminist. Her life is recounted in flashbacks in a mostly hilarious manner. In *A Bit of Difference* (2013), Atta shows different ways of facing reality in the diaspora context. Once again two very different women characters, Deola and Subu, redefine their lives and are confronted with

the elusive comfort of home. Deola needs to return to Nigeria and Subu prefers London. In this novel Atta also deals with homosexuality and the negative stigma it has in Nigeria. Deola is a typical Attan character, intelligent, ironic, cosmopolitan, independent, and non-conformist. One of the political and thorny concerns of the fiction is the oftentimes negative exertions of NGOs in Africa, which Atta dissects with dry irony. In her third novel, *The Bead Collector* (2019a), two female characters —an American and a Nigerian middle-aged women— get involved in an acquaintance devoid of trust and flustered by political correction. For Atta human, and especially family relations, are always complex, sometimes suffocating, full of silences, reproaches and jealousies, the in-laws being a frequent obstacle for the protagonists' self-realisation.

In her selection of short stories *News from Home* (2009) and plays *Sefi Atta: Selected Plays* (2019b), she shows her craftsmanship for dialogue, for digging into the intimate family knots and the reluctance to vent oppressive structures until a spark unleashes a turning point. Furthermore, Atta embraces different ethnic characters and backgrounds. Her plays, short stories and novels are enfolding in terms of regional and ethnic culture, and show the richness and variety of the Nigerian society. As she caustically remarks in the short story "Lawless," "[t]he Civil War ended decades ago and Nigeria was one nation now, united in its mess" (in *News from Home* 2009, 60). However, her main characters often belong the upper, educated or middle-class whom she critically depicts and knows with intimacy. The streak of humour is an unmistakable ingredient in her oeuvre, which is elaborated in both an irreverent manner and in candid freshness. Atta, like Adichie, creates female characters who defy the patriarchal Nigerian locus and refer to the power of historical events in their shifting realities. Atta, in addition, seems committed to changing the exoticism of African life usually associated in the West. In the outstandingly penned short story "Spoils," she describes —from the perspective of a ten-year-old Hausa girl— the attitude of a famous American actress towards Africa in the following terms: "Hassan said she used to get attention because of the balloons, then her skin got shrivelled up and the balloons began to leak. After that, no one would give her work to do in Hollywood, so she tries to get attention by saving African girls. It is either wild animals, or us, Hassan said" (2009, 54). Her characters belong to the global educated elite and, also, share the singularity of Nigerian cultural heritage. All in all, Atta is a solidly political analyst and a resourceful character conjurer whose cunning has a Twainian reverb. Much of her concern could be contained in a quote taken from her short story "Twilight Trek": "the lesson to learn is that the world is round, which means that if I run

too fast I might end up chasing the very homeland I am running from” (2009, 91). One could only wish that more fiction of hers were available to relish her calm angst and jest.

*Nnedi Okorafor: The West African Ananse*

Nnedi Okorafor is an American writer born to Igbo Nigerian parents. She has always lived in the United States, having spent many holidays in Nigeria. She defines her identity as Nigerian- American (2014a, *nnedi.com*). She writes a special type of science fiction imbricated within the tapestry of Nigerian, and sometimes, Ghanaian myth culture. Ananse is a mythical West African character which Okorafor seems to especially regard with affection and include in her fictions as the weaver of bewitching yarns. Likewise, she conjures up intricate cobwebs of a singular thread. She has termed the genre she writes as *Africanfuturism*, defined by the author as:

similar to “Afrofuturism” in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. (2019a)

Similarly, she has also created a new genre she refers to as African “jujuism”: that is, “a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities & [sic] cosmologies with the imaginative” (Okorafor 2020b, *Instagram*). In addition, she has clearly stated her political stance as regards her writing on her *Instagram* account:

My worlds are African ones. [...]. Those cultures existed long before me; I didn't imagine them. And my stories certainly don't exist because white male (or female... let's not forget that white female perspectives also dominate female perspectives in science fiction and fantasy). My stories aren't a “response” to whiteness. They exist wholly outside of white-male-anything. These stories that come from my own culture, experiences, from within me, from reflections of specific African cultures. By existing, I'd hope they help bring cultural, ethnic and gender balance to science fiction and fantasy, but this is not my work's reason to exist. (2020b)

Okorafor is a prolific writer. Apart from fiction, she has written a memoir *Broken Places and Outer Spaces* (2019b) in which she deepens into how, after an operation that had her legs immobilised for a time, she began to dream with

psychedelic universes. Her many novels are mainly addressed to young adults such as *The Binti* Trilogy, the *Akata Witch* Series, *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005), *Long Juju Man* (2009), *The Shadow Speaker* (2010a), *Ikenga* (2020a) and the newly-edited *Remote Control* (2021). However, it could be safely affirmed that her novels can capture the attention of a most varied readership. Additionally, she has authored comic scripts such as *Antar: the Black Knight* (2018a), *Black Panther: Long Live the King* (2018b), *Wakanda Forever* (2018c) and *La Guardia* (2019).

*Lagoon* (first edited in 2014) is one of her most compelling, thematically as well as structurally, contemporary fictions. In it the globally peripheral city of Lagos becomes the centre of the world stage. An alien invasion plays havoc with the already chaotic Nigerian urban centre. The novel is narrated in a single day from the perspective of several characters, many of whom are not human. Several tropes pivot around the story, the power of born-again Christian churches, gay activists engaged in emerging from invisibility, marital violence, army corruption and homosexual repression. The thread of the story interconnects lives in an effective “Rashomon Effect” cinematic way. Above all, the message underpinning is that humanity is not superior to any of the other species in this planet (or outside the galaxy). Thus, Okorafor seems to endorse an Anthropocene tilted viewpoint, a metafictional and ecological chain which embraces all species and narrators.

Another critically acclaimed novel is *Who Fears Death?* (2010b) which is said to be in process of becoming an HBO TV series. Although the fictive environment is a surrealist desert, reference to real episodes of the recent history of Sudan are made throughout the narrative. Rituals such as clitoridectomy, and war practices such as women massive rapes, are embedded into the argument line. As in the *Binti* trilogy and the *Akata Witch* series, the heroines are girl apprentices who have to fight in an uncertain world of usually man-controlled magic. Thus, women usually bear this characteristic empowerment impromptu. Even though Okorafor’s worlds may seem *outré*, there is always a very close resemblance to reality and serious, debatable current issues. Her last novella *Remote Control* (2021a) deals with the strange blend between technology and rural life in Ghana. Another fiction which offers food for thought, where communion and understanding of nature is opposed to the controlling power of multinationals and high-tech consumerism. The female protagonist with “special magical powers” returns. This time, Sankofa is in search of a strange and ambiguous amulet. In general terms, Okorafor is a very popular author in

Nigeria and she seems to share the vision of a Nigerian insider. Her affection for the culture and political upheavals of the country —and the continent at large— are quite evidently subscribed in all of her writings. Her latest adult novel *Noor* —to be released in November of 2021— is said to be set in a near-future Nigeria. The author promises a tale of “[a] woman... with machine enhancements. A true Fulani herdsman. A whirling natural disaster in the north... and more” (2021b).

*Chika Unigwe: Rugged Ties*

Chika Unigwe studied at the University of Nsukka, Nigeria, and holds an MA from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. Her PhD —from the University of Leiden, in The Netherlands— was about First-Generation Nigerian authors. Before migrating to Europe, Unigwe had published two volumes of poetry in Nigeria —*Tear Drops* (1993) and *Born in Nigeria* (1995). In 2003, she was selected from 450 entries for a short story contest with a fiction written in Flemish Dutch “*De Smaak van sneeuw*” or “The Taste of Snow” (Bekers 2015). In the same year, her short story “Borrowed Smile” was awarded recognition by the BBC Short Story Prize. Her first fiction, *De Feniks* —*The Phoenix* in English (2007)—was published in Dutch in 2005. The novel explores the Belgian society from the perspective of an African expatriate (Tunca, 2020). In addition, tropes related to illness, pain and loneliness and the stereotyped image of Africa in Europe are tackled. Currently, she writes fiction, poetry and essays for literary journals and newspapers such as *Wasafiri*, *Moving Worlds*, *Aeon*, or *The Guardian UK*.

In her world-acclaimed two novels in English, *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and *Night Dancer* (2012), Unigwe deals with the difficult and, at the same time, communal and supportive relations between women —friends in the former, and mother and daughter in the latter. Both fictions have a secret at their core which is gradually revealed, thus bringing enlightenment and catharsis to the main character(s). Once again, the diaspora experience is depicted in all its harshness, and the intersectionality of class, genre and race becomes apparent. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, the webs of illegal prostitution between Europe and Nigeria are brought to the fore. At the same time, the Nigerian conditions that drastically compel the protagonists —belonging to different cultural and class backgrounds— to be sex workers as an ultimate escape from violence and poverty are expounded. Alternatively, the courage that implies not complying with the restraining patriarchal social status quo in Nigeria is Unigwe’s

endeavour in *Night Dancer*. Both novels develop in a quasi-detective structure. Relations between very unlike women, who are compelled to share their lives and accept their differing outlooks on life, are deftly sifted through the plots. In *Night Dancer*, a daughter who cannot understand her mother's decisions and single motherhood is gradually unfurled towards a dark exposure. Incomprehension, silences, secrets, survival, injustice are Unigwe's recurring tropes.

In 2013, Unigwe wrote *The Black Messiah*, originally in English, though published in Dutch as *De Zwarte Messias*. This fiction leaves the woman protagonist perspective to explore the wondrous life of the slave Gustavus Vassa—or Olaudah Equiano in Igbo—and his tumultuous life; from his capture in Nigeria, his stay and formal education in Europe, his marriage to a white British woman, and his involvement in the early eighteenth century British abolitionist movement. The novel has not been edited in English up to the moment. More recently, in 2019, the author returns to the diaspora concerns (Tunca 2020). In *Better Never than Late*, Unigwe loosely interconnects the Nigerian immigrant stories to the social atmosphere of Belgium and delves on the protagonists' reasons for leaving the African country; their depleted survival, and the uncomfortable situations her characters encounter in the struggle for adjustment to the western country. Her calm tone and skill at psychological depiction are in tune with the ever-present political commitment of the so-called post-Achebean generation author.

### 2.7.3. Contemporary African Feminism

In November 2007, over a hundred African continental and diaspora feminists met in Accra, Ghana, with the aim to issue what became known as the *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*. In general terms, and in contrast to their predecessors' lukewarm acknowledgment of the term, these activists explicitly choose to name themselves Feminists. They have claimed: "We are African women when we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. Our feminist identity is not qualified with 'Ifs', 'Buts', or 'Howevers'. We are Feminists. Full stop" (3). They have avowed that in order to challenge patriarchy they should also include in their struggle variables such as race, class, ethnic conflict, religion, and global imperialism. By the same token, they demand to be recognised the right and the space to express their multiple identities and celebrate their diversity while acknowledging their common core as feminists.



Historically, they define their activism as imbricately linked to the past of pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonisation as well as neocolonialism and globalisation. Interestingly, they aspire to draw their inspiration from their *ancestor feminists* and consider “a profound insult to claim that feminism was imported into Africa from the West” (5). Hence, they reclaim their own devices to strategise, theorise and speak up for themselves. With a clear and straightforward agenda, they list the most prominent concerns, such as having the right of choice over their bodily integrity—including reproductive rights, abortion, sexual identity and orientation. In addition, they claim opposition to governmental and NGOs political agendas as they hijack their spaces. The same spirit of embracing the feminist cause without the compulsion to coin new terms to define her stance is evidenced in the writings of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, currently, a world-known feminist spokesperson.

Upon having released her novel *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003, Adichie is said to have been advised by “a well-meaning man” that she should not be considered a feminist since they are “women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands” (Adichie 2014). When told by an African academic that feminism was not “our culture,” as it is decidedly “un-African,” and that she was called herself so because “she had been influenced by Western books” (2014, 9-10), she decided that something must be done—and written. Such remarks led Adichie to the notorious TED talk “The Danger of the Single Story” which, in time, morphed into the now school-curriculum booklet *We Should All Be Feminists* in 2014. As a matter of fact, she decided to call herself a “Happy African Feminist” (10). Adichie’s tongue-in-cheek definition shows “how the word feminist is so heavy with baggage, *negative baggage*: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think that women should always be in charge, you don’t wear make-up, you don’t sheave, you’re always angry, you don’t have sense of humour, you don’t use deodorant” (11; emphasis added). She argues that the repetition of certain dynamics is what naturalises the position of men in some spheres rather than knowledge, flexibility or creativity. She starts to wonder what could happen if one could teach boys and girls not to link masculinity with money. If men could allow themselves to be fragile or weak, if we could teach girls not to be submissive or not to represent a threat to male egos, if one could teach a girl not to make poor marriage choice due to the family pressure, if one could raise girls not to be seen as competitors for the attention of men, if girls could be raised without shame and boys to do as they please when concerning women. “Boys and girls are undeniably different biologically, but socialization exaggerates the differences, and then starts a self-

fulfilling process” (35). She proposes teaching boys and girls about ability and interest instead of gender.

In the same pedagogical and argumentative tone, she concedes that tackling the issue of gender is always difficult and thorny. She chooses to talk about feminism —instead of, say, humanism— because historically, women have been the group systematically excluded and oppressed. A solution to this problem, she argues, cannot be found without acknowledging this fact. Referring to humanism instead of feminism is to negate the specific experience of a woman as such, subjected to silence. Gender, she continues, is not a culturally given, since cultures are in constant change and renewal, and its primary function is the preservation of a people. “Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we must make it our own” (46). Her own definition of feminism, she concludes, is a man or a woman who are conscious of a problem with gender and want to fix it (48).

In her second writing on Feminism called *Dear Ijeawele. A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2018), Adichie gives a friend advice on how to raise a child as a feminist. “For me, feminism is always contextual” (7), she declares at the opening of the book. She rejects the idea of being defined by motherhood while she emphasises that “motherhood and work are not mutually exclusive” (11). She contends that one either is or *is not* a feminist, that language is a repository of prejudice, beliefs and assumptions (26; emphasis added). Consequently, she advises her friend to bear in mind what she will say and what she could silence, and to give her daughter the space to question givens. Marriage does not define women so it should never be considered an achievement. “Feminism and femininity are not mutually exclusive” (42) she also posits since the linkage between appearance and morality is not only vane but dangerous and time-consuming. She also urges Ijeawele to teach her daughter that “the selective use of biology as ‘reasons’ for social norms” should be laid bare (48). A woman’s body is hers and nobody should pressure her to do something she does not feel like. Adichie boldly emphasises that shame has been a control instrument on women’s bodies —and women from one another. By contrast, virginity and nakedness should be neutral and natural. Women should not be morally better than men and women standards should not be universalised. “Difference is normal” (60) she rounds up in circular fashion.

Another Nigerian-Swedish-Finnish writer, blogger and activist, Mina Salami, has recently published *Sensuous Knowledge. A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone* (2020) and is considered another prominent referent in global feminist discourse. In a rather all-embracing claim, Salami espouses her aim of writing theory from “an Africa-centered black feminist perspective” (2). Her explicit intention is not to counter an *Europatriarchal* perspective, but rather to fully explore —and expose— the “*hidden* narrative” of blackness and femaleness (2; original emphasis). In order to accomplish such an endeavour she stresses the openly *ideological* objective of her book. “There is no point in ‘smashing the patriarchy,’ as many Western feminisms claim to do, without fighting imperialism and capitalism” (3). Salami’s views are in tune with the Ghanaian African Feminist Manifesto. However, she differs from Adichie’s stance in that her view of black feminism is in tune with *humanism* —and humanity— as well as with *nature*. Although she concedes there is no single way of black women knowledge, she understands that their discourse “grapples with the impact of dominance” as an unavoidable advantage.

To my mind, one of her more polemical issues in her book is that it is intended not as a protest but as a progress intent. “By *progress*, I refer to all three meanings of the word: first, something unfinished; second, onward movement; and third, raising consciousness higher” (7; original emphasis), Salami contends. Her stated intention is imbricately entwined with knowledge, historical narratives and humanism. She offers the notion that it is time for Africa to “irradiate the world with depth of insight from Africa’s knowledge systems and the black diaspora culture derived from it” (7). Moreover, she goes on to assert that knowledge has to be imbued with spirit, that is, knowledge will be enlivened with insights from the arts. Salami’s alleged —humble?— attempt is to synthesise this Africa-centred, woman centred and black feminist centred view into a “harvest of universal ideas” (9). On the whole, her claims of progress and universality —which have *Négritude* undertones— may seem at odds with the task of dis-centring the long-standing *Europatriarchal* discourses she claims to offer an alternative to.

She divides her book into nine sections: knowledge, liberation, decolonisation, identity, blackness, womanhood, sisterhood, power and beauty. It is not my intention to analyse them all —since this attempt would exceed the scope of this state-of-the-art-section. However, I believe that the chapter “Of Knowledge” is particularly enlightening since she proposes an African-centred view of discourse. Knowledge, she proposes, is an imbrication of *ogbon-ori* —

“knowledge of the head”— and *ogbon-inu* —“knowledge of the gut” (12). She embarks on a critical examination of how Europatriarchal narratives are embedded in social structures in an attempt to dismantle them. She deconstructs the very idea of intelligence as a hierarchical process historically associated to reasoning, quantification and deductive inquiry. “Europatriarchal knowledge itself is not rooted in the rationality it promotes,” she claims (20). The accumulation of “insight on how to end war, poverty, and disease” has not created a world without such scourges. On the contrary, to do so would mean “the end to its rule” (20). Education systems are in connivance to the adage that “knowledge is power” and disseminate the notion that knowledge is something one can “acquire” in order to dominate and compete. Hence, *science knowledge* —historically regarded as the religion of Europatriarchy— has been considered as devoid of embodied experience, allegedly neutral and objective, with no moral or ethical questions underpinning. The inherent neutrality of knowledge would mean that one is able “to separate knowledge from the thought patterns and social conditions that created it” (33). This distancing from context is biased and not rational. In other words, a lie.

Instead, she proposes a complementary kind of “sensuous knowledge” which is closely related to the arts, emotions, and erotic and internal self-recognition. Much in tune with Patricia Hill Collins’ “ethics of caring” (2000), she propounds a three-fold alternative mode of understanding the world: first, valuing the individual, second, valuing emotions, and third, promoting the capacity of empathy. She adheres to the premise of progress fine-tuned with a countercultural approach which can encompass class, gender and race issues in an alternative and transformative way of thinking. Salami promotes harmony with nature and animals as an African philosophy of inter-being —in which there is no hell, no heaven and no death. Many African cosmologies acknowledge the realms of the spirit and the world as united and transcending this context. Simply put, she offers a completely novel ontology, alternative to the Greek myth and philosophy which has shaped Eurocentric culture: the insights of African myths and philosophies.

In sum, one may agree or deem these feminist stances excessively context-specific. Undeniably, however, these authors are proposing viable alternatives to experience womanhood and gender manifestations, together with different roads to theorise and perceive reality. Moreover, African feminists acknowledge the global compromise the cause requires without discarding their multiple differences —which is, after all, a mirror of what could be observed in the

feminist movement in the West as well. In other words, there is no need to resort to new names since African feminists will not recoil at being called feminists. All the more so, they are taking a step further with a view to leading the debate.

## 2.8. Fourth Generation in the Making or “Me-Generation”

At this juncture, I will consider the present materialisation of some tendencies within the Third-Generation authors which could further detach them from the by now canonicals previously mentioned. To start with, a growing volume of online publishing is contributing to reshaping the industry dynamics: the format as well as thematic choices available. In addition, this medium of literary accessibility and visibility is clearly changing the literary scenario. In connection to this issue, I will refer to the ideas exposed by the online critic Ikhide Ikheola. At the same time, other surfacing considerations are worth pondering: the increasing experimentation thrust when it comes to analysing genres as well as fictive environs and characters; the new literary hybrid works which cannot be straightforwardly categorised, and the perceived introspective gaze which tends to blur the borders between fiction and memoir. Interestingly, the authors based in Nigeria evince a clearly reckless attitude towards denouncing political, social and gender injustice as well as an evident exploration of genres such as auto-fiction, sci-fi, thriller, noir, erotica and romance, and a combination between them. As Toni Kan has expounded in a recent review to the anthology of short stories *Limbe to Lagos: Nonfiction from Cameroon and Nigeria* (Dami Ajayi et al. Goethe-Institut Nigeria 2018) issued in *The Lagos Review* (2018):

There is, in the works of young African writers (*millennials*) a marked tendency, one that drifts inexorably towards the *urgently personal*. For this new corps of writers, who belong to what one might refer to as “Generation Me,” every writing springs from a personal fount and nothing is taboo or off limits or too personal —sex, abuse, mental illness, or family dysfunction. All is cannon fodder for literature. (Kan 2018; emphasis added)

One cannot avoid referring to Byung-Chul Han’s observation in *The Transparency Society* (2012) that in our present world “[e]verything is measured by its exhibition value” since “everything has been turned outward, stripped, exposed, undressed, and put on show” (11). Only display, he claims, generates value. However, I also agree with Stephanie Newell when she posits

that there is a current re-visiting of *humanism* (2009, 209); the specifically local stories exert their universal plight for a better global circumstance.

These assertions may lead to postulate that the emergence of another generation of Nigerian authors may be in the making. The debate of how it could be branded does not seem crucial at this point. In fact, several names have already been globally coined: “Peter Pan Generation,” “Boomerang Generation,” “Generation Y,” or the “Net Generation” (Lahsaiezadeh 2019). However, as Adesanmi proposed when determining the Third-Generation forking path, there may be some significant variables to consider. In the Nigerian critic’s terms a new tradition could be evolving if there is a co-presence or overlap of “age/publication brackets, ideological leanings, responses to socio-political context, distinctive textual strategies, personal politics and self-definition” (2007, *sentinelpoetry.org*) all converging to crystallising as *an interpellation* to previous writings. As the Nigerian writer Toni Kan proposes, the new authors are mostly millennials, that is, many of them have been born during the 1990s and their publications have been released from the 2010s onwards. The diaspora experience in the West is not central to their stories and their ideology is more focused on personal self-defining concerns, such as gender choice, and the activism that such a recognition usually entails. As pertaining their response to the socio-political context, they are similarly committed —although in a more angered voice— and their textual underpinnings are increasingly experimental. What is more, there seems to be a fictive streak which reveals an intention to shock the reader with explicit sex, domestic and social violence. They seem to demand urgent change, they are tired of waiting, traditional and political witlessness, and broken promises, as if the depiction of the harshest realities could be the desperate way to bring about some mind-set change. Therefore, I will briefly refer to the main authors and fictional works adhering to this tendency as a way of exemplifying the above-mentioned contentions. Additionally, I will provide a brief overview of four prominent and promising female authors within this emerging group: Irenosen Okojie, Chinelo Okparanta, Chibundu Onuzo and Leslie Nneka Arimah. Although three of them are living in the West, the cosmopolitan condition is never mentioned in their fictions.

### 2.8.1. Trends, Authors and Fictional Works

Novels such as *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi (2018a) or *I For Don Blow But I Too Dey Press Phone* by Hymar David (2019) are reluctantly classified into

easily categorised genres. The former is at a crossroads between auto-fiction, expounding Igbo metaphysics and transsexual activism, while the latter is a refreshing blend of memoir revealing an explicitly disavowal of disability trauma peppered with humour and non-translated Pidgin English. Furthermore, either the short stories in *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017) by Leslie Nneka Arimah, the magic realism of Ironesen Okojie in *Butterfly Fish* (2015) or *We Won't Fade into Darkness* (2018), and *The Madhouse* (2021) by TJ Benson, compel the readers to witness new, sometimes dark, cruel and beautifully crafted stories, on the verge of the sublime and the inexplicable. By the same token, the fusion of fantasy, science-fiction, pre-colonial aesthetics and incantatory landscapes, plots and characters are commonplace in the fictions of Tomi Adeyemi, Chio Zoe or Suyi Davis Okungbowa, among the most salient. Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister the Serial Killer* (2018) is a noir thriller told with a good dose of black humour and underlying domestic trauma. Jumoke Verissimo's *A Small Silence* (2019a) is on the surface a realist novel which, on a second reading, discloses equal layers of social and historical criticism, surrealist wanderings, and poetic sensuality while suggesting a subversive use of the trope of darkness and silence. Yemisi Aribisala's essays in *Longthroat Memoirs: Soups, Sex and Nigerian Taste Buds* (2017) are an in-between attempt to describe Nigerian food in close imbrication with sexuality and personal memoir, showing an authentically Nigerian social tapestry. Cunningly, she resorts to the use of essayistic prose, recipes, personal letters and inner humorous musings with a superb skill to describe tastes and fragrance though metaphor. By the same token, Francesca Ekwuyasi paints a peculiar combination —as the novel's title suggests— in *Butter Honey Pig Bread* (2020). She blends an expertise on cooking, and explicit sex scenes of lesbian love with ogbanje interpellations. Isaac Newton Akah, Amara Okolo and TJ Benson, to name just a few, are authors based in and publishing in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, some of their novels are made scarce in the West. They mix social realism with autobiography (and photographic reportage) and portraits of post-apocalyptic Nigeria. These are just but parcel and parcel of the budding force and creative drive that Nigerian Literature —continental and in the diaspora— is currently exerting. For this reason, I contend that a Fourth-Generation may be emerging, or, at least, a collective piecemeal-like veer towards the expansion of thematic concerns and formal limits. This group is, without any doubt, redefining not only the African canon, but suffusing the global one with original tropes, mixed genres and an always defiant activist stance.

Moving on to consider the seemingly currently democratised space that social media, such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* or *Instagram* and the sundry online literary journals and magazines offer to young writers *and* readers, it may be worthwhile to consider the reflections of the online Nigerian critic Ikhide Ikheola. Having defined himself as an avid reader who happens to write, “Pa Ikhide,” —as he introduces himself in blogs and social media— punctuates several issues on which he has strong views and which he has fervently defended. He claims to know about the perils of being a writer since he happened to be a regular contributor to the now defunct *Next* newspaper (published by Molaru Wood and Dele Olojede). Exultantly, he celebrates the present moment in African literature as a *Renaissance* period, and the current generation of writers are referred to as “the generation of feisty writers” or the “Fuck you! Generation” since, he emphasises, “they have taken one look at thieving generations of intellectuals and politicians who did little or nothing for them and given them the middle finger” (Edoro 2013). Evidently, he is mainly referring to writers based in Nigeria. Three main issues seem to emerge from his blog posts and interviews. To start with, the danger of the single story —to use Chimamanda Adichie’s famous TED talk catchphrase— which has been described by Helon Habila (2013a) as the “poverty porn” or by Amatoritsero Ede (2013) as the “self-anthropologising” portrayal of Nigeria (and Africa at large). Secondly, the role of the so-called “African writer” and his/her reaction to western publishers and readership demands. Thirdly, and most importantly, he considers the unprecedented possibilities that Internet and social media have provided to new aspiring writers in Nigeria in terms of accessibility, visibility as well as thematic and stylistic freedom. Eventually, he refers to the role of the Nigerian readership in the equation.

Ikheola contends that the creation of the “exotic other” on western literary publications, mainly by diaspora Nigerian authors such as Chris Abani, has contributed to creating “the expectation that the only literature that can come out of Africa is one that reeks of misogyny, patriarchy, sexism, despair, poverty, wars and rapes, with women and children objectified as unthinking sex objects, hewers of wood, and mules” (Ikheola 2016a). He argues that western publishing houses seek to sell those hackneyed images of Africa and that African diaspora writers mainly comply with this exotic image in their urge to have their books published. Regarding the usually difficult role of “African writer” that many authors reject, he incisively retorts that if they are unhappy about the label, they should stop applying for grants or western prizes dedicated to preserving ‘African literature.’ Likewise, he rants “those who see the exotic



in us, do not share the expression of our humanity” (Ikheola 2012, *xokigbo.com*). Arguably, he intimates, if these authors enjoy the comfortable roles the West offers them, they should accept their part in the bargain and comply with being called ‘African writers.’ To what one may argue that being an African writer is not certainly an all-embracing category for a continent that has 54 countries, with the abysmal variety that such a geography and population can engender in cultural terms.

In relation to the new emerging possibilities from Internet and social media publications, he believes that orthodox publishing houses in Nigeria cannot but poorly compete with the “emerging technologies rendering the book near-obsolete thanks to the democratization of publishing by the Internet” (Ikheola in Egoro 2013, *brittlepaper.com*). He also claims that traditional western publishers in Africa are well aware of this phenomenon and, consequently, a healthy reconfiguration of the old “book-centric approach” is brought into question. In the energetic and provocative tone that characterises him, Ikheola asserts that “today’s writers are defiantly writing and publishing themselves” (Ikheola in Egoro 2013). In addition, he declares that the new generation of online authors are prepared to “blur boundaries” and reshape literary form. He also asserts that this new group of authors are tackling with, say, sex and sensuality in a way never yet attained by the heavyweights of Nigerian literature. As a matter of fact, he defends the view that

books are dying a long slow death and the single stories that he [Achebe] and Adichie bemoan are dying with those wretched books. I call this generation the *brave generation* because they are telling our stories, the best way they know how. They have triumphed over broken schools, inchoate publishers and a largely anti-intellectual society to produce stories that transcend the stereotypes that made [Binyavanga] Wainaina and me to erupt in rage. [...]. Let’s be honest, the West has been intervening to save our writers from Day One. Where would Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, etc, be without the West? This generation does not have anyone but themselves and the Internet. (Ikheola in Egoro 2013; emphasis added)

Eventually, he refers to another crucial variable in the debate: the African readership. He claims that, contrary to what has been hypothesised about their lack of reading habits, African readers *do* read, even though they may not have access to the canonised fictions of the Nigerian diaspora writers. He propounds that the instant accessibility that Internet also provides visibility to the preferences of the Nigerian reader. Referring to the novels by diaspora authors

who have been canonised in the West, he observes that they are simply not available in Nigeria. However, he also emphasises that “[m]any readers won’t buy those books, not because they aren’t good, but because they dwell on themes that are too familiar, and they aren’t written by white people, about exotic places that the buyer may never visit, or intends to migrate to and leave, forever, this place called Africa” (Ikheola 2016b). By the same token, he claims that

the Afropolitan writers and their works find better favour with African publishers and the Lekki-type [rich Nigerian class] demography for a good reason—they have left the godforsaken continent and gone on to live, study and work in those exotic white places. But, oh well, you can take the African out of Africa, but the African can never write anything as good as *Harry Potter*, or *The Hunger Games*. (Ikheola 2016b)

One may find Ikheola’s convictions rather extreme and oftentimes explicitly taunting—he seems to quite enjoy a well-peppered debate. Antagonising positions notwithstanding, he makes a clear argument on the new online literary trend. However, one may not avoid pondering on the question of the accessibility of these digital literary works in the long term. Paradoxically, he has never discussed this self-evident fact. A new notion of art could be evinced, therefore, by exchanging books for digital novellas, poems or short stories—no full-length fictions are available yet unless one has the complete novel in instalments. The query lingers: Is he thinking about a more contingent conception of literature (and art, as it were)? If that is so, how could the future generations enter into conversation with this courageous and fertile group of young digitally-bound millennials? In addition, one cannot but notice that the publishing industry in Nigeria has expanded significantly of late. Proof of these are the much online publicised releases of Cassava Republic, Kachifo Press, Parresia Publishers, Farafina Books, Okada Books, Karatu Books, Masobe Books and Ouida Books, to name the most prominent. Wherever the road may lead, these new explorations, the eruption of Nigerian—and African—writers in visibility and in numbers is undeniable. All in all, one can only expect time to do its workings; that is, to reveal these configurations to full extent. In the meantime, as Toni Kan moots, the definition of a new generation is “an augury of a new literary ferment much like Harry Garuba’s seminal *Voices from the Fringe*” (2018, *thelagosreview.ng*).

*Irenosen Okojie: Old Wounds and Warped Realities*

Two collections of short stories —*Speak Gigantular* (2016) and *Nudibranch* (2019) followed Okojie’s first novel, *Butterfly Fish* (2015). In this first fiction, she merges four timelines focalised through four characters: a young girl — Joy— in her twenties, her mother, her grandfather —whose story is narrated as a journal— and an ancient story in the city of Benin in Nigeria. The narrative threads crisscross in time and space between Britain and Nigeria, and different decades in precolonial and postcolonial Africa. A very unconditional, and eventually full of secrets, relation between a mother and her daughter is gradually disclosed. At the same time, another relation unfurls between a daughter and her father. Although the Benin story seems rather incongruent with the more recent accounts, the parallel between them seems to lie in the outlawed relationships they narrate and an old art token binding their destinies. Okojie’s prose shows a mastery at magical realism which is infused with metaphor to a baroque extent. Family relations and secrets, eerie worlds where the mere survival is blended with cranky technology, kinky sex and gory circumstances are frequently knit together. Okojie’s universes turn even more disparate, feral and bold in the collections of short stories. Her short story “Grace Jones” —which won the AKO Caine Prize for African Writing 2020— concocts a luscious plot in a singularly crooked tone. She seems to infuse almost every paragraph with the lace of the surreal and metaphysical. Furthermore, her characters are not exclusively African.

*Chinelo Okparanta: Hushed Love*

In *Happiness, Like Water* (2013), Okparanta depicts several family and couple relations which go awry. Furthermore, she introduces the topic of female homosexual love relations, which is fully explored in *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). Again, the background of the Biafran war serves as the context for her character’s gender coming out and struggle. However, the war is not as relevant for the story as is the case of Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The most important concern for Okparanta is to show the criminalisation of homosexuality in Nigeria and the communal and familiar pressure to comply with “normalcy” through marriage. Ijeoma —the main character of *Under the Udala Trees*— tries to please her mother and struggles to conform to the extent that the reader can actually cringe at the futility of all endurance. The novel, thus, turns to be an excruciating portrayal of the quandary of lesbian women in

deeply patriarchal societies such as the Nigerian. Okparanta's prose is fluid, effective and convincing; her activism, deceptively restrained, leaves a trace.

*Chibundu Onuzo: Roaring Lagos*

Onuzo's debut *The Spider King's Daughter* (2012) is successful in the depiction of Lagos and its stark class divisions, the volatile social condition that this circumstance engenders and the mutual distrust of the people belonging to different social strata. Education, which once was an equaliser, proves to be in the hands of those who could afford to send their children to study abroad. Otherwise, the plot evolves in an excessively manichean and sugary love story, albeit the switching two narrators perspectives give the story an agile pace. *Welcome to Lagos* (2017), on the other hand, puts on display a motley number of characters belonging to the different ethnic groups of the country and reveals a carnivorous city: once again, Lagos. The title is ironic. The overpopulated city rarely embraces newcomers. The protagonists wander about in the city outskirts and dwell in the house of a characteristically corrupt government politician whom they unexpectedly come to appreciate. Undoubtedly, the city is the most salient character, in all its raw landscape of contrasts and chaos. Likewise, Onuzo succeeds at giving each protagonist a distinct accent and demeanour with an occasional tinge of humour. Her third novel —*Sankofa* (2021)— deals with a middle-aged mixed-raced woman's search for her African paternal roots. The gradual disclosure of a completely new world and outlook on life reveals in Anna as a renewal of an otherwise predictable and nondescript life. Onuzo is not a bold formal innovator, however, her stories have the capacity of blending (and bending) opposing worlds.

*Leslie Nneka Arimah: New Worlds, Old Tales*

In her collection of short stories *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017), this young Nigerian-American author shows her dexterity and powerful prose, which delves on motherhood and female relationships. She experiments with gothic, folk tales, realism and futurist dystopia. Her book of short stories *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* and the short story "Skinned" (2019) —which won The Caine Prize for African Writing in the same year— depict impending worlds where the periphery has become the centre and whites are the new refugees in Africa and scientists have created formulas to control emotions —the main character of the first short story is trying to forget her girlfriend. "Skinned" is a metaphor for the new slavery of women, especially

lower caste Osu women in Nigeria. In this alienated society, women are exposed to and have to learn how to cope with nakedness, shame and the acceptance of their circumstance. Arimah is a full promise, not only because she experiments thematically, but she adroitly blends the stimulating aesthetics of African folk tales with uncertain projected environs. One can only wish a full-length novel by her soon.

To sum up, as these authors seem to evince, the *outré* worlds, overt sex scenes, lesbian relationships and a social realism neighbouring caricature seem to characterise the new thematic directions. Formally, non-fiction and fiction are amalgamated to taunt the reader. Ikheola celebrates this Nigerian, and African, literature Renaissance. A literary landscape which is in a veritable process of further change, increasingly visible in all its variety and sheer number. Additionally, the dynamics of publication and exposure to readership allegedly becomes less mediated, and themes and form in the novel genre are yet again invigorated and re-defined. Ben Okri has expressed his hopes and certainties regarding the special moment African letters are witnessing. In an interview with Ainehi Edoro for the literary journal *Brittle Paper*, he ponders the global role of Africa in literature today:

As literature comes out of life and feeds back into it, in an endless circularity, the big question is: how can we create a great literature that is true to us and yet universal, how do we pull off what might seem to some (think Saul Bellow) unthinkable—an African literary alchemy, making literary gold out of all that richness and chaos and suffering and beauty and joy. (Edoro 2020b)



## OF TIES AND LIES: AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL DISRUPTIONS IN *MY SISTER, THE SERIAL KILLER* (2018) BY OYINKAN BRAITHWAITE

“We are never more beautiful than when we are the most ugly because that is the moment when  
we really know what we are made of”  
*A Deep Humanness, A Deep Grace*, Chris Abani (2014b).

Oyinkan Braithwaite is one of the most massively read authors of the Me-Generation Nigerian female writers. Her debut brainchild—*My Sister, the Serial Killer*—has been sold and translated into more than ten languages including Korean, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Persian. In 2019, the novel was shortlisted for the Women’s Prize for Fiction and long-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. In addition, it has won several awards such as Best Debut Novel (Mansfield 2019), Crime and Thriller Book (Peterson 2020), Best Mystery/Thriller (Bookmarks 2019), among the most prominent. What she has claimed to have started as a writing exercise for her own amusement, has given Braithwaite global author status (Braithwaite 2020a). Having lived most of her childhood and adolescence in the United Kingdom, Braithwaite graduated in Law and Creative Writing from Kingston University. Her incursions into the editorial business started as a freelance writer for online journals and as an editor for Kachifo Limited—a Nigerian publishing house. She has also been a production manager for Ajapa World, a company that produces educational entertainment for children. Interestingly, Braithwaite is also a poem performer and a graphic designer. One of the media reviews that concisely captures the essence of her initial fictive work describes it as a “glittering noirish comedy set in vividly evoked Lagos” (Shilling 2019). Braithwaite is presently based in the aforementioned city in Nigeria. Since her much discussed stepping into the writing arena, she has written two novellas *Treasure* (Kindle Amazon 2020c) and *The Child Is Mine* (Quick Reads 2021). In her fictions, she revisits themes such as the close imbrication of beauty and power, social media and fake realities, family ties, especially rivalries and complex bonds and, most importantly, she resorts to black humour coupled with the concoction of fallen, often wretched and quirky characters which have contributed to honing her distinctive voice.

With the aim of further speculating on the *aesthetic explorations* of the Me-Generation writers and on the flexible genre-crossing nature these three authors seem engaged in, the main purpose of the present chapter is to analyse Braithwaite’s debut novel with a view to demonstrating its liminal condition in

terms of genre and characterisation. I will seek to demonstrate how this young author's particular black-humoured élan imbibes her creation with an original flavour. In order to do so, I will recourse to some formal features related to crime genre categorisation as well as some narratological theory in order to provide a possible interpretation of the main characters' traumatic childhood and present condition. I will especially focus on the narrative pattern conveyed by the plot structure and the narrator's unreliability exertions on the readers' engagement with the literary work, in general, and the narrator's standpoint, in particular.

Moreover, a second section will be devoted to delving on some *ethical considerations* in connection to the side-effects of trauma, the complex nature of female sibling bonding, the relation of power with beauty and, above all, the general atmosphere of entropy conjured up through *My Sister, the Serial Killer*'s pages. The theoretical approach I will resort to in this section will be provided by some psychiatry, sociology, philosophy, and literary criticism literature. In general terms, I wish to speculate on the predominance of characterisation over plot as well as on how Braithwaite's indirect questioning and silences contribute to dislocating both aesthetic and ethical issues in relation to theme and formal elements of noir fiction. By the same token, I will reinforce the idea of female sisterhood as a constant in contemporary Nigerian literature by women authors as a road to homeliness while speaking up for women's thwarted rights.

Initially the novel is said to have ambled from Braithwaite's morbid curiosity concerning the female black widow spider's purely biological need to feed itself on its male partner after copulating (Braithwaite 2019b). Likewise, one of the characters in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*—henceforth referred to as *MSSK*—kills her boyfriends in a similarly insouciant fashion. The novel begins with a compellingly brief three-line chapter. The story plunges the reader *in medias res* as the main protagonist and narrator, Korede, receives a phone call from her younger sister Ayoola telling her she has done it again. She has killed yet another boyfriend. Immediately after, Korede, who happens to be a nurse, undertakes the meticulous task of erasing any possible evidence which may incriminate Ayoola. A fast paced prose informs the reader that this is not the first time Korede has saved her younger sister from such a quandary. With skill, the nurse cleans up all the remnants of blood while desperately searching for a way to dispose of the corpse. As the eldest sibling, Korede has been responsible for stunningly beautiful Ayoola since she was a child. The story moves in short



chapters at high speed with short suggestive titles. The secret between the sisters could have been secured from Lagosian police interference for good, were it not for the introduction of a charming and good-looking doctor, Tade, whom Korede seems to be infatuated with. Predictably, Ayoola meets Tade and the young man falls in love with her. From that moment on, Korede starts having second thoughts on her loyalty to her apparently naïve and blasé sister. A burdened and despondent Korede urgently seeks someone to share her guilt with. Interestingly, a comatose patient, Muhtar, thus becomes her silent confidante. In yet another ironic twist of the plot, not only does Muhtar recover consciousness, but he also remembers almost every detail of Korede's concealment. Eventually, she decides to close ranks with her sibling, but not before disclosing piecemeal to the reader, in fleeting flashbacks, a dark secret the sisters and their mother have buried and sought to forget for a long time. Although Tade's life is in mortal danger, this time it is Ayoola who suffers an injury. Another crucial choice is brought upon Korede: unveiling the truth to the police, thus having the chance of setting herself free, or protecting her kin once again, with the responsibility to cover up Ayoola in the offing again. In order to increase the tension of Korede's decision, a recently divorced Muhtar appears to have fallen for the not so graceful nurse. The final chapter, and Korede's eventual judgement, is another achievement of *MSSK*.

## **1. CRIME FICTION: DEFINITION OF TERMS**

When referring to crime fiction, it becomes paramount to define the diverging—and oftentimes overlapping—terms it usually entails. Hence, I will seek to outline crime fiction and some of its possible variant genres: the thriller, the hard-boiled detective novel and noir fiction. In order to provide a general framework within which to explain how the African crime novel enters in conversation with the western literary writing, a diachronic and synchronic synopsis of crime fiction in the English language tradition will be briefly provided. To continue, African crime fiction, in general, and Nigerian crime literature, in particular, will be explored so as to underline the especially fresh contribution of Braithwaite's debut novel to national, continental and global literature. At the same time, I will focus on the growing contribution of women African writers to a genre that, otherwise, has been—historically—a male dominated realm.

According to Milda Danyté, crime fiction “is some of several names given to one of the most popular narrative genres today. This term is very broad, as it

includes any story that has crime and its solution as a central feature of the plot” (2011, 5). In Danyté’s terms, the constitutive elements a crime story usually contains are the following: a crime, usually a murder, some suspects sharing reasons for committing the crime, a detective or police member trying to solve the case by carefully gathering evidence and interviewing the suspects and/or witnesses, and the eventual discovery of the criminal and his/her motif(s) as well as the expected closure and deserved punishment for the culprit(s). Heather Worthington explains in *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (2011) that such literature has appeared in oral and written narratives all along human history. Having a preeminently popular status, Worthington assumes, crime fiction “can be and often is very responsive to the context in which it appears, affording important insights into its cultural, political and historical moment” (2011, 1). In other words, Worthington suggests that crime fiction offers rich insight into the cultural variations of a given society through time. Additionally, crime stories may be said to establish both a *conservative* and a *prospective* possibility in relation to social change (Worthington 2011). On the one hand, their formulaic conventions usually prescribe rather stable formal component features but, on the other, they show the moral cartography of a particular social context (Worthington 2011). Furthermore, she purports that the crime novel usually deals with facts at two levels. At the formal and literary one, the writer should engage the reader in the labyrinths of the plot—or the *whodunnit*. Meanwhile, at a structural and social gambit, the fictive argument must presuppose specific legal, procedural, and juridical understanding of a particular social milieu (Worthington 2011). In the same vein, Fiona Mackintosh and María Alonso additionally stress the “moralising potential” that classical “clue-puzzle type” crime fiction entails regarding the historical and social circumstances of the country from which they emerge (2020, 252).

Turning to consider the suspense thriller, Milda Danyté propounds that this genre presupposes a tantalising experience to the reader which “includes an element of fear, a pleasurable fear in those cases where one feels safe, as in carnival rides, and a less pleasant one if the situation is a dark street and a man with a knife” (2011, 33). Suspense is usually an element that accompanies thrillers. Thus, the reader should be ‘gripped by the narrative’ since s/he does not know what unexpected outcome the plot may disclose in a sudden twist. As Danyté argues, strong sensations are experienced while one is perfectly aware that this is not reality, even while being fully conscious of the very improbability of the story in terms of verisimilitude. Digging deeper into the nuances between the crime novel and the thriller, Val McDermid has pointed

out —paraphrasing the Scottish crime novelist Ian Rankin— that the former is critical of the status quo in a sometimes covert, or an otherwise overt fashion. “It often gives a voice to characters who are not comfortably established in the world —immigrants, sex workers, the poor, the old. The dispossessed and the people who don’t vote” (2015, *theguardian.com*). By contrast, she observes that the thriller is often slanted “towards the conservative, probably because the threat implicit in the thriller is the world turned upside down, the idea of being stripped of what matters to you” (2015).

As regards the difference between hard-boiled detective fiction and noir fiction, it is a somehow subtle one. Moreover, some critics consider the former as synonym for noir thriller (Danyté 2011). Ralph Willett defines hard-boiled fiction as a “tough and unsentimental style of American crime writing that brought a new tone of earthy realism or naturalism to the field of detective fiction” (1992, *baas.ac.uk*). This fictive genre usually contains “graphic sex and violence, vivid but often sordid urban backgrounds, fast-paced and slangy dialogue” (New Encyclopaedia Britannica in Willett). Allegedly, noir fiction seems to have arisen from the hard-boiled genre although distancing itself from the private eye crime plots. In film studies, the term “noir” emerged in the 1940s and was used to refer to the stark contrast of lighting or chiaroscuro effects in black and white Hollywood productions influenced by the German Impressionism of Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), and directors such as Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmark, Edgar Ulmer and F. W. Murnau as well as the British Alfred Hitchcock. The ensuing atmosphere and subject matter was one of despondence and cynicism. In film noir, James Ellroy and Otto Penzler contend, the distinction between hard-boiled private detective and true noir stories may be blurred. However, they emphasise that “the discerning viewer will easily recognize the opposing life-views of a moral, even heroic, often romantic detective, and the lost characters in noir who are caught in the inescapable prisons of their own construction, forever trapped by their isolation from their own souls, as well as society and the moral restrictions that permit it to be regarded as civilized” (2010, 129). Noir fictions, either in film or literature, are

existential pessimistic tales about people, including (or especially) protagonists, who are seriously flawed and morally questionable. The tone is generally bleak and nihilistic, with characters whose greed, lust, jealousy, and alienation lead them into a downward spiral as their plans and schemes inevitably go awry. Whether their motivation is as overt as a bank robbery, or as subtle as the willingness to compromise integrity for special gain, the central figures in noir stories are doomed with helplessness. (Ellroy and Penzler, 110)

In *Noir Fiction: Money, Sex and Revenge* (2010), Ian Crouch suggests that hard-boiled is “sissified” when compared to noir literature which “canonizes the inherent urge towards self-destruction” (Crouch, *newyorker.com*). The private eye could have some possibility of being a hero, even when his/her ethical position may oftentimes be compromised. The noir protagonists, on the contrary, are losers and hopeless. As Andrew Pepper points out in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, the usual themes of noir are “the corrosive effects of money, the meaninglessness and absurdity of existence, anxieties about masculinity and the bureaucratization of public life, a fascination with the grotesque and a flirtation with, and rejection of, Freudian psychoanalysis” (Pepper 2010, 60). As can be perceived, the distinctions of the aforementioned terms tend to be flexible and, if they show any variation, it is due to their degree of adherence to certain formal conventions, thematic implications as well as characterisation and plot closure.

### **1.1. A Brief Overview of Crime Fiction in English**

According to Milda Danyté, crime fiction in English could be traced back to John Addeley’s and Thomas Harman’s sixteenth century accounts of England’s netherworld, or seventeenth century Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1900, first published in 1610) or *Bartholomew Fair* (2005, first performed in 1614 and first edition in 1931), together with the “broadside ballads” —biographies of executed criminals printed in verse for the populace. Although Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) or Henry Fielding’s *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743) may depict criminals as central protagonists, it was not until the nineteenth century that the genre was properly born. Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) established the blueprint which was to be followed by the English tradition of Arthur Conan Doyle and his famous fictional detective Sherlock Holmes (Danyté 2011). In the twentieth century, the so-called Golden Age of crime fiction gave rise to another version of the “clue-puzzle” novel of which Agatha Christie was one of the most prominent authors. In tune with Sherlock Holmes’ cases, Christie’s plots became more complex, with more characters, and often dealing with serial crimes. The British female author’s peculiar literary Belgian detective —Hercule Poirot— or the elderly English spinster, Miss Maple, usually took to solving mysteries in closed settings such as trains, ship voyages in exotic places, or in English rural manor houses.

In the period between wars, a new crime fiction mode developed in urban America: the hard-boiled detective fiction. The novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and their fictional sleuths —Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe respectively— were fast-paced in plot, deploying pulp fiction violence, peppered with sexual innuendos as well as aggressive and colloquial dialogue in New York or Los Angeles underworld. The former English prevalence of reason, together with the good over evil denouement, became blurred. Final closure and justice were not to be usually fully found at the end of these fictional works. As the American author Megan Abbott claims, the hard-boiled novels are “an extension of the far west and pioneer narratives of the nineteenth century. The wilderness becomes the city, and the hero is usually a somewhat fallen character, a detective or a cop” (2018, *lithub.com*). After World War II, police procedural novels became popular with their characteristic law abiding police detectives, working on more than one case, and showing corporate team effort. Suspense thrillers, with their international mystery connections, chase scenes and unexpected turns, also became popular. The British novelist Ian Fleming created the famous cinematic James Bond hero. In addition, John Le Carré’s morose protagonists were enmeshed in Cold War spy conspiracies transpiring existential ennui. Phyllis Dorothy James conjured up her intellectually prone Adam Dalgliesh, and Ruth Rendell conceived a fictive, fatherly police inspector in her Wexford series. Both female British authors enriched their protagonists with a more complex psychological description of their protagonists’ private lives and existential motivations. Moreover, no overview of crime novel would be thorough without mentioning the extensive oeuvre and literary nuance of the psychological thrillers of the American —based in Europe— Patricia Highsmith with her dexterous but doomed character, Tom Ripley.

In the 80s black-American writers —such as Chester Himes— gained prominence with the self-righteous Harlem sheriffs Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones. Other American urban environs such as Miami or Chicago were alternatively the locus of action in Elmore Leonard or T.D. Allman’s hard-boiled fallen worlds. The post-Vietnam culture of cynicism and disillusionment is depicted in the urban deserts and minimalist landscapes of Tony Hillerman who chose the Navajo and Zuni reservations of Arizona and New Mexico to unveil tribal and racial quandaries as well as indigenous ethics codes (Willett 1992). In a mostly male-populated literary setting, where women protagonists were stereotyped as either victims or erotic and lethal *femmes fatales*, female —and feminist— writers with their heterosexual women, or gay/lesbian detectives

thrived in the 60s and 70s with feminist thrillers. Clearly showing a shift of emphasis from action towards psychological character analysis, and an overt ideological agenda compromised with gender, race and class, the by-now prominent detectives Vic Warshavski and Kinsey Millhone —arising from Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton’s usually masculinist and patronising milieus—knew how to use a gun or reject the wife corset. Currently, Scandinavian writers such as Henning Mankell are particularly attractive and translated into English.

Interestingly, at present an exponential number of women authors with women protagonists have gained momentum. Particularly successful are American authors such as Megan Abbott, Paula McClain, Gillian Flynn, Mary Cubic, Shari Lapena, Karen Dionne, Attica Locke or Paula Hawkins, among the most salient in a remarkably extensive list. Fictions such as *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2012), or *The Girl on the Train* (2015) by Paula Hawkins, mark a noticeable movement towards the intimate and the contestation not only of rugged masculinity, but of white privilege, and even of the sacrosanct home space. Thomas Allen purports that

[f]emale writers for whatever reason (men?), don’t much believe in heroes, which makes their kind of storytelling perhaps a better fit for these cynical times. Their books are light on gunplay, heavy on emotional violence. Murder is de rigueur in the genre, so people die at the hands of others—lovers, neighbors, obsessive strangers—but the body counts tend to be on the low side. “I write about murder,” Tana French once said, “because it’s one of the great mysteries of the human heart: How can one human being deliberately take another one’s life away?” (2016, *theatlantic.com*)

Allen speculates on how death in these novels by women is “chillingly casual, and unnervingly intimate” (2016). Several characteristics could be pinpointed in what has been —sometimes reluctantly— coined as *domestic noir*. Among the most salient novels are more elaborate puzzles in the plot, whose narrators are usually first-person and unreliable. The line between perpetrator and victim is, many a time, smudged. In addition, the female experience is central. As Julia Crouch purports, “[t]he main themes are family, motherhood, children, marriage, love, sex, and betrayal” (2018, viii). An important variable is that the setting is often the home, depicted not as a sanctuary, but as “a cage, a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence” (viii). In the Introduction to *Domestic Noir* (2018), Laura Joyce contends that female agency is pursued, not in the traditional role of “inert body to be looked at, dissected, and penetrated” (2018, 5), but as a protagonist on the move, a sociopathic, even despicable one

who straddles across social media culture, claustrophobic loci in an attempt to redress “the hegemonic cultural obsession with the passivity of the beautiful, female corpse” (5).

## **1.2. Crime Literature in Africa and Nigeria: A Concise Diachronic and Synchronic Introduction**

In Karen Ferreira-Meyers’ terms, the 1970s appear to be a turning point in the production of detective fiction in English and French languages on the African continent, while crime fiction in Portuguese emerged later, in the third millennium. During the 80s and 90s, many Senegalese authors such as Modibo Keita and Assé Gueye, the Cameroonians Jean-Pierre Dikolo and Simon Njami, or the Congolese Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou and Achille Ngoye published initially in France. Increasingly, the African continent saw the emergence of crime literature in countries such as Togo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Gabon, Benin, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal (Ferreira-Meyers 2012). Later, Portuguese-speaking Pepetela or José Eduardo Agualusa inaugurated the novel genre in Angola.

In all likelihood, the predecessors of African crime fiction seem to have been the Nigerian popular Onitsha Market pamphlets of the 1950s. According to Wendy Griswold, the late colonial expansion of the school system in the country witnessed a new generation of readers who mainly lived in large urban contexts. They were said to have craved for “lively, not-too-demanding reading” which were an extension of the pulp fiction of newspaper crime sections or detective magazines (Griswold 2000, 244). According to Virginia Coulon, both the Onitsha pamphlets and Nigerian Macmillan Pacesetters shared an entertainment objective with an understated pedagogical concern by recourse to cinema techniques from the crime thriller. However, the vision of the pamphlets was more pan-African and advised their readers how to cope in the urban environs (Coulon 1987). The Pacesetters novels, by contrast, were more openly committed to a national nation-building concern and “developed the gap between school readers and adult fiction” (1987, 304). The authors Adaora Lily Ulasi with *Many Thing You No Understand* published in 1970 and Kole Omotoso’s *Fella’s Choice*, written four years later, are considered the first African crime novels to achieve literary recognition (Dash 1977 in Ferreira-Meyers; Akachi-Ezeigbo 1991). The former deals with the colonial vicissitudes of a staff of British civil officers who have to solve the murder of a white employee under strange circumstances and the tension between colonial

authorities and the native villagers. The latter's setting is South Africa, where detective Fella Dangogo has to deal with a secret, gargantuan organisation, South Africa's Bureau for State Security, at the times of the apartheid clout. In addition, other sources have been mentioned as antecedents for the present crime fiction landscape in the continent. The contemporary Nigerian crime fiction author Leye Adenle mentions having read the Mills & Boon novels by African authors, Nancy Drew, and James Hadley Chase's novels as well as crime comics (Adenle 2019a). Another Nigerian-American well-known writer, Chris Abani, remembers growing up on a protean diet of the photo novels of the 60s and 70s, starring the 007-like black detective Lance "The Spear" Spearman which were published by African Film Magazine and Drum Magazine —and edited in Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Nigeria (Abani 2018). On his part, Helon Habila also acknowledges to have been early inspired by the prolific Americans John Russell Coryell and John McDonald, or the British Desmond Bagley's hard-boiled detective novels in instalments (Habila 2013b).

When it comes to considering the thematic iterations in African crime fiction, Ferreira-Meyers observes that the underlying social critique in these novels is related to issues such as "polygamy, family ties, HIV/AIDS, the status of women, the importance of traditions, and superstitions" (2012, 63). In addition, "migritude" —that is, the circumstance of many Africans in the diaspora— is also recurrent. Crime writing has also tackled matters concerned with tribalism, gender divergence, and the effects of urbanisation on village life and values. By the same token, the difficult condition of women and the reification of their bodies as an "altar of male pleasures" through practices such as forced marriage, female circumcision, human trafficking, prostitution and gang rape have been particularly examined by Francophone authors such as Achille Ngoye and Abasse Ndione, and South Africans such as Margie Orford and Liberian-born H. J. Golakai (Ferreira-Meyers 2012). As Ferreira-Meyers has suggested, quite often, humour and irony have been deployed in African crime writing so as to soften the bleak realities in the largest urban geographies of the continent. In fact, she points out, "a new literary technique, at the intersection between serious and casual, comical, dramatic, and grotesque" has reinvented the genre "where fantasy bleeds into reality, and where norms are constantly put to the test" (70). No account of African noir fiction would be thorough without mentioning the world Akashic Noir Series set in Africa. The anthologies published so far are *Lagos Noir* (2018) edited by Chris Abani, *Nairobi Noir* (2020) compiled by Peter Kimani, *Addis Ababa Noir* (2021) edited by Maaza Mengiste, *Accra Noir* (2020) collected by Nana Ekuia Brew-



Hammond, and *Joburg Noir* (2020) published by Jacana Media and edited by Niq Mhlongo.

The American sociologist Wendy Griswold has examined the Nigerian popular novel and its different genres at length. As regards crime fiction, she has described some variables which are generally present in the massive production of the country, especially during the 80s and 90s. She emphasises that the main motivation in the plots is seldom murder, but robbery. However, killing or rape may occur as unexpected circumstances arise. In addition, in tune with the American hard-boiled counterparts, action rather than detection moves the fictional scheme. Unlike Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, reason is not the protagonists's main accomplishment. The heroes in most Macmillan Pacesetters series are mainly "brave, determined, and individualistic, and they place confidence in their energy and courage, not in their powers of deduction" (Griswold 2000, 246-7). Furthermore, violence is a relevant ingredient in these novels, where both "humorless male protagonists" and criminals alike systematically "ignore legal and moral restraints" (247). Another recurrent variable Griswold mentions is the characters's distrust of Nigerian institutions such as the police, healthcare, education, private corporations, or justice systems. It becomes apparent that the sudden and chaotic growth of Nigerian urban centres, such as Lagos, left the postcolonial police and justice structures in a state of anomie, in contrast with the tight control of village and rural life. Hence, the protagonists are generally used to bracing for themselves alone, without any help from the establishment. As a matter of fact, in postcolonial Nigeria —as shown in its crime fictions— there seems to be no clear-cut distinction between crime and politics, corruption and law, or private and public sphere. Griswold also points out that the recurrent structure underlying western crime novels adhering to the pattern *order-disorder-restoration of order* is not always the case in Nigerian fictions. Many of them, she concedes, end in disorder. The basic plot, Griswold observes, could be summarised as follows: "hardship experienced by a basically decent person, crime offers an opportunity to overcome hardship, temporary success," there is a "turn of fortune and destruction or restoration," or either "end in disorder" (248). The American sociologist also examines how female protagonists —and writers— are usually a rare occurrence in the Nigerian crime fiction of the time, and the thematic concerns are also deeply inflected towards masculine and misogynist inclinations. Among them, "getting a job, attracting women, supporting a family," or "maintaining one's integrity in public life" could be mentioned

(251). “Work, love and honour,” Griswold contends, are the decidedly masculine traits of the genre.

Another consideration worth mentioning is the recent adherence to the so-called Afro-pessimism in relation to the genre African neo-noir. The classic noir novel of the mid-twentieth century with its typical mood of alienation and moral decay has been replicated and enhanced by a contemporary African neo-noir, which in the words of Sam Naidu, “explores contemporary existential and ontological themes and locations other than the metropole of classic noir” (2020a, 332). Additionally, it goes further so as to amplify political awareness by denouncing the ambiguity of justice and a transnational web of crime which enmeshes the globe as a new locus of outlaw experience. Although the novels are traditionally structured within fast-paced plots instead of on elaborate characterisation —as it happens in traditional noir fiction— the new genre is said to exhibit “a preoccupation with the ambiguity of justice” while articulating “a lament for a continent and its peoples who have endured injustice for too long” (332). The social criticism these fictions transpire treads into satire, or even hyperbolic sappiness. Questions are posed so as to elucidate the metaphysical nature of justice and truth in an anti-detective fashion. Another variable which singles out the new writing is an evinced “moral blurriness” which seems to be one of the most disorienting aspects for readers who are, thus, compelled to close ranks with dodgy characters or left without an ethical compass. The detectives’ choices are oftentimes dubious, and they have led a life of crime or have committed criminal offences themselves. This ironical inversion of roles renders the protagonists into a new category of *hero-villains*, capable of obnoxious behaviour. Another characteristic of African neo-noir is, in Naidu’s terms, the lack of fictive closure, that is, endings are cynical and offer no catharsis. Moreover, the usual settings are urban, but the characters tend to move along the big cities of the world. In other words, crime is transnational, corporative and oblivious of frontiers. As Naidu accurately summarises, “African crime fiction, being the second most popular literary genre on the continent after romance, is worthy of study because of its accessibility, wide-spread, diverse readership and also its capacity for socio-political analysis” (Naidu 2020b, *theconversation.com*).

As far as the authors of crime fiction are concerned, it could be safely claimed that up until the mid-twenty-first century, men writers by far outnumbered women authors. Famous francophone writers were Cameroonian Jean-Pierre Dikolo and Malians such as Aida Madi Diallo, Modibo Soukalo

Keita and Moussa Konaté. Among the Congolese, Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou and Achille Ngoye could be mentioned. Especially well-known are the Moroccan Driss Chaïbi and the Algerian Yasmina Khadra —with a female *nom de plume*. Ghanaian and Kenyan authors such as Kwei Quartey and Mukoma Wa Ngũgĩ are prominent at present. Interestingly, South African writers are especially prolific in crime fiction, and contemporary women authors seem to clearly have gained prominence. Some famous names are Lauren Beukes' *Broken Monsters* (2014), Priscilla Holmes' *Now I See You* (2014), Joanne Macgregor's *Dark Whispers* (2014), Charlotte Otter's *Balthasar's Gift* (2014) and Angela Makholwa's *Red Ink* (2007) and *The Black Widows Society* (2013), to name but some of the most widely read. In Nigeria, the Pacesetters series of the late 70s and 80s produced a massive middle-class readership. According to Virginia Coulon, the Macmillan novels mainly rely on stereotyped cinema elements: the handsome, fearless and young hero, the desirable and untrustworthy *femme fatale* and the flatly wicked villain, together with the sweet naïve character who is duped and whose virtue is eventually restored (1987). In addition, Theodora Akachi-Ezeigbo describes this popular fiction as plenty of "racy, gory escapades, sex orgies, violent robberies, blood chilling murders and exciting adventures" (1991, 68). Particularly relevant are *The Instrument* (1980) by Victor Thorpe, *The Mark of the Cobra* (1983) by Valentine Alily, *Dead of Night* (1983) by Philip Phil-Ebosie, *Forgive Me Maryam* (1986) by Mohmed Tukur Garba, or *Dangerous Inheritance* (1988) by Chuma Nwokolo. Other popular titles edited by Nigerian editorial houses were *Kill Me Gently* (1982) by Abu Aremu, *The Victim* (1984) by Toni Marinho, and *Harvest of Tricksters* (1988) by Jide Oguntoye, to mention but just a few sample of a sundry number of such publications. Theodora Akachi-Ezeigbo especially mentions Eddie Iroh's novels —*Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (1976), *Toads of War* (1979) and *Siren in the Night* (1982)— which deftly expose the thriller mode and successfully depict socio-political problems that accursed the country at the time, especially those of the civil war. Compared to the South African scene, Nigeria has a dearth of authors in crime fiction. However, some could be mentioned, among whom Oyinkan Braithwaite is the only woman who has published a neo-noir thriller novel. Ibe Adimchinma's *Treachery in the Yard: A Nigerian Thriller* (2010) and *Patron of Terror* (2011) deal with the corruption of politics under the cunning scrutiny of detective Tammy Peterside. Obinna Udenwe's *Satans & Shaitans* (2016) tackles the reality of the born-again churches and their murky machinations. Leye Adenle's *Easy Motion Tourist* (2016) and *When Trouble Sleeps* (2018) introduce the versatile, sexy and morally labile lawyer Amaka Mbadiwe fighting on her own

terms against greedy and corrupt politicians while trying to help sex workers from a seedy underworld web. His last thriller *The Beautiful Side of the Moon* (2019b) is a blend of science fiction and psychological thriller. The Nigerian-American writer Chris Abani has concocted the stylishly dark *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014a) in which two morally disreputable characters straddle Las Vegas neon-flooded streets and memories of apartheid South Africa. Toni Kan's *The Carnivorous City* (2016) could be read as a chronicle of Lagos' underworld. Femi Kayode plunges the reader into the labyrinthine world behind university cults and mob-lynchings in rural Nigeria in *The Light Seekers* (2021). Most of the aforementioned fiction rarely issues humour as a constitutive element of the prose style and narrative voice. Hence, Braithwaite's novel seems to be a rare occurrence in the present Nigerian crime literary landscape.

## 2. AESTHETIC NUANCES IN *MSSK*

### 2.1. Genre Crossings: Between Domestic Noir and the Psychological Thriller

In the section that follows, I will concentrate on analysing Braithwaite's novel with a view to demonstrating its flexible condition as regards genre. I will seek to show how the fictive work shares some characteristics with domestic noir fiction and the psychological thriller, even though it cannot be said to fully adhere to either category. In other words, in terms of form, *MSSK* is an original accomplishment with elements of crime fiction used in a loosely, yet perfectly balanced way. The reader is provided with adequate doses of unexpectedness, an extremely agile plot, character psychological delineation, black humour and social satire, melodrama, textual gaps and fractured patterns, and above all, a very realistic portraiture of sibling love.

Although Braithwaite's novel shares some elements of neo-noir, it does not linger extensively on the so-called "Afro-pessimism," at least not on a surface first reading. Some elements in *MSSK* could be associated to domestic noir and classical noir fiction. To start with, the urban setting is the city of Lagos and its entropic atmosphere. The main character, Korede, is a nondescript nurse who is torn by guilt and her inherited notions of familial duty. She is obviously as flawed as her happy-go-lucky younger sister, Ayoola. Korede's ethical standards are questionable. Moreover, their home is a site of violence and is depicted as a stifling prison. Additionally, the narration lacks closure and

Korede seems enmeshed in a never-ending cycle of crime and shame. It becomes apparent that there are no heroes in Braithwaite's weft. Although blood does need an expert wipe, the narrative is not gory. Violence is present though at a more subtle and insidious level than the one explicitly described in traditional crime and noir fictions. Every variable previously mentioned could be further nuanced and cross-examined. To begin with, the Lagos of *MSSK* is a clear source of social satire. The daily traffic jams, the meekly accepted warden's bribes, the hospital staff laidback attitude to work and the police slowness and incompetence, together with some Nigerian customs, such as the funeral anniversaries, are described with wit and a keen, overcritical eye. As a way of example, the Lagos Lagoon bridge "is not stranger to death," Korede muses (Braithwaite, 19). In fact, the bridge seems to be a collective tomb or, at least, the waterbed where every discarded human or non-human disposal is reunited. As the protagonist coolly remarks, "[n]ot long ago, a BRT [Bus Rapid Transit] bus, filled to the brim with passengers, drove off the bridge and into the lagoon. No one survived. Afterward, the bus drivers took to shouting, 'Osa straight! Osa straight! 'To their potential customers. Lagoon straight! Straight into the Lagoon!'" (20).

If any, the general portrait that emerges is chaotic and hectic, a place where any criminal can get away with his/her misdeeds. The home in particular seems to be a perceptible locus of oppression. In that respect, Braithwaite's debut work could be said to share some traits with domestic noir. The association of home with a prison is clearly conveyed in the repeated use of a twin painting of the house which Korede usually observes at length—the exact replica of the place she lives in, as if it were the cosy place she dreams of. In fact, as a *mise-en-abyme* recourse, the painting could act as a reminder of what their home is not. Korede broods, "[a]s a child I would go stand before it and wish myself inside. I imagined that our alternates were living within its watercolour walls. I dreamt that laughter and love lay beyond the green lawn, inside the white columns and the heavy oak door" (58). As far as the characters are concerned, both sisters are apparently doomed. However, Ayoola evades the victim and the victimiser role behind a garb of naïveté, neighbouring childishness. On the contrary, although Korede feels the burden of guilt, her attitude seems to be one of snide patronising. She may not be fully calibrating—the reader is led to doubt—her young sister's actual understanding, intelligence and manipulation of the situation they are looped in. *MSSK* appears to be inhabited by wretched characters. However, the reader could hardly avoid closing ranks with the sisters. As regards Korede in particular, although she is an accomplice of her

sibling, she cannot be entirely judged as a criminal. One could even perceive the reluctant but selfless loyalty towards her family. A bond which is thicker than the blood shed —and duly bleached. At times, Ayoola could be likened to the *femme fatale* of the hard-boiled fiction. Nevertheless, quite often, her demeanour is tantamount to an infantilised, unencumbered, and even whimsical one. Noir and thrillers usually resort to violence and sex. That is not the case of *MSSK*. Except for a few scenes of blood cleansing and corpse disposal — narrated in a darkly humorous manner— the damage depicted in the plot is not physical, but decidedly psychological.

Concerning the variables that could place *MSSK* along the line of a psychological thriller, one could argue that plot plays an important role in the narrative. So much so that the reader is gripped by the unfathomable Ayoola and her sudden knife-wielding outbursts. Moreover, the world seems nightmarish and upside-down to faithful Korede. In spite of this, no element of fear is conjured up, and no suspense burdens the reader, only the edgy sensation of *when* will Ayoola snap next. Characterisation outweighs plot in Braithwaite's skein. The *cause* of the serial killings matters more than the actual deaths. And this proves to be one of the main strengths of the narrative: the narrator's inner rumination; her meditations on family ties, her jealousy at being the ugly woman of the pair, her idealisation of doctor Tade, her recreation of the already dead Femi through his poems, her unwavering support and protection to her sister during childhood, her defiance of paternal cruelty and her eccentricities at work are the driving forces that leave a second layer of speculations simmering on the reader's mind. Korede and Ayoola's world may be upside-down, the readers acknowledge, however, there is a reason for this havoc, and the narrative voice of the protagonist convinces him/her of a justification for this state of affairs. The fictional tone is agile and undergirds the surprise element, even when the dark liaisons cannot be unknotted. On the whole, Braithwaite's noir thriller creates more expectancy than despair. Interestingly, the reader can hardly anticipate the ending. The seamed time fractures and half disclosed facts maintain the tension, even when the residual mood is somber and rather unpromising.

## **2.2. Black Humour: Irony and Social Satire**

Another trait germane to Braithwaite's prose is her innate sense of humour — especially black humour— as well as her recourse to social satire with which she peppers, and defines, her fictive universe. Hence, in the section that follows,

I will seek to delineate black humour and analyse some of its constituent characteristics in order to show how it is used in *MSSK*. Paraphrasing crime fiction author Megan Abbott, noir is likely to thrive in times of instability (2018). The same could be affirmed of black humour. As Patrick O’Neill has claimed, referring to the western tradition of humour, a sundry number of authors separated in time and geographies such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, John Barth, Günter Grass, Ferdinand Céline, Joseph Heller, Italo Calvino and Thomas Beckett could be said to share “a refusal to treat what one might regard as tragic materials tragically, and this not as a cheap method of shocking or evoking irreverent laughter, but because the comic approach is for them clearly the only remaining approach that is artistically acceptable” (1983, 148). In an effort to enrich the eminently pervasive masculine literary referents, O’Neill’s enumeration could be enhanced by mentioning the works of female authors such as Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Ursula Le Guin, Clarice Lispector, Margaret Atwood, Sadie Smith, Elena Ferrante and Angela Carter in the West (Bausells 2016). Furthermore, in the Nigerian context, one can hardly omit the suave irony of Chinua Achebe, the witty social satire of Wole Soyinka, the tongue-in-cheek vim of Simi Bedford’s style, the almost expressionistic caricatures in Lola Shoneyin and Igoni Barrett’s plots, the ironic reverberation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s prose, Sarah Ladipo Manyika’s and Abi Dare’s believable and rambunctious lovable characters and, above all, the mordant mood undergirding most of Sefi Atta’s fictive universe, to name but some in a prominent list. Irrespective of nationalities, gender, or class, as the German humour anthologist Gerd Henninger suggests, humour could be regarded as a defence against horror (Henninger in O’Neill, 151).

Defining humour is hardly an easy task, given the divergence of positions and overlapping terminology its different modes engender. As Antony Chapman and Hugh Foot speculate, one may regard humour as a stimulus, a response to a certain event, or a personal disposition (1976). Furthermore, humour’s aim could be to underline one’s *superiority* over others (the Aristotelian theory of humour). It could be used as a *release* or *relief* mechanism (Erichsen 2005) or else, be deployed so as to focus on the *incongruity* between our expectations and the reality before us (Holoch 2012). The satiric, grotesque, ironic, and parodic modes of humour are labile concepts and have been considered as layered as overlapping one another. A considerable number of authors, critics, and theorists such as Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Northrop Frye, Mikhail Bakhtin, John Ball and Linda Hutcheon, to name but

the most salient, have theorised on humour and its different manifestations. Hence, given the wide disparity and imbrication of definitions on the topic, I will adhere to the views and definitions provided by Patrick O’Neill in order to avoid much confusion and digression on this theorisation, which is not the main aim of the present section.

O’Neill distinguishes between three categories of humour. The first two types are termed *benign* and *derisive* humour, while the third is defined by its entropic, sometimes aggressive nature, which he labels *black humour*. “Both the benign and the derisive forms of humour are essentially self-congratulatory, self-reassuring, and spring from an ordered world of imperilled values —the humour of those inside and safe rather than outside and lost” (O’Neill 1983, 154). In other words, one’s circumstances may be difficult, but once the danger has been overcome, humour may arise as a protective filter. O’Neill claims that both “the benign and the derisive modes of humour essentially see the self optimistically as a controlling agent in an orderly world. They differ in their mode of expression in that benign humour is warm, tolerant, sympathetic, the humour of sensibility and sentiment, the humour, in a word, of unthreatened norms” (154). On the other hand, black humour presupposes lost direction and confidence as well as disorientation. “Physicists express the tendency of closed systems to move from a state of order into one of total disorder in terms of system’s entropy: black humour, to coin the phrase, is *the comedy of entropy*,” O’Neill purports (154). In order to further analyse entropic humour, the Canadian critic observes that it is defined by *subject matter* as well as by *mode of being*; that is, by the ethical stance it entails. In order to further qualify such entropic mode of humour, he pertains, two conditions should be met: an essential incongruity and a particular response from the reader. The first condition is related to the narrative use of material or subject matter that usually resists comic treatment. In other words, it is considered defiant, subversive, or taboo. The second characteristic resides in the overt intention or desire to shock. In the same line, Holoch purports that

Black humor is grounded in the notion that the situations it considers are without hope, and it becomes a way for individuals within those situations to acknowledge that hopelessness through laughter. The individual’s laughter is a revolt, but not a revolt that will change his circumstances: rather, it is a bold declaration of selfhood and awareness in the face of oppression. What play exists in this mode is of a more existential nature: it is a process of exploring the positioning of the self, a process that involves foregrounding the primacy of an



individual voice, and registering a perspective that interrogates and critiques its circumstances, even if those circumstances cannot be changed. (2012, 118)

In other words, black humour could be regarded as a pessimistic approach which, on the surface, does not offer explicit relief, that is, reality is painful. However, one could still revel in a mocking attitude towards it. Although the mood of such fictions may be defeated, it usually conveys a subverted picture of society —as André Breton suggests— without sentimentality (Breton in Holloch, 122). Furthermore, it exerts a certain aggressive pull towards the reader, which often is, in my opinion, a stratagem to elicit a response. In other words, it could be seen as a narratorial recourse to instigate change.

At this juncture, it becomes paramount to further outline the different modes of articulation black humour can entail. O'Neill considers five: satiric, ironic, grotesque, absurd and parodic. Satire —whether in its benign or derisive versions— emphasises the didactic and sometimes punitive aim of depicting chaos triumphing over order. As O'Neill claims:

satire is characterized by a firm belief in its own moral efficacy, by a confidence that the real can indeed be brought closer to the distant ideal. At the entropic end of the spectrum, however, we find an emphatic lack of belief in its own efficacy as an agent of moral education, and didactic confidence gives way to a fascinated vision of maximum entropy, total disorder. (157)

Irony, by contrast, “focuses on the discrepancy between the real and the ideal” (158). Interpreting Bergson, O'Neill sustains that humour foregrounds, and mocks, the real while irony highlights *the gap* between reality and the ideal (158; emphasis added). The grotesque, furthermore, seems to lie somewhere between comedy and tragedy. However, both literary genres seek to maintain order, while the grotesque is usually associated to structural chaos and perversions. “It undermines the autonomy of the real, and by extension the validity of the guarantee implied by the notion of a linking between real and ideal” (160). To put it simply, the distance between real and ideal becomes so wide that the result is an almost repulsion. The absurd, O'Neill argues, goes further than the grotesque; that is, it “registers the disappearance of the real altogether” (160). The narrative usually navigates far-fetched concoctions. Eventually, parody is the acceptance of disorder, begetting a form of humour that could be defined as meta-humour —characterised by the utter celebratory tone of entropy. As Samuel Beckett's novels convey, parody could represent

“the laugh laughing at the laugh” (O’Neill, 161). In other words, not only does parody embrace the absurd, but it also deconstructs it.

### 2.2.1. *Those Unnerving Stains*

Having considered some general theoretical distinctions on black humour, I will now move on to discuss how two of its modes —irony and satire— are used in imbrication with noir so as to establish a very peculiar tale of sorts in *MSSK*. Braithwaite has repeatedly distanced herself from any moralising intention while writing the novel (Braithwaite 2020b). She has claimed that people find it easier to be engaged in debates when the author is not clearly —and righteously— positioned over sensitive issues. She also believes that humour is an excellent instrument to convey a viewpoint without being patronising or preachy. Paradoxically, Braithwaite also admits to having had the intention of writing an allegedly quirky novel, but not a hilarious one (Braithwaite 2020a). “I didn’t realise it was gonna be funny until it got published,” she candidly admits, “I knew it was going to be light and it was important to me to keep that lightness throughout the book” (Braithwaite 2019b). Despite the author’s declared intention of distancing her fictional work from dark and thorny issues, the remaining —and layered— themes the novel transpires denounce injustice and domestic violence as well as exert a pull towards empowering women. Additionally, *MSSK* also lays bare questionable social and personal ethical choices and consequences. When asked whether Nigerians’ sense of humour is reflected in the novel, Braithwaite has conceded that she has intentionally described some scenes which are commonplace in her country, and that she has also tried to endow her protagonist with a certain snideness she believes is a definitely Nigerian trait. Moreover, she has observed that “Nigerians have a way of finding humour in a situation that ordinarily would not be funny. I think that’s how we get by sometimes,” she admits. “It could be a good thing, but it could also be a bad thing because we don’t get up always quickly enough because we think everything is like a joke” (Braithwaite 2019b).

From the very design of the book cover, *MSSK* conveys the double standards and contrasting chiaroscuro of the novel plot. The novel’s jacket —first published by Atlantic Books— a black woman’s face whose rounded, tinted (and fashionable) sunglasses mirror a hand with a knife is depicted on the front cover. The glamour is quickly toned-down as one peruses the back design: a red rubber-gloved hand with a bleaching spray bottle and a wiping cloth. The background of the image is black and the font pretends to be blood stained

though the colour used is highlighter green. The combination of title and picture are powerful and convey from the very beginning the mixture of black humour and murder plot. See picture one.



Picture one. Front and back jacket design by Atlantic Books edition (2018).

In addition, particularly hilarious is Korede's rational commitment to leaving no traces of her sister's murders. The narrator's direct address to the reader by using the second person singular seeks to straightforwardly implicate him/her in her reflections and actions. By the same token, the use of third person plural to talk about her and her sister has a detaching effect as well as an ironic depersonalisation from the traumatic moment. "Have you heard this one before?" She muses with a tongue-in-cheek, crisp prose as if telling an off-colour joke, "Two girls walk into a room. The room is in a flat. The flat is on the third floor. In the room is the dead body of an adult male. How do they get the body to the ground floor without being seen?" (Braithwaite 9; original emphasis). The narrator creates expectations on how the two sisters will dispose of the dead body, which is an account of what they had certainly done already before, at least twice. "First, they gather supplies" (9), that is, they take three bed sheets. "Second, they clean up the blood" (9), which is removed with towels. "Third, they turn him into a mummy" (10). The reader gets a first-hand glimpse of how Korede matter-of-factly checks the man's pulse and goes on to calculate how to wrap the well-built body. While she is assessing their

possibilities, Korede relishes on Femi's shape: "I could make out his sculpted body beneath his white tee. He looked like a man who could survive a couple of flesh wounds," she mulls over, "but then so had Achilles and Caesar." The instructions proceed: "*Fourth, they move the body*" (10). The efficient nurse opts for using the lift, not the stairs. Korede anticipates some possible questions from neighbours to which she mentally rehearses some implausible answers: "*We are playing a prank on my brother. He is a deep sleeper and we are moving his sleeping body elsewhere. No, no, it's not a real man, what do you take us for? It's a mannequin. No, ma, it's just a sack of potatoes*" (11). Korede is rather inclined to pray so as not to be discovered, although she "is fairly certain that those are exactly the types of prayers He *doesn't* answer," she objectively faces. "So I chose instead to rely on luck and speed" (11; original emphasis). Eventually, Korede's deft hands are put into real action. "*Fifth, they bleach*" (12).

The singular chemical recipe for wiping blood, hence, is galvanised into a manual for cleansing all incriminating proofs. Once again, Korede apprises the reader:

I bet you didn't know that bleach masks the smell of blood. Most people use bleach indiscriminately, assuming it is a catchall product, never taking the time to read the list of ingredients on the back, never taking the time to return to the recently wiped surface to take a closer look. Bleach will disinfect, but it's not great for cleaning residue, so I use it only after I have first scrubbed the bathroom of all traces of life, and death. (2)

The efficient nurse reports she has spent three hours cleaning the blood and that "the hardest part was getting to the blood that had seeped in between the shower and the caulking" (2). After some blood has leaked into Korede's car boot she almost proudly thinks: "I take my homemade mixture of one spoon of ammonia to two cups of water from her [a dazed Ayoola] and pour over the stain. I don't know whether or not they have the tech for a thorough crime scene investigation in Lagos, but Ayoola could never clean up as efficiently as I can" (4). Before deciding to throw Femi's body through the third mainland bridge, Korede unapologetically ruminates: "We return to the car and he is still in the boot, waiting for us" (4). It becomes apparent that the absence of traffic, police control and city lighting facilities will give the siblings the perfect concealment and impunity to discard the third body. "We take him to where we took the last one—over the bridge and into the water. At least, we won't be lonely" (4), she cynically remarks. In fact, the portrayal of Korede's personality is sketched

from the very first chapters. A quick-witted, and cool-headed professional who struggles the chaos around her life with a stubborn obsession about order, cleanliness, smells and measured quantities. The description of her handbag's contents is an example of what she calls "the essentials for every woman": "Two packets of pocket tissue, one 30-centiliter bottle of water, one first aid kit, one packet of wipes, one wallet, one tube of hand cream, one lip balm, one phone, one tampon, one rape whistle" (71-2). Her nature seems impervious to feminine excessive accessories. By contrast, some chapters ahead it is said that Ayoola's bag brims in "a mess—used tissue, recipes, cookie crumbs, notes from Dubai and candy that had been sucked and rewrapped" (205). Nowhere is the implied author more pungently humorous as when she includes the poems written by the third murdered boyfriend, Femi. Dedicated to Ayoola, the incisive first line cannot but amuse the reader: "*I dare you to find a flaw / in her beauty; / or to bring forth a woman who can stand beside / her without wilting*" (17). Even more mordant, Korede reads these lines on Femi's blog: "*I found the quiet / In your arms; / The nothing that I search for / Daily. / You are empty / And I am full. / Fully drowning*" (86).

Throughout the book, there seems to be a constant pull inside the main protagonist towards sympathy for others and guilt coupled with her compulsion to re-establish 'normalcy,' common sense and family stability. Always depending on social media trends, Korede had watched a TEDx video where a man had discovered how jotting down happy moments in his life had saved him and changed his existence (the acerbic undertone of the implied author in relation to such self-help 'recipes' emerges). Diligently, she buys a notebook with such a purpose in mind, only to end up recording one joyful moment. Only "*I saw a white owl through my bedroom window*" (5; original emphasis) remains—a mirror metaphor of her complicit witnessing role? In need of a better use, thus, the pages are turned into a record of the names of her sister's killings. The ease with which the two sisters seem to equate important events with gruesome ones adds up to the global and dark humorous effect. When Korede asks Ayoola about Femi's surname she does not seem to remember. "It's not my fault, you know,' But I don't know. I don't know what she is referring to," Korede broods, "Does she mean the inability to recall his surname? Or his death?" (6). By the same token, when Ayoola insistently calls her on the phone, the eldest sister pointedly remarks: "Maybe she is reaching out because she has another man to his grave prematurely, or maybe she wants to know if I can buy eggs on the way home" (31-2).

Some other tidbits of irony are cunningly embedded in a casual manner within more serious issues. Many a time, when she is referring to Ayoola, Korede is particularly —and jealously— biting. In a scene where the eldest sister is told by her mother to teach her younger sibling how to cook, Korede reflects on how sloppy and absent-minded her sister could be while chopping the ingredients. “She doesn’t mind being in the kitchen. She likes to sample everything she sets eyes on” (41). In addition, the narrator’s purposeful use of understatement sparks the desired ironical effect. When Tade —the charming doctor Korede is infatuated with— asks her about her sister’s love ties, she cannot help picturing on her mind: “I think of Femi sleeping on the ocean bed, being nibbled at by fishes,” while she hones in, ““She’s taking a break”” (62). And, eventually, tells him that Ayoola has not a boyfriend because “[h]er relationships tend to end badly” (63). In one of the longest chapters of the book —six pages— entitled “Questions,” the police have been sent to their house in order to inquire about Femi’s death. The scene unfurls hilariously since it depicts the inefficiency of the police inquiry while one of the officers is quite evidently stunned by Ayoola’s beauty. Korede secretly relishes on her sister’s acting qualities. The story the siblings are plotting is that Korede was in Femi’s flat to intercede so that they could be reconciled after the couple had an argument. To what the police officer asks: ““Did she help? Were you back together?” To what Ayoola lackadaisically responds, ““No... it was over”” (101). And the representation proceeds:

She sighs. It is a masterful mix of weariness and sadness. We watch as she twirls a lock of hair around her finger. “I mean, he had accepted that things wouldn’t work between us.”

“Ms. Korede, do you agree with that assessment? Did Mr. Durand accept his fate?”

I remember the body, half lying, half sitting on the bathroom floor, and the blood. I doubt he had time to come to terms with his fate, let alone accept it.

“I imagine he was unhappy. But there was nothing he could have done to change her mind” (102).

*MSSK* seems, on a surface level, generously interspersed with black humour: from the cover to Korede’s bleaching pedagogical tips; from the senior nurse acrimonious personality to her sensitivity for Femi’s prophetic poems; from her unexpected ironical remarks to the effective deployment of understatement. The narrator can tell a story that grips the reader and teaches him/her to await for the next pun —or punch.

### 2.2.2. *Satire: Lagos, City of Entropy*

According to Niyi Akingbe, satire is by no means unfamiliar to Nigerian literature. As such, it has been present from pre-colonial times and across literary genres (2014). Godini Darah contends that “the satirist is seen as a defender of communal norms and virtues” (2005, 22). And he observes a difference between the “satire proper” and the “pseudo-satire or lampoon.” A lampoon satirist “relies on invective rather than objective and sophisticated analysis” (22-23). On the contrary, proper satire is more nuanced and only criticises in oblique terms. Africans such as Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o and Tejumola Olaniyan have stressed that satirists make explicit their derision at society’s shortcomings and have the aim of correcting its vices, “through painful, sometimes malicious, laughter” (Thiong’o 1972, 55). From pre-independence times, Cyprian Ekwensi and T. M. Aluko, together with Chinua Achebe, often satirised the European intolerance and ignorance about the African cultural systems. Post-independence authors such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Ola Rotimi inveighed against the foibles of Nigerian leaders. The Second-Generation writers, including Kole Omotoso, Femi Osofisan, Tunde Fatunde and Festus Iyayi, to name the most prominent, distanced themselves from their predecessors and mocked the raw capitalism and the havoc it inflicted on their country. Particularly prone to satire is the poetry of Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Femi Fatoba, Odia Ofeimun and Oyenyi Okunoye among others, who inflect their stanzas with the clash between oral and modern traditions, politicians’ fickleness, environment degradation, poverty, prostitution, alcoholism and the alienation of the diaspora experience.

In such a panorama, Braithwaite’s satire recourse is rather indirect, and it emerges as part of the background in the Lagosian environment. It also contributes to foregrounding the fact that a serial killer can escape justice and punishment. Be that as it may, the entropic rhythm of the biggest city of Nigeria—Lagidi or Gidi, as it is popularly known—could conceal the misdemeanour of a pair of peculiar sisters. *MSSK* transpires a typically Nigerian élan and is rooted in many of the country’s social flaws. Braithwaite has observed that when she first returned to Lagos permanently, she had been outraged by daily occurrences that she became unhappily used to, and oblivious, with time (Braithwaite 2019a). Hence, it may come as no surprise that such systemic shortcomings are the ones evinced by the police: the traffic, roads and car security management; the hospital staff lax dynamics or culturally established

institutions, such as marriage or funeral rites, are often the object of Korede's wry remarks.

The portrayal of scenes depicting Lagosian life and its characters is another source of humour Braithwaite deploys at ease. From aside commentaries such as "I called the air conditioner repairman, who insisted he was ten minutes away. That was two hours ago" to "the bridge was no stranger to death" (Braithwaite, 19), Korede proceeds to offer a piece of her mind to the reader. The infamous Lagosian traffic congestions—which people have to endure on a daily basis—are coupled with the commonplace wardens' systematic and random bribes, for no apparent reasons but to add up a money complement to their supposedly meagre salaries. While Korede is delayed at 5:15 a.m., she "inadvertently meet[s] the eye of one of the LASTMA [Lagos State Traffic Management Authority] officials lurking around the line of cars, watching out for his next hapless victim" (27). She does not want to call his attention due to the fact that his car boot has housed Femi's corpse the previous evening. Therefore, she resorts to broken English as a way of avoiding his anger at her being a classy woman. Without success, she offers 3,000 Naira to the angered warden, to what he answers "'You're not serious.' [...] 'So give me wetin a big man go use enjoy'" (30). Korede adds 2,000 extra Naira to what the officer retorts "'[w]ear your seatbelt, and make you no do am again'" (30). Scornful Korede assures that a LASTMA warden's "greatest task, his *raison d'être*" is "to chase down individuals who run a red light" (27-28).

No less sceptical is the narrator's condescension towards Lagos police, who take Korede's car for investigation, upon which they predictably decide there is nothing wrong with it. They duly return her her car, not without charging her 5,000 Naira on account of "[l]ogistical and transportation costs" (117). Korede explains the reason behind the police officers' dropping her car at the hospital: "At home, I would have had all the power. I could simply demand that they leave my compound. Here, I am at their mercy. [...] I need them to leave before they attract more attention. Every eye on either side of the hospital doors is on me, my car and these two geniuses" (118). Surrendering to circumstances, Korede hands over the money while Chichi—one of the hospital nurses, who happens to be a busybody—"pretends she hasn't seen the exchange" (119). When Chichi asks why Korede's car has been taken by the police, she claims it has been involved in an accident and that the policemen have just been checking it "for insurance purposes" (119). Chichi would never believe such an excuse, to what Korede ironically snaps, "You know these police. Always working so



hard” (119). Classism, however, seems to dictate the probity of the police officers involved. When Tade gets enmeshed in a criminal situation with Ayoola —eventually it is *her* who gets injured when trying to kill the doctor—the police staff in charge is different. In other words, whenever the situation involves rich or upper-middle class citizens, the interviewers are “well spoken and educated” (217). As Korede explains “this comes as no real surprise. Tade is a talented doctor at a prestigious hospital, Ayoola a beautiful woman from a ‘good’ background. The case screams ‘high profile’” (217). Eventually, as Korede suggests is the case with well-off people:

They had his [Tade’s] license revoked, and he has to spend a few months in jail for assault. It could have been much worse, but many attested to the fact that he was kind and never had displayed a whit of violence. Still, there was no denying the fact that he had stabbed Ayoola. And for that, society demanded that he pay. (220)

All along the narrative, the explanations of police proceedings are brief and sweeping. On the whole, it seems implausible that Ayoola and Korede could escape police surveillance and incriminating proof. Unless one could be willing to believe that no police member could carry a serious crime investigation. Or else, that the justice system is willing to exonerate affluent citizens. When asked about her possible sister’s part in Femi’s death, a cynical Korede explains to the police interviewers: “A hundred suspicions don’t make proof. She is five-two. What the hell do you think she did with him, if she hurt him?” (218).

The vignettes of the hospital life are particularly satirised, especially when Korede describes her co-workers. The receptionists, Yinka and Bunmi are sloppy and inefficient. Chichi, whom Korede cannot trust since she is a gossip, keeps selling shoes during work time in order to earn extra money. Mohammed, Assibi and Gimpe, the janitors, (two of whom have Hausa names) do not seem to have an inkling of what cleanliness is about in the eyes of the narrator. Yinka usually snoozes at the reception desk and “has found a way to sleep with her eyes open.” Korede slams her clipboard on the desk, to what Yinka complains, ““What the hell, Korede? Don’t wake me up unless there’s a fire”” (15). Yinka cannot be rushed, according to the senior nurse, since she “slows down intentionally when you push her buttons” (31). Another hilarious vignette at hospital is portrayed when, upon Korede’s arrival, Yinka is painting her nails at the reception desk. “Bunmi sees me coming and nudges her, but it is a pointless warning—Yinka won’t stop on my account. She acknowledges my

presence with a feline smile” (51). The following exchange ensues: “‘Korede, those shoes are nice o!’ ‘Thanks.’ ‘The original must be very expensive’” (51).

No sooner has meticulous Korede finished giving orders to the receptionists than she suspects Mohammed has been flirting with Assibi and neglecting his duties. “It comes as no surprise to me that he can’t clean windows—I can smell him ten feet away, and it is a rank, stale odor,” Korede confirms. And she curtly ruminates: “Unfortunately, the way a person smells is not grounds for dismissal” (15). Although Korede is promoted to chief of staff nurse, her description of the hospital is nevertheless rather dispassionate and wearied. “The sofas are a rich burgundy color. (The decorator was not trying to broaden anyone’s horizons.) If hospitals had a flag it would be white—the universal sign for surrender” (32). One can hardly avoid making the association of white with bleach, and defeat. What Braithwaite masterfully juxtaposes is satire with a somber and cynical tone the protagonist transpires through the apparent lighthearted social critique. Eventually, after an episode of robbery caused by Korede in Tade’s office, Mohammed is dismissed. The always grumpy senior nurse unexpectedly broods, “[i]t’s easy to point the finger at Mohammed. He is poor, uneducated. He is a cleaner” (194).

Nigerians’ customs prescribe that “the demise of a person represents a transition from the physical to the spiritual realm. Having that consciousness, the Yoruba want to maintain a good relationship with the dead, especially during burial” (Azeez and Salami 2020, 26). In addition, the descendants of the dead person should provide, according to their economic possibilities, for a second burial whose enactment may vary according to the family’s possibilities. The belief is that if the second burial is not celebrated, the dead could take revenge upon the outliving family. However, according to Azeez and Salami, burials are excuses for social family gatherings, which usually presuppose “entertainment, social bonding, contact making, social control, and business,” rather than religious rituals (2020, 26). Duly, Korede, Ayoola and their mother organise their father’s second burial ten years after —at the insistence of their father’s sister, aunt Taiwo. The real motives the three women have for celebrating the burial anniversary are not to honour their father, but to avoid having to answer difficult questions to the family and the community. “[W]e are nothing if not thorough in our deception of others,” Korede concedes. Aunt Taiwo suggests a great party since her brother deserves a big celebration. “I am sure they are celebrating him in hell,” Korede mulls over. In fact, the aunt suggests a place in Lekki —one of the most expensive areas in Lagos— to what

Korede ponders that “[h]e doesn’t deserve a single naira, but my mother wants to keep up appearances and so she agrees” (81). Once in church, Ayoola and Korede are wearing *aṣọ ebi* —that is, the matching colour *ankara* outfits to distinguish the family of the deceased. Ayoola, who is a clothes designer, has chosen the fabric which is “a rich purple ensemble. He hated the color purple. She also designed both pieces—mine is a mermaid dress, flattering to my tall frame, and hers clings to every curve. We both wear sunglasses to disguise the fact that our eyes are dry” (106). By contrast, their mother performs the widow role. “My mother weeps in church, bent double; her sobs are so loud and powerful, they rattle her body. I wonder what she is focusing on to bring about tears—her own frailty? Or maybe she is simply recalling what he did to her, to us” (106). The ironic remark is again in the words of the priest who reminds the faithful kin of “the gift of God” they enjoyed from the years spent with their father. “I close my eyes and mutter words of gratitude to whatever forces keep his soul captive” Korede broods and as if on cue, “Ayoola searches for my hand and I take it” (107). At the same ceremony, a young woman tells Korede her father used to pay her university fees. To what she scornfully broods: “I am tempted to inform her he had several girlfriends in various universities across Lagos. We had long since lost count. He once told me you had to feed the cow before you slaughtered it; it was the way of life” (107). With her unwavering wryness, Korede muses “[w]hen you have money, university girls are to men what plankton is to a whale” (107).

Korede’s mother seems to be the epitome of schmaltzy disposition. She reads Mills & Boon novels, “the type of love she has never known” (41), she is intent on marrying her daughters, especially Ayoola, whom she considers beautiful enough to deserve a wife status. The endeavour of finding her younger daughter a husband seems to worry her —Korede does not seem to wholly meet the beauty standards for marriage. That is the reason why she wants Korede to teach Ayoola how to cook. Culinary qualities are paramount to be worthy of the ring. Her daughters, however, are quite skeptical of the matrimony institution. Ayoola does not seem to worry about having men’s attention since she is too attractive to be concerned. On the contrary, Korede dreams about marrying Tade, the warm and good-looking doctor, but she regards herself as ugly enough not to deserve any man’s interest. As a matter of fact, there is a constant tension exerted on the part of the mother and the in-laws —especially, Aunty Taiwo—so that the sisters get married soon; marriage is seen as a market where women engage in fierce competition for the male prize: “You people are getting old and competition is tight. Girls are not joking. Some of them are even taking

men away from their wives!” (81). In a remarkable summary of what a woman should do in order to tie the knot and secure a happy man, Auntie Taiwo declares: “Keep your hair long and glossy or invest in good weaves; cook for him and send the food to his home and his office. Stroke his ego in front of his friends and treat them well for his sake. Kneel down for his parents and call them on important days. Do these things and he will put a ring on your finger” (82). Those pieces of advice, condoned by their mother, simply imply keeping up with appearances. Paradoxically, Auntie Taiwo is not married herself, but remains a concubine of a wealthy politician.

Throughout the novel, there is a steady pull to conform to marriage standards. The janitors at St Peter’s hospital are described having a fight because one of them had been trying to “steal” her boyfriend, Mohammed. Women seem compelled to wrestle for men’s attention. The irony of the reality is that marriage has not proved to make any of the women happy, especially Korede’s and Ayoola’s mother. “After all, *she* didn’t have love. What she had was a politician for a father so she managed to bag herself a man who viewed marriage as a means to an end” (24; original emphasis), Korede dryly concludes. Marriage and funeral rites are usually regarded as social conventions by means of which males decide women’s roles and value. The narrator of *MSSK* has dreams, but certainly second thoughts on these Nigerian social standards; the circumstances of humour, irony and satire tend to lay bare patriarchal and structural Nigerian flaws. As Patrick O’Neill has put it, and Oyinkan Braithwaite has also openly declared: “while we laugh, there’s hope” (O’Neill 1983, 165). Braithwaite has said to have struggled with “the tension between her faith and the moral ambiguity of her fiction,” (Lea 2019, *gulfnews.com*). Yet, as she remarks, “people say they read it [*MSSK*] and laughed. I like to think that, in my own little way, I’ve brought joy into the world” (Lea 2019).

### **2.3. Flowers, Poems, Jewels, and... Marriage**

Braithwaite’s writing has been found having reminiscences of Jane Austen. Korede and Ayoola have been compared to the Elinor and Marianne Dashwood of the iPhone Generation (Edwards 2018). Although *MSSK* is not a romance novel, it evinces many elements of the genre. For a start, marriage appears to be a desirable condition and the main drive for most women characters. Paradoxically, misanthropic Korede is more inclined to being romantically involved than stunning and whimsical Ayoola. Be that as it may, romance

clichés such as flowers, a bracelet, and a diamond ring are present, in all likelihood, as a mocking recourse to idealised and vapid displays of gallantry. Noir fiction could involve some kind of love relation as part of a sub-plot, although erotic dallying is usually more akin to the genre. In yet another departure from the classical structure of the noir novel, *MSSK* builds up structural plot tension around three characters: Korede, Ayoola and Tade. The doctor is, however, a useful pawn to further develop—and challenge—the bond between the sisters. In this section, I will consider how romance is another feature present in the novel which further blurs its categorisation into definite genre boundaries. What is more, if any love is foregrounded in Braithwaite’s fiction, it is the sisterly affection and not a romantic fling.

Romance novels have always been popular in Nigeria, especially from the 50s to the 80s, Wendy Griswold purports (2000). Collections such as Harlequin Romance, Candlelight Ecstasy, Sweet Inspirations or Mills and Boon have been quite massively read in the country. The previous Onitsha Market paved the way for the establishment of a middle-class of mostly female readership on the genre. The contemporary Hausa *littattafan soyayya* and Ankara Press—a Cassava Republic Press subsidiary printing house—are thriving sources “empowering romance” in the country (Carpenter 2014, *thebookseller.com*). The classic and western romance plot, which rooted in Nigerian fiction, often portrays the beautiful and young lovers meeting obstacles and misunderstandings and, eventually, reunited in a happy-ever-after. This situation seems to be neither Korede’s nor Ayoola’s destiny. Nevertheless, the main protagonist is quite voluble to men and has a penchant for having platonic crushes. By contrast, her apparently shambolic sister seems to know more about men and is usually more cautious about avoiding serious or idealised attachments to men. At the beginning of the novel, Korede appears to be the strong, distant and forethoughtful sister, while Ayoola is shown in a puerile light, always in need of protection. As the plot unravels, however, the reader has direct access to Korede’s sensitive nature and her inner insecurities, frustrations and guilt. Ayoola, on the other hand, is never entirely fathomed by the reader, who only has access to her via Korede’s point of view. Increasingly, one begins to doubt the narrator’s assessment of reality, and the true nature of her sister.

Many of the chapters’ titles of the book involve romantic icons: “Song,” “Orchids,” “Roses,” “Bracelet,” and “Heart.” In the chapter entitled “Song,” Korede describes Tade in a glamourised light while he is at work with a child patient. Rarely does she show signs of having maternal feelings. Korede

describes the weeping girl as “a wild chicken” and she considers how bad the mother must be feeling, by adding “I wonder if this was what she imagined when she was posing for her pregnancy photo shoot and making merry at the baby shower” (48). However, a different Korede emerges when she refers to the affectionate doctor, “[h]e has the ability to look at you and make you feel like you are the only thing that matters for as long as you have the attention. He doesn’t look away, his eyes don’t glaze over, and he is generous with his smile” (14). It is not a minor detail noticing that Tade’s uniform is thoroughly approved by the hygiene standards of our nurse. Tade’s devotion for his patients and his easy-going, gentle disposition softens Korede. He can sing a kid’s song such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb” in order to predispose a child to vaccination. Korede is utterly moved by his voice “like an ocean” (49). Even the child’s mother is visibly enthralled. Korede contemplates “passing her a tissue to catch the drool that threatens to spill from her mouth” (49).

Predictably, the illusion vanishes when Tade eventually meets Ayoola and is dumbfounded by her beauty. Korede feels turning inside out. She even tries wearing make-up for the doctor’s sake. Korede’s attempts are thwarted by Yinka who vengefully tells her: “We both know Ayoola and Tade are meant to be. They look gorgeous together” (74). In a melodramatic response, Korede rushes to wipe her mascara “rinsing away any traces of makeup and tears” (74). “If he were mine, I wouldn’t leave his side,” she broods when at their father’s funeral ceremony Ayoola disregards Tade’s presence altogether (108). The eldest sister seems to concede that she “could be happy for them [Ayoola and Tade]. I could, I think. But she doesn’t love him and for some reason he is blind to that fact; he doesn’t care” (133). As a matter of fact, she may be on the way to acknowledge what Ayoola had told her from the very beginning: Tade is not very special indeed and very similar to other boyfriends she has had. When asked by Korede why he is in love with Ayoola, Tade answers that she is “beautiful and perfect” (166). In all likelihood, Korede had expected a more complex and acute answer. She gradually, hence, starts to consider what her sister had warned her about. “*All he wants is a pretty face,*” she had quickly appraised (166; original emphasis).

Femi —Ayoola’s third victim— is another character Korede does not get to know. However, she is haunted by his physical appearance and his alleged sensitivity. Many a time, she has nightmares of him, reads his online poems, even daydreams with her sister’s killed boyfriend. Korede pries over his photos on Ayoola’s phone, “[h]is mouth is set in a firm line, but his eyes are laughing.

Ayoola is in the shot, looking lovely as usual, but his energy fills the screen” (20-1). She begins to explore Femi’s social media information until his blog is no longer available. Korede sentimentally broods: “He no longer exists for the online world; he can no longer exist for me. He is beyond my reach now in death, as he would have been in life” (196). Ironically, Muhtar, Korede’s “great listener” (18) and coma patient is the only real possibility of love for her. He seems to be an intellectual man—he can quote Toni Morrison at ease—and is faithful to Korede even though he knows about her complicit relation with murder. He advises her to save Tade and to free herself from her sister’s crimes. He even divorces his wife and is willing to start a relation with the nurse. He is on the road to replace Tade’s place in the plot as in Korede’s life when she decides to destroy all ties with him.

Additionally, some hackneyed symbols of romantic love are involved in the relation between Tade and Ayoola. The deployment of such clichés may be the author’s way of bringing to the fore that love entails a deeper, raw and more complex reality than the mere display of tokens. However, for Korede these gestures appear to be significant. So much so that she ruins the two rose bouquets Tade has sent her sister and destroys the diamond ring he has bought her for their future engagement. The objects remain a deep wound on Korede’s self-awareness, a fetish of what is necessary to be considered worthy and desirable. When our protagonist is with Muhtar, she immediately thinks of Tade and Femi. She remembers part of one of the latter’s poems: “*Love is not a weed / It cannot grow where it please...*” (124). She probably intuitively feels Femi was more sensitive than what her sister could deem or admit. Moreover, she probably feels Muhtar’s loyal silence is more akin to true love. It is worth pointing out, however, that the presence of Tade posing a conflict of loyalty between the sisters appears to be the most conspicuous climax in the novel’s plot—neither the serial killings nor the heartbreaks seem to count—since the most prominent tension is the siblings’ commitment to each other or falling apart because of Tade. In the light of a blurred but interesting Femi, a wilful and intellectual Muhtar, and most importantly, a sister who could apparently kill to stay true to her kin, Tade becomes a superficial, even hysterical character who poses no challenge to the siblings’ implicit alliance.

#### **2.4. Trauma and Silence: Radial Narrative Pattern**

In the following pages, I will focus on how domestic trauma is propelled in narratological terms by a particular pattern defined by Jane Alison as *radial*

(2019). I will also delve on such aesthetic issues as the role that fractured time, silence, dreams and memory exert within the plot, and how they interact in order to achieve a global effect of despair, although —on a surface level— the novel may seem a light-hearted, entertaining and easy read. In *Meander, Spiral, Explode. Design and Pattern in Narrative* (2019), Jane Alison claims that there is a reason why the wave pattern is very prone to be used in narratives. “[A] wave is a clear instance of energy charging static matter until that energy is spent and equilibrium returns, elegant and satisfying,” she observes (20). However compelling this pattern may be, she insists that also nature provides *allocentric* perspectives —that is, more remote or “aerial” points of view of space which allow us to see “the overall shape” and “the relations beyond yourself” (8). Ironically, she also ponders on the fact that there is an undeniable masculine-sexual connotation in the ever-present surge and tautness until the final collapse narrative. Providing insights from eclectic theories such as those explaining nature motifs and textile art, she proposes an unconventional way to analyse narrative plots. From *Patterns in Nature* (1974) by Peter Stevens, she suggests that textual nature may also resemble differing shapes and movements. In addition, she borrows the term pattern from the textile scholar Charlotte Jirousek, who defines it as “an underlying structure that organizes surfaces or structures in a consistent, regular manner. Pattern can be described as a repeating unit of shape or form, but it can also be thought of as the ‘skeleton’ that organizes the parts of a composition” (Jirousek in Alison, 69-70). Hence, Alison proceeds to describe and exemplify from literary fiction five patterns of textual narrative: Meandering, Spiralling, Radial, Fractal and Cellular. It is not the aim of this section to expand on each of them in detail. Suffice it to say that *MSSK* could be said to conjure up a radial narrative. Alison describes such pattern in the following terms:

Narratives that strike me as radial are those in which a powerful center holds the fictional world—characters’ obsessions, incidents in time—tightly in its gravitational force. That center could be a crime or trauma or something a figure wants to avoid but can’t help falling into: something devastatingly magnetic. [...]. [A] reader might have a sense of being drawn again and again to a hot core—or, conversely, of trying to pull away from that core. You might already know the end at the start and get many fractured views of the same moment, or many fractured views of things avoiding that moment. You might feel a sense of violent scatteration from a central point. Radials can be centrifugal or centripetal, but linear they are not. (165-166).



If one concentrates on the seventy-six short chapters the novel is divided into, some recurrences are worth mentioning and analysing. A number of chapters are concerned with *love* and *romance* (whose titles have been already mentioned in the previous section). Some are concerned with *death*: “Words,” “Body,” “Knife,” “Stain,” “Break,” “Blood,” “Cleaner,” or “Bathroom.” *Family* is focused on in the chapters called “Home,” “Birth,” “Family,” “Fence” and “Sister.” *Memory* and *Mental Instability* are tackled in the chapters entitled “Memory,” “Madness,” “Asleep,” “Secret,” “Sheep,” “Screen,” “Gone.” *Social media* and *Internet culture* is suggested in “Instagram,” “#3,” “#2: Peter,” “#5,” and “Phone.” However, there is a noun that is repeated throughout the narrative in chapters thirteen, twenty-eight, thirty-six, thirty-eight, sixty, sixty-three and seventy-four: “Father.” These analeptic narrative movements adamantly reappear as if from a vortex which is a turning point in the sisters’ lives. All along the novel, their father is never given a name. He is called “Father” or “he.” Quite evidently, he has inflicted a wound in the siblings which is the cause of the mental instability they undergo. Chapter sixty starts “The day it all ended was a Sunday” (Braithwaite, 171). Conversely, one can only conjecture that the mentioned day was the moment everything started. The events of this day are never told in a single paragraph, but in patchy fragments. Previously, as if an aside comment Korede muses:

He... slumped, hitting his head against the glass coffee table as he fell to the floor. His blood was brighter than the dark color we saw on TV. I got up warily and Ayoola came out from behind the couch, where she’d been taking cover. We stood over him. For the first time, we were taller. We watched the life seep out of him. Eventually, I woke my mother from her Ambien-induced sleep and told her it was over. (80)

The reasons for the murder became apparent but the reader never gets to know more details of the incident. In another leap backward, Korede broods: “I recall us, standing over our father, watching him die” (127). In all the chapters referred to him, the reader is provided with a portrait of a reckless man who did not show any affection for his wife or daughters. A rich and reputable man in the community, known for having paid the university fees of many young women. “He rarely looked at us closely, and when he did, it never ended well,” (173) Korede surmises. Father was a man who showed an almost unhealthy attachment to a tribal cane and a knife. “He would hold the nine-inch curved blade between his fingers, drawing the viewer’s attention to the black comma-like markings carved and printed in the pale bone hilt. The presentation usually came with a story” (37). Sometimes it was a gift from a university colleague, a

soldier who had tried to kill him or a sheik who had given him the choice of his daughter or the knife. Another clear instance of the place women had in his regard. The cane was used for trashing her daughters. The edge of this cane was the first thing that led Korede to share the punishment given to Ayoola. “History had shown me that if you came within the reach of the cane, the cane would not distinguish between victim and observer, but I had the feeling that Ayoola would not survive the confrontation without me” (183). Thus, down she went to help her sister bear the brunt of pain. Korede explains that the beatings could be understood as his father’s “desire to instil discipline” or clearly establish “the law of the home” (184). However, little love is shown in such demeanour, and much aggressive compulsion to neglect and punish women as if this were a cultural given. Father was only stilled when his public reputation was at stake, when people “could ask questions” (184). In chapter seventy-three, the reader is told of their father’s intention to “give” Ayoola to a wealthy chief as a sexual gift. Korede feels she must, once again, protect her sister and is determined not to comply with his father’s scheme. Upon being utterly scared of his anger, the sisters are given no choice: “‘He will kill us,’ she [Ayoola] sobbed. ‘Not if we kill him first’” (216), Korede retorts.

From this gap in the narrative one can muster every quirk and mental instability shown in Korede and Ayoola stem as in a splash scatter. “There used to be a chair at the head of the table, but I burnt it down to a crisp in a bonfire just outside our compound. We don’t talk about that. We don’t talk about him” (57). A silence has covered the crime. However, the story and its repercussions cannot help but repeating themselves as if unconsciously in the case of Ayoola, with an adamant instinct of protection—or is it a compulsion to cover?—in Korede’s instance. As an inheritance from their father, the siblings have a habit of fetishising objects. Ayoola loves jewels, money and clothes, Korede believes in the power of destroying Tade’s wedding ring and rose bouquets and has an obsession with cleaning and bad smells. Ostensibly, the sisters’ ritualistic energy may lead them to break the spell of the immaterial over the too material reality of the killings and the guilt they are burdened with. “Ayoola inherited the knife from him (and by ‘inherited’ I mean she took it from his possessions before his body was cold on the ground). It made sense that she would take it—it was the thing he was most proud of” (37), Korede informs. Is Ayoola using the knife as a symbol of his father’s violence and power to restore her innocence and self-respect? Or is it simply her instinct of self-protection learnt by years of domestic violence? Korede reflects on the fact that she does not know where the knife used by Ayoola is. In fact, were she in possession of the knife, it would

have been swiftly destroyed. Korede heedlessly thinks that it is not her sister's will resorting to stab her victims, but it is as "if it were the knife and not her that was doing the killing. But then, is that so hard to believe? Who is to say that an object does not come with its own agenda? Or that the collective agenda of its previous owners does not direct its purpose still?" (36).

Plot time is frequently fractured and memories as well as dreams are disrupting. Apart from the overpowering presence of a man whose name and personal story the reader has never access to, childhood memories arise interspersing the otherwise darkly humorous plot. Korede remembers that stories about the knife were the "closest things to bedtime tales we had" (38), that after their father's death, they dismissed all the house staff "for practical reasons" (42). This silence over their past is constantly growing as Korede's guilt and necessity to speak becomes urgent. Ayoola, however, becomes the centre of her concerns time and again:

I need to talk to someone, anyone; someone besides Muhtar. I considered therapy once, but Hollywood has revealed that therapists have a duty to break confidence if the life of the patient is at stake or someone else is at stake. I have a feeling if I were to talk about Ayoola, that confidence would be broken in five minutes. Isn't there an option where no one dies and Ayoola doesn't have to be incarcerated? (134)

What remains strange is the fact that she only considers the secret of Ayoola's killings. Her father's death —presumably her own responsibility— is seldom mentioned and never named as a crime. Memories arise, nevertheless. In addition, dreams are also haunting for the protagonist-narrator. Femi's body swelling underwater is recurrent and Tade also appears in her nightmares blaming her for what Ayoola does. After reading the novel, the general picture emerges, a bayou in which "Father" and "Home" become equally central and puzzling, a violent inheritance and prison. The painting of the house they have at home seems to echo intertextual references with Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. The painting maintains its eternal beauty while the real home is gradually rotting:

The beauty of our home could never compare to the beauty of the painting, with its perpetual pink dawn and leaves that never withered, and its bushes tinted with otherworldly shades of yellow and purple, ringing the garden. In the painting, the outside walls are always a white crisp white, while in reality we have not been able to repaint them and now they are bleached-out yellow. (59-60)

Their big “grand, history rich” home is like a burden they could not dispose of since it had been acquired on dubious manners and it was too big for sale. Hence, they were compelled to remain, as it were, prisoners of the curse of the house. In yet another resonance with Poe’s famous gothic classic “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the house appears as a metaphor for the size of their secret. “I glance at the painting once more as I make the trip from the bedroom to the kitchen. There are no people in it, which is just as well. But if you squint, you can see a shadow through one of the windows that looks like it might be a woman” (60). Is the narratorial voice anticipating her being a prisoner of the house? Is the shadow woman mirroring Ayoola’s power, a legacy from their father? As Alison contends, the reader does not have to picture the murder, since Korede has made us complicit in her plight. “The killing isn’t the point, of course; what matters are the omissions and consequences” (Alison 2019, 169-170).

## **2.5. Unreliable Narrator: Can We Trust Korede?**

It can be ascertained that the existence of narrative gaps is a prerequisite for irony. In other words, the distance between the plot the reader reconstructs — that is, the general picture conveyed through, in this instance, an axial fictional pattern— and what the narrator, Korede, ruminates and directly communicates to the reader, contributes to creating the notion of yet another ironical fictive twist: that the whole story may be told by someone the reader cannot fully trust. Hence, in the following section, I will succinctly explore the nature of narrative unreliability and its possible exertions on the reader’s involvement with the characters, especially Korede and Ayoola, as well as his/her possibly alternative (re)interpretation of the sisters’ plight. In order to further provide examples from the novel to prove this argument, I will first define some crucial terms in connection to authorship and narration, as well as briefly provide some established theory agreements on what unreliability presupposes. Additionally, I will refer to two types of unreliable narrators as defined by Greta Olson (2003): fallible and untrustworthy. I will exemplify the instances of unreliability in *MSSK* at the paratextual and fictional level by focusing on the biased account of Korede, her idealised appreciation of Tade, her jealousy slanted relation to Ayoola, her contradictions, memory inconsistencies and mental deterioration along the plot. Last but not least, I will suggest a very concise alternative redefinition of the two main characters’ bond. Thus, in addition to the genre crossings the novel displays —domestic noir, psychological thriller together with elements of irony, satire and romance fiction— and the axial structure

derived from the trauma implosion the plot converges into, *MSSK* also has formally narratorial implications which renders it particularly worth a second reading.

In order to fully concentrate on narrative unreliability, it becomes crucial to revisit terms such as the implied author, the ironic contract between implied author and postulated reader (Booth 1961), and the limitations of the homodiegetic narrator. Wayne Booth refers to the implied author as a penchant for addressing “values, linguistic peculiarities, and a worldview of a particular text, [...] without referring to the personality of the historical person who wrote the book” (105). To put it simply, Braithwaite’s ideas and values are foregrounded in the narrative context without having the necessity of her explicitly subscribing to these views. Other theorists such as Monroe C. Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt referred to this indirect reading as “the intentional fallacy” (Beardsley and Wimsatt 1972 in Olson 2003, 105). In other words, they contended that the author’s stance is only one in a number of possible interpretations of his/her work of art. In addition, Booth also claims that narrator unreliability is a function of irony since it “provides the formal means by which a distance is created between the views, actions, and voice of the unreliable narrator and those of the implied author” (Booth in Olson, 94). In other words, an ironic contract between an implied author and the reader is established when they are “secretly in collusion, behind the speaker’s back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting (Booth 1961, 304). This signal sent by the implied author through the words of the narrator is received by the reader and de-codified as having some kind of flaw or, at least, incongruity. According to Olson, there is a three-fold movement through which a savvy reader can recognise the irony and determine narrator unreliability. First, “the reader rejects a literal understanding of the text” (Booth, 10). Secondly, s/he decides that the implied author’s probable intentions may be other than the intrinsic meaning conveyed in the plot. Thirdly, “non-literal meaning is settled upon,” and then, textual markers are weighed so as to suggest a possible fictive incompleteness, or hidden story, so to say.

Since they inhabit the textual world they conjure up, Olson observes, homodiegetic narrators are prone to suffer from limitations. “These narrators cannot have metatextual, omniscient knowledge” (2003, 101) and their reality is bound to be biased, “subject to the epistemological uncertainty of lived experience. Yet, they are not necessarily unreliable” (Olson, 101). She distinguishes two types of unreliable narrators: fallible and untrustworthy. The

former are not reliable because their judgements or perceptions are hampered by limited education, experience, or inherent incapacities. The fallible narrator is “*situationally impaired*.” In other words, their external or understanding circumstances are the cause of their misjudgements or mistakes. By contrast, an untrustworthy narrator is said to be “*dispositionally unreliable*,” that is, their inconsistencies are caused by “ingrained rather than behavioural traits or some current self-interest” (Olson 102; original emphasis). James Phelan summarised the dichotomy in the following terms: narrators “can be unreliable in two different ways, either by falling short or by distorting. Narration that falls short is reliable up to a point; narration that distorts is simply unreliable” (2001, 6). Although there have been discrepancies in relation to how unreliability is perceived, that is, “where the authority to judge a narrator unreliable lies” (Olson, 99), some authors, such as Booth, believe that it is the *implied author’s* intention to manipulate the narrative and textual information. Others, such as Nünning (1999) believe that the validation of unreliability is endorsed by *the reader’s* acknowledgement of the divergencies of opinion and values between the narrator and the implied author. The different positions, however, agree that for unreliability to be manifested, at least, three elements need to be present in the narration: *factual inaccuracy* of some kind, a perceived *lack of objectivity* and some *possible ideological unreliability*.

In *MSSK*, the narrator, Korede, shows excessive jealousy towards her sister to whom she has been compared since her sibling was born. In addition, she also displays some kind of compulsion to cleanliness and order which clearly undermines her social interactions in her daily life. Furthermore, she reveals an idealised infatuation with the doctor she works with, which leads her to misconstrue an accurate judgement of the man’s values and personality. Hence, early in the narration, the reader starts doubting whether Korede’s portrayal of reality is accurate or reliable. The implied author seems intent on conjuring up a “girlie” portrait of Ayoola. That is why she is described by her eldest sister as excessively attractive, indifferent to people’s feelings and spoilt while being unaffected and air-headed. However, there is textual evidence which seems to refute that description: this testimony is unearthed from Ayoola’s actions and dialogues. Ayoola’s behaviour is always qualified or seen through the oblique lens of her sister. This narratorial (or implied authorial?) insistence on the fact that Ayoola is sexy but dumb is adamantly contrasted with a dull but dependable Korede portrait. In addition, the gradual deterioration of the narrator’s mental situation becomes increasingly apparent by the end of the story. Thus, the reader is further compelled to cast aspersions on the credibility

of her account. It is worth noticing that, however unreliable, Korede could be considered as a fallible narrator, and not untrustworthy, since she seems to be speaking up her mind, as it were, by telling the reader her version of the events. No ill purpose is revealed behind her account.

### *2.5.1. Paratextual Elements: Family, Death, Trauma and the Looming Figure of "Father"*

Even at the risk of repeating some ideas, it seems worth pointing out that some paratextual elements such as the profusion of short chapters, their titles and main thematic concerns add up to the dynamics of juxtaposing dark facts or occurrences together with a lighthearted and fast narrative pace. A bird's view of the book's main structure and themes is provided in Picture Two.

**Picture Two:** Chapter names and themes. The main themes developed in each chapter are coloured differently.

1. Words	27. Roses	52. Market
2. Bleach	28. <b>Father</b>	53. Memory
3. The Notebook	29. Bracelet	54. Madness
4. The Poem	30. Time	55. Asleep
5. Body	31. The Patient	56. Ice cream
6. Scrubs	32. Cleaner	57. Secret
7. The Patient	33. Bathroom	58. Friend
8. Heat (city)	34. Questions	59. <b>Father</b>
9. Instagram	35. Blood	60. Family
10. Traffic	36. <b>Father</b>	61. Sheep
11. Reception	37. Maga (stupid, duped)	62. <b>Father</b>
12. Dancing	38. <b>Father</b>	63. Wife
13. <b>Father</b>	39. Research	64. Night
14. Knife	40. Car	65. Broken
15. Èfó	41. Heart	66. Phone
16. #3	42. The Patient	67. #2: Peter
17. Song	43. Angel of Death	68. Theatre
18. Red	44. Birth	69. Wound
19. School	45. Birthday	70. Fence
20. Stain	46. Head Nurse	71. Screen
21. Home	47. Coma	72. Sister
22. Break	48. The Game	73. <b>Father</b>
23. Flaw	49. Seventeen	74. Truth
24. Flapper	50. Maneater	75. Gone
25. Mascara	51. Awake	76. #5
26. Orchids		



**Picture Three**

Number of Chapters	Chapters' main thematic concerns
20	Family
15	Death/Killing/Cleaning
12	Mental Instability/Memory/Trauma
7	<b>Father</b>
7	Social Media
6	Social Satire
4	Love
3	The Patient
2	Words

Although the thematic choice may to some extent be rather artificial since some tropes clearly overlap, a roughly general outline of the important issues imbricated in the plot and their interconnections could be useful so as to understand the authorial choices in the narrator account. As can be observed, there is a prominent number of chapters related to *siblings' relationship* (twenty chapters) through which the narrator provides a personal judgment of her attachment to Ayoola as well as her often jealousy-laden accounts of her sister's personality. In addition, many of these chapters include childhood memories. Occurrences related to *death*, Ayoola's serial killings and Korede's obsession with the erasure of the corpses and proofs, deserve fifteen chapters. Furthermore, the effects of *trauma and mental instability* are almost as numerous as the ones related to killing (fifteen and twelve chapters respectively). By the same token, the ubiquitous presence of domestic trauma and patriarchal violence, personalised in the figure of their *father*, comprise seven disruptive chapters. These analeptic snapshots are strategically positioned to further fracture the fast-paced plot. The rest is devoted to the narrator's facetious criticism of social media's double-standards and social institutions and practices —seven and six chapters. Korede's rather moony involvement with men and her ingrained self-awareness as an ugly woman is displayed in chapters related to *romance*. Eventually, Muhtar, Korede's friend, confidant —and shared conscience— is an important element in the narrative delineation. The emphasis is clearly on the effects of trauma —“Mental

Instability/Memory/Trauma” chapters are closely related to the ones entitled “Father”— and the desire to forget (or erase) painful memories. However, the psychological protective liaison established between the sisters seems to be more thoroughly explored. As was analysed previously, the axial pattern stemming from memory disruptions associated to the chapters entitled “Father” contribute to establishing the undeniable cause of the sisters’ mental instability, obsessions and the fallible status of Korede’s account.

### 2.5.2. *Tade: From Sensitive Mister Good-Guy to Whimsical Lover*

Korede’s infatuation with Tade, and to some extent Femi, may provide the reader with some hints of her somehow distorted appreciation of reality. She insists on seeing the doctor as a gentle, romantic, and almost perfect man, even though her sister warns her:

“If you want him for yourself, just say so,” she pauses, giving me time to make my claim. “Besides, he isn’t all that different from the rest of them, you know.”

“What are you talking about? He *is* different. He is kind and sensitive. He sings to children.”

“He isn’t deep. All he wants is a pretty face. That’s all they ever want.”

“You don’t know him!” [...].

“Do you want me to prove it to you?” (Braithwaite, 69-70; original emphasis)

Since Korede’s point of view is the only reality accessible the reader has, one can only just conjecture that Ayoola is not the superficial and dumb character sketched by her elder sister. Moreover, she could be trying to protect Korede from Tade, whom she considers “boring” and “needy” (112). By contrast, Korede looks at his “innocent light brown doe eyes” and wonders whether she “ever had that kind of innocence.” She insists on his being “so wonderfully normal and naïve” (145). Further evidence from the text suggests that Tade may not be so innately charming. When the doctor is in a relationship with Ayoola, he tells Korede that she would not let Ayoola “move forward in life” since, he claims, she “wants her to depend on [her] for the rest of her days” (165). This is a hardly believable contention. It becomes apparent that it is Ayoola who cannot live without her sister so that she can be free from her killings’ traces. However, Tade insists on Ayoola’s constant need of Korede’s approval for their marriage. Tade’s attitude towards Korede becomes gradually more recalcitrant as he cannot avoid Ayoola’s rejection. Moreover, he blames Korede for her sister’s compulsion to look for attention from other men. Undoubtedly, he shows his selfish side to Korede, who seems impervious to his simplistic reasoning.

Instead, she is worried about Ayoola's ruining his life and future. Eventually, when Tade is whining his grief at the nurse due to Ayoola's disinterest, Korede wonders: "Was he always prone to lecturing this way?" (123). The image of the later Tade distances from the mellifluous doctor of Korede's earlier daydreaming: "Tade looks like shit. His shirt is rumpled, he needs to shave and his tie is askew. No singing or whistling has escaped his lips in days" (120). Korede's realisation may be the beginning of her regarding the young doctor in a more realistic light. Likewise, the reader is compelled to doubt the narrator's first impressions.

### 2.5.3. *Elusive Ayoola*

Indisputably, Ayoola is one of the most intriguing characters in the novel. The first picture the reader is shown of the serial killer is, paradoxically, that of an insecure, depending woman, who is bound to react in an extremely volatile and unexpected manner when she believes her life is at stake. The early description of Ayoola is that of a young woman "perched on the toilet seat, her knees raised and her arms wrapped around them" (3), while Korede is cleaning the remains of her third murder. "The blood on her dress has dried and there is no risk that it will drip on the white, now glossy floors. [...]. She keeps looking up at me with her big brown eyes, afraid that I'm angry, that I will soon get off my hands and knees to lecture her," Korede surmises (Braithwaite, 3). Apparently, Ayoola seems all too ready to rely on her sister, and synchronically cries when she sees her protector doing so. Thus, the attachment she has to her older sister seems almost unhealthy. By contrast, later in the plot, the narrator laments that "Ayoola lives in a world where things must always go her way. It's a law as certain as the law of gravity" (91). She is also described as having "the body of a music video vixen," being "a scarlet woman, a succubus" (19). The tinge of sibling rivalry is noticeable since Korede has been compared to her sister from childhood, apparently without having a chance to meet her younger sister's beauty. In a compelling description, Korede portrays her in the following terms: "She has relocked [her dreadlocks] and placed beads on the ends, so as she moves they knock against each other and make a rattling sound" (126). One cannot avoid making associations with a rattlesnake or a Medusa. Moreover, the narrator also considers her as half-witted. Korede mocks at her sister's phone password choice, "1234" (20), or at her listening to "I wanna Dance with Somebody" after Femi's death. "It would be more appropriate to play Brymo or Lourde, something solemn or yearning, rather than the musical equivalent of a packet of M&MS" (34), dogmatic Korede observes. She particularly resents

seeing Ayoola “stretched out in her bed laughing at videos of auto-tuned cats” (83); the hackneyed epitome of stupidity for the nurse. However, stunning Ayoola is also chaotically creative, the exact opposite of pragmatic and antiseptic Korede. Ayoola’s bedroom is a place where “[e]verything is upside down—her clothes are on the floor, spilling out of cupboards, and piled on the bed” (68). In addition, the young clothes designer seems to have a clean conscience and exhibits, in the eyes of the narrator, a guiltless attitude in connection to her lethal outbursts.

Korede has always been compelled to play the role of the big, responsible sister. She believes she has to teach her sister about political correctness and “normal” social behaviour. For instance, Ayoola asks her how long she is supposed to mourn her last boyfriend and refrain from posting snapshots on Instagram. To what Korede answers: “Any shorter than that [a year] and you will, at the very least, look like a sorry excuse for a human being.’ She examines me to see if I already believe she is a sorry excuse for a human being” (77). While Korede suffers from insomnia, Ayoola sleeps as if she “lapsed into a coma” (179) and, accordingly, argues that her killings have been in self-defence. Ominously, Korede finds some character resemblance in her sister with their much hated father: “I try not to scream. More and more, she reminds me of him. He could do a bad thing and behave like a model citizen right after. As though the bad thing had never happened. Is it in the blood? But his blood is my blood and my blood is hers” (105). The irony is not lost if one considers that, presumably, Korede has killed their father. Additionally, the beautiful sister is a consummated actress and performer since she could look straight in someone’s eyes and flatly reject having killed a person. “‘I didn’t have to *teach* her to maintain eye contact,’ Korede amusingly broods when interviewed by the police. ‘She was already a pro’” (99; emphasis added). And she concludes, “[m]y sister is in the wrong profession. She should be in front of the camera, with the lights framing her innocence” (100). Young Ayoola also shows a carefree attitude towards moral choices, in stark contrast with Korede, who appears to be judgmental and prudish, constantly suffering from guilt. To complicate matters to Korede, Ayoola dates married rich men *while* having boyfriends. She seems to admire power and money and usually has what in Nigeria is called a “sugar daddy,” that is, an older —married— and wealthy man who pays for her material needs in return for sex. In other words, Ayoola’s depiction emerges as a singular combination of beauty, selfishness, naïveté, dependance, dumbness, amorality and performance.

The apparently Janus-faced sister has yet more faces to show. Even Korede doubts her own assumptions about her sister, “I’m always on her side. It’s just that... she has many sides. Not all of them as pretty as the one as you see...” (121). Curiously, since she was a child, Ayoola has been fascinated by her father’s objects, especially his knife. What is more, after their father’s death, Ayoola hid the knife and kept it to herself as an inheritance. Whenever Korede asks her to get rid of the hideous object, she would not budge. “Perhaps if it were someone else the receiving end of this show of sentimentality, her words would hold some weight,” Korede ruminates, “[b]ut she cannot fool me. It is a mystery how much feeling Ayoola is even capable of” (36). In one of the instances the reader has direct access to Ayoola’s actual words, she complains: “‘You’re not the only one suffering, you know. You act like you are carrying this *big thing* all by yourself, but I worry too’” (105; emphasis added). Interestingly, she cannot even name what the “big thing” refers to. Is it their father’s murder? Her boyfriends’ allegedly self-defence killings? Her involving her sister in the corpse disposals? What becomes apparent is that neat Korede cannot entirely grasp the extent of her sister’s quandary.

Korede insistently observes that her sister has not been tainted by blood, while she has, for her sake. On the other hand, from Ayoola’s dialogues, the reader can muster that she feels like a weirdo. “These days you look at me like I’m a monster. ‘Her voice is so low, I can barely hear her. [...] ‘This is victim shaming, you know...’” (23). To what Korede retorts: “Victim? Is it mere coincidence that Ayoola has never had a mark on her, from any of these incidents with these men; not even a bruise?” (23). Gradually, through some exchanges or from what Ayoola does, or fails to do, another picture of her materialises within the narration. There is an episode which reveals her in a much sharper light. When Korede plucks Tade’s two bouquet of roses sent to Ayoola, the younger sibling claims to have done so to counteract their mother’s anger at the house girl. She knew it had been Korede. However, she neither exposed her big sister nor discussed the matter openly. “Ayoola knows I did it. I keep my head down, looking at the petals on the floor,” Korede concedes (79). Yet another episode puzzles Korede in relation to her sister. While Ayoola is dating Tade, she flies away to Dubai with Gboyega —her sugar daddy. Unexpectedly, according to the newspapers, he dies from drug overdose abroad. Ayoola, on the contrary, claims it has been food poisoning. Korede is utterly intrigued by the motif of his death —which is never made clear. “Ayoola never strikes unless provoked,” Korede believes, and Gboyega did not appear to be

the dangerous type. Once again, Ayoola may not be so criminal or always in need of Korede's cleaning hands. The question lingers.

According to Mieke Bal, if narrator and focalizer "coincides with the character, that character will have an advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character's eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character" (1985, 3098). This narrative strategy provides the narrator-focaliser with "a strongly manipulative effect," he posits (3251). Consequently, he observes that the reader has

to keep sight of the difference between *spoken* and *unspoken words* of the characters. Spoken words are audible to others and are thus perceptible when the focalization lies with someone else. Unspoken words —thoughts, internal monologues— no matter how extensive, are not perceptible to other characters. Here, too, lies a possibility for manipulation which is often used. Readers are given elaborate information about the thoughts of a character, which the other characters do not hear. If these thoughts are placed in between the sections of dialogue, readers do not often realize how much less the other character knows than they do. (3251-2; emphasis added)

Through Ayoola's direct words, another sister emerges. One that insists on being together in this imbroglio, one that not only seeks Korede's help, but someone Korede could rely on. Hence, gradually a doubt seems to arise, who is defending whom? Who is protecting whom? After Korede tries to threaten her sister to stop playing with people when she knows about Gboyega's fate, Ayoola is defiant and suggests that she is as much implicated in these crimes as Korede is. Likewise, when Ayoola ruminates what could happen after the episode with Tade, Korede proffers there will be a proper police investigation on the case and it would be Tade's word against Ayoola's. To what Ayoola corrects: "Against ours, Korede. It's his word against *ours*" (213; original emphasis). Although Ayoola's treacherously interposing herself between her sister and Tade could be interpreted as betrayal, there is a second possible reading. All the display the sexy sibling is concerned with could be just to show Korede how vain Tade is. The day of the first outing with the doctor, Ayoola is evidently performing: "Ayoola is paused there [on the stairs], allowing herself to be admired" (84). The scene is described in a grandiose, even melodramatic manner since Korede interprets it as her sister's beauty ostentation. The bracelet she gets from Tade is even showed to her mother and sister as a token, or a bounty for her collection. Alternatively, she may be warning her sister about Tade's unimaginative disposition.

In addition, the happy-go-lucky Ayoola is revealed as having blackouts, or moments in which she loses awareness of what happens around her. Ayoola is in the kitchen chopping spinach with the knife in one hand and typing on the phone with the other. Korede remembers going over to her, and removing “her fingers from the hilt and tak[ing] the knife from her possession. She blinks” (43). By the same token, when asked to provide more details on her reasons for the killing of Femi, Ayoola justifies herself by saying that he cornered her and “flipped” because he had seen messages from another guy on her phone. She claims “[h]e was threatening me, threatening to, like hit me and stuff” (87). She claims she “kinda saw red,” “it was all a blur” and that she would “take it back if [she] could” (87). It may be possible that she was not fully conscious of what she was about to do. However, she remains a mystery. Some exchanges Ayoola reports to have had with Tade may give the reader some more hints of who she really is and how she feels. After Ayoola’s last failed attempt to murder Tade, she asks her sister:

“Then when I was on the ground, he was all like, oh my goooooosh, Korede was telling the truth. What did you tell him, Ko-re-de?”

She did this for me and ended up hurt because I betrayed her. I feel dizzy. I don’t want to admit that I chose a man’s welfare over hers. I don’t want to confess to letting him come between us, when she clearly chose me over him. (213)

One cannot help but having second thoughts with respect to Ayoola’s real intentions. She could have well prompted the attack on her so as to have Korede on her side for good. Or else, Tade could be trying to incriminate Korede. Alternatively, he may have discovered Ayoola was really dangerous. The moment remains a blank. Further in the narrative, Ayoola tells Korede about the doctor’s assessment of the situation:

“He said you broke my ring. Said you were accusing me of all sorts and maybe you had something to do with my ex going missing...” [...].

“I told him he was crazy. But he said you were really jealous of me and had some kind of... ummm... latent anger... that what if”—she pauses for dramatic effect—“what if you had gone back, after we left, you know, to talk to Femi...”

“He thinks I killed Femi?!” [...].

“Weird, right? I didn’t even tell him about Femi. Only Gboye. Maybe he saw it in Insta. Anyway, it’s like he wanted to report you or something... So I did what I had to do.” She shrugs. “Or at least I tried.” (213)

By listening to Ayoola directly, it seems that she was not aware of Korede closing ranks with Tade, while he, on the other hand, hypothesised that the nurse was responsible for the killing of Ayoola's boyfriend. Who is betraying whom? Can we trust Ayoola? Or else, can we trust Korede? Was Tade's discovery a litmus test for the siblings' true bond? Why does the bond persist? Because of criminal liaisons or due to childhood shared violence? Or, perhaps, because of both circumstances. Whatever the answer, the reader has only Korede's view of her sister. And Ayoola remains an enigma as much as Korede remains ambiguous. The nurse succinctly expresses her puzzlement at her sister's endeavours with the following commentary:

I lean on the door frame and watch her, trying and failing to understand how her mind works. She remains as impenetrable to me as the elaborate 'artwork' daubed across the walls. She used to have an artist friend, who painted the bold black strokes over the whitewash. It feels out of place in this dainty room with its white furniture and plush toys. He would have been better off painting an angel or a fairy. (34-5)

This is a very compelling passage which clearly suggests that one can only "see" Ayoola in white and tinsel: Korede's eyes. Plausibly, the artwork with its black smudges may be truer to Ayoola's character than the protagonist narrator can be aware of.

#### 2.5.4. *A Quirkier Korede*

An impending metaphor is used early in the narration regarding the whole unfurling tragicomedy in *MSSK*. After Korede discovers Ayoola has an interest in Tade, she spills *okro* soup on the table cloth. "I can feel Ayoola's eyes on me and I try to calm down. The house girl runs to clean the stain, but the water she uses makes the stain bigger than it was before" (58). In like manner, the tainted past and present gradually sieve and spread across the narrator's conscience. Our protagonist claims to be feeling more exhausted than angry. So much so that she even wishes her father would be with them again to solve things. "He would know what to do. He would be in control, every step of the way. He wouldn't allow his daughter's grievous error ruin his reputation—he would have had this whole matter swept under the rug weeks ago," Korede concedes (Braithwaite, 96). Somehow, one cannot help assuming that Korede—and Ayoola—take after him. Unarguably, they are sweeping their secrets under the carpet. Since Ayoola was born, Korede has been raised to protect her, her little doll. "Perhaps a normal person would be angry," Korede ruminates, "but what I



feel now is a pressing need to dispose of the body” (3). The nonchalant attitude towards the situation is explicitly stated. She seems more concerned about getting rid of the evidence than considering the fact that she is an accomplice of murder. When narrating Ayoola’s third murder, our protagonist chooses to do so using third person indirect monologue. She even seems to caution the reader not take her words at face value; she is just stating her sister’s account:

On their one-month anniversary, she stabbed him in the bathroom of his apartment. She didn’t mean to, of course. He was angry, screaming at her, his onion-stained breath hot against her face. [...]. The knife was for her protection. You never knew with men, they wanted what they wanted when they wanted it. She didn’t mean to kill him; she wanted to warn him off, but he wasn’t scared of the weapon. He was over six feet tall and she must have looked like a doll to him, with her small frame, long eyelashes and rosy, full lips (her description, not mine). (7-8)

This passage could either convey Korede’s wearied attitude, or her skepticism about what Ayoola recounts. What becomes increasingly controversial is her deep attachment to her sister, were she the selfish being the nurse repeatedly strives to portray. Korede recalls the “instinctive fear inside of [her]” (173) a visitor to their father triggered in her when she perceived the way he was looking at adolescent Ayoola. “When we were young, we often slept together, and it always had the effect of calming us both. Together we were safe” (179). In addition, when Muhtar advises her to free herself by telling the truth about her sister, she does not seem to be thinking properly. She answers: “The truth. The truth is that my sister was hurt on my watch because of something I said, and I regret it” (210). She has already taken sides. She has, once again, assumed the blame and decided to protect Ayoola. Eventually, Korede misses Muhtar — more than she has been involved with Tade. Nevertheless, by the end of the story, both men are gone from her life. “I don’t know what he [Tade] is thinking or feeling. But I don’t much care. She was right. You have to choose a side, and my lot will always have her; no one else matters” (220).

Some other occurrences contribute to knitting a gauzy and gradually intriguing portrait of Korede. Her acute sense of righteousness seems, at the very least, incongruous with her demeanour. To Aunt Taiwo’s advice to get a husband, she mulls over: “I know better than to take life directions from someone *without a moral compass*” (82; emphasis added). One could only wonder whether she pretends or truly believes to have one. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that Korede has no friends, only Muhtar’s silent listening.

However, she claims that Ayoola does not have friends either, only “minions” (132). Since, she moots, “you have to accept someone into your confidence, and vice versa, to be able to call them a friend” (132). By the end of the story, there is some evidence that Korede’s mind is not properly working. Much like Ayoola, she has blackouts at the hospital: “I blink. The couple has vanished [some patients]. Apparently I’ve been standing in the shadows for a while, lost in thought. Bunmi looks at me quizzically” (65). She is capable of faking a robbery in Tade’s office and dissociate herself from what she has done. So much so that she can observe the office wreckage as if discovering the place for the first time. “The drawers are all open and most of the contents scattered on the floor. The medicine cabinet is ajar, the pill bottles are in disarray and there are files scattered all over his desk” (193). Furthermore, her memory seems to be deteriorating. She does not remember that Mohammed had been fired many months before from the hospital due to her. When interviewed by the police about the incident between Ayoola and Tade, Korede broods:

My hands are resting one atop the other on my lap. I would have preferred to place them on the table, but the table is grimy. There is a faint smile on my lips because I am humoring them and they should know that I am humoring them—but it is not enough of a smile to suggest that I find the circumstances at all humorous. My mind is clear. (217)

This assertion can only lead the reader to immediately doubt Korede’s mental state. By the same token, later in the narration and mentioned as if by chance, Korede informs the reader that Ayoola was seventeen when she killed her first boyfriend and they decided “to torch the room” (147). Korede has even murderous feelings towards Muhtar. “Madness” is a chapter that confronts Korede with her own killing musings. She is frightened he may reveal her secret. She imagines writing his name on the notebook and also wonders what Ayoola may feel when killing (157). These circumstances become all the more contradictory since, in all likelihood, she has killed her father.

The reader is then confronted with several possible scenarios. One: Ayoola is a smart young woman who uses Korede to shield her killings. Two: Ayoola is just as smart, but selflessly protects her eldest kin. Three: Ayoola is not very cool-headed or bright, and she needs Korede’s protection since she cannot restrain herself from using the unnerving knife. Four: the beautiful sibling is selfishly oblivious to Korede’s ordeal without being fully conscious of the harm inflicted on the latter. Five: Korede knows her sister very well although she cannot help some of Ayoola’s fatal outbursts. Six: Korede does not know her

sister at all, and is not aware of being callously—or guilelessly—manipulated by her. Additionally, all these possibilities could be further combined and imbricated. Korede’s fallible unreliability leaves the reader with few clues to fully delineate her true character, let alone her sister’s. What becomes clear is that their father’s murder remains a skeleton in the closet they are not willing to air. As Gill Plain puts it, our contemporary society needs crime fiction in order to “disturb identity, system and order” (2008, 14). *MSSK* undermines what Plain considers the three narrative Cs: certainty, complacency and closure. The reader is invited to consider reality from the perspective of the victim/perpetrator/accomplice and root for her plight. Undoubtedly, humour makes the entire task more palatable, even healthy.

### **3. AMBIGUOUS ETHICS: VIOLENCE, POWER, FAMILY BONDS, AND AGENCY**

Having referred to the peculiar imbrication of aesthetic variables such as the novel’s special combination of domestic noir fiction, psychological thriller, romance as well as the timely inclusion of an ironic and satiric tone, especially in connection to social critique, narrative structure, and narrator unreliability, I will now turn to analyse the fictional work’s thorny ethical contours. As I will argue, this variable is also subject to discussion since its implications are paramount to a thorough understanding of the novel’s layered construction. In short, *MSSK* could be read in the light humorous tone explicitly intended by the author or, at a second reading, as a contestation to patriarchal violence. This controversy exerts a visible and oftentimes risible fictional reversal of power which poses ethical objections. Hence, in the section that follows, I will start my analysis by defining the concept of ethics. In addition, I will contend that both domestic and social structural violence are subverted in *MSSK*, although such a turn of structures may imply some concessions to the social idea of justice. I will claim that the mental health disorders the characters seem to embody are a counterbalance to their misbehaviour against established notions of social stability. By the same token, I will expand on two tropes the novel prominently tackles, such as the amalgamation of power and beauty, and the consequent reification of women—and men—as well as the contradictory construction of reality prompted by the Internet and social media.

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, “ethics” comes from the Greek word *ēthos*, which means “moral character,” “moral principles of a person or group.” The adjective “moral” is “associated with or characterized by right behavior,” and also “associated with or concerning conduct or moral

principles” (good or bad). The word is derived from the Latin word *moralis* “proper behavior of a person in society” (*etymonline.com*). Both words have been historically discussed and used in similar terms. However, by morals one is supposed to imply the socially learned, mainly unconsciously, standards of right and wrong. Ethics, on the contrary, seems to presuppose a conscious debate on what is desirable related to one’s view of him/herself and the world (Keniston 1965). The online Encyclopaedia Britannica, postulates that morality is “personal and normative, whereas ethics is the standards of ‘good and bad’ distinguished by a certain community or social setting” (Grannan 2021, *britannica.com*). In order to avoid long-standing discrepancies, I will refer to ethics and ethical stance to refer to what is acknowledged and consensually accepted as lawful behaviour in a given social context. Although *MSSK* ironically refers to issues such as recurrent killings, the quandary the sisters endure—and its less humorous origin—is a matter for debate. My contention is that the novel propounds an ironic reversal of power stemming from domestic and structurally patriarchal violence to a reification of men as disposable serial homicides, in an endeavour to galvanise poetic justice and enhance characters’ agency.

### 3.1. From Gender Submission to Poetic Justice

Although the tone of *MSSK* is cynical and ironic, the plot is about serial killings and psychological as well as body violence. Moreover, the author is successful in worming out the gory and over-explicit spectacle of physical pain. However, the fact that violence is avoided does not imply it does not exert a powerful surreptitious influence all along the narrative. As Elaine Scarry has propounded in *Body in Pain* (1985), the language of physical pain is elusive and sometimes difficult to articulate. When it *is* actually expressed, it could lead to difficulties related to the political implications or the actual process of material and verbal articulation or wording. However, she also claims that “[t]hough there are very great impediments to expressing another’s sentient distress, so are there also very great reasons why one might want to do so, and thus there come to be avenues by which this most radically private of experiences begins to enter the realm of *public discourse* (6; emphasis added). In certain spheres of human action—such as medicine, law, human rights activism, or art—the actual textual expression of physical pain may prove to be an ethical task which contributes to the visibility of suffering people and to counteracting structures of power. *MSSK* eludes evident descriptions of physical pain. Instead, it reinforces the idea of its difficult articulation. Nevertheless, the existence of

gaps, narrative fragmentation and evidence of mental disorders in the two main characters undeniably suggests that physical and psychological pain is present. The impossibility of a full verbalisation of it, which is part of the intended aim of the implied author, appears to confer the narrative a double force. The impulse of what is *not* actually said lingers, and is far more evocative and compelling than otherwise. In addition, Scarry reflects on the fact that the description of physical pain is often intimately associated to the image of the *weapon*. “Both weapon (whether actual or imagined) and wound (whether actual or imagined) may be used associatively to express pain” (16). In *MSSK*, there are two fetishised objects: a knife and a tribal cane, which seem to represent masculine power and the substantiation of the domestic pain and serial killing. As Scarry observes “the fact that the very word ‘pain’ has its etymological home in ‘poena’ or ‘punishment’ reminds us that even the elementary act of naming this most interior of events entails an immediate mental somersault out of the body into the external social circumstances that can be pictured as having caused the hurt” (16). For this reason, the knife seems to be the “carrier” of punishment, or a metaphor for death.

Violence, therefore, is evidenced in the novel at different levels. In the domestic sphere —both physical and psychological— harm is inflicted upon women characters. At the structural or social level, violence is especially denounced by patriarchal internalised practices, the inefficiency of police in protecting citizens, and justice institutions which are clearly class-biased. Eventually, there is what could be termed as “purifying violence” (Lacassin 1993, 198). This sort of violence is a constitutive characteristic of the crime genre. However, in this particular novel, it could be interpreted as a gender reversal of power. At the domestic level, Ayoola, Korede and their mother are hapless victims of their father’s and husband’s prerogatives. Although this situation cannot —and should not— be generalised to the entire social context, the emerging singular picture of Korede’s home seems a suggestion of what is oftentimes mirroring social Nigerian machismo trends. Several incidents are mentioned by the narrator which reveal not only a ruthless father, but also a man who is used to treating women as pawns for his pleasure or interests. This is shown in the way he treated his wife, his daughters, and every woman he related to. Korede remembers an episode in her childhood when Ayoola had stained their father’s knife with chocolate once they had found the desk drawer where it was displayed unlocked. Their father is said to have dragged her out of the room by pulling her from the hair, “flinging her across the hallway” (Braithwaite, 39). Additionally, Korede remembers her father having a peculiar

fondness for his objects: “When the guests were gone he would polish the knife meticulously with a rag and a small bottle of rotor oil, cleaning away the memory of the hands that had touched it. I used to watch as he squeezed a few drops of oil out, gently rubbing it along the blade with his finger in soft circular motions. This was the only time I ever witnessed tenderness from him” (38). Ayoola’s father’s words, while he was caning her, echo her later regard for men: “You think this boy cares about you? He just wants what is between your legs. And when he is done he will move on” (184). Indeed, he is making apparent his own mindset and convictions, which in all likelihood have been internalised by his daughter, Ayoola.

Their mother is described as having insomnia —as Korede has— and probably depression problems. She was equally humiliated and beaten by her husband. There is another episode of Korede’s childhood in which her father brings a young “yellow” —light-complexioned— woman home. The cruelty and violence inflicted on their mother was witnessed by Korede and Ayoola. While it seems rather exaggerated that a man would actually take a lover home, their mother is portrayed as fighting and insulting the woman, not her husband. The three slept together that night. The next morning, the violent episode had been erased from the man’s mind, who congratulated his wife on “her excellent cooking” (114). This behaviour is quite telling since Ayoola seems to take after her father in this respect, “[h]e wasn’t sucking up, he had simply moved past the incident” (114). When Ayoola was fourteen, his father wanted to give her as a “gift” to an older chief. As Korede ruminates “our maternal grandparents always kept us away from chiefs. Apparently, if a chief saw a girl he liked, he would reach out and touch her with her bejeweled cane and she would become his bride, no matter how many wives the man already had; no matter if the girl in question wanted to be his wife or not” (173). The normalcy of such episodes in the siblings environs have been, so to speak, internalised by them. Consequently, they became used to bonding, covering or pretending in the face of violence. The use and existence of the cane and the knife —intricately carved and exposed as cultural tokens of power and prestige— are reminders of the masculine allegories they represent. According to snide Korede, Ayoola “carries [the knife] the way other women carry tampons” (96). By the same token, she uses it because she does not trust men in general, even though she eventually ends up voluntarily giving herself as a gift to a sugar daddy.

In his essay “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe contends that sovereignty in many African countries is “expressed predominantly as *the right to kill*”

(Mbembe 2001, 16). Although Mbembe's disciplining force is referred to extra- or supra-national organisations such as "urban militias, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security firms, and state armies" (32), at a domestic and private level, as is shown in *MSSK*, the so-called right to kill is proved to be a form of exerting agency and power. Ayoola takes possession of her father's weapon, which appears to evince the level of violence inflicted upon her body. On the other hand, she strives to reify her male couples, who are thus transformed into objects of her violence and, eventually, into mere numbers. In tune with the same idea, Miriam Pahl claims that

[w]hile Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben focus on European societies in their evaluations of biopolitics, Achille Mbembe draws on these scholars' theories to elaborate the relation between the sovereign and the *subject* in African societies. This relation, he asserts, is not based on 'reason as the truth of the subject' but establishes *life* and *death* as the foundational categories of 'sovereignty, politics and the subject' (Mbembe 2001, 14). In other words, the right to kill and fear of death determine sovereignty and the subject in these societies. (Pahl 2018, 87; emphasis added)

Consequently, the violence of the patriarchal strictures depicted in our protagonist's domestic environment is also reinforced by the social and structural absence of the state as shown by police inefficiency and justice lethargy. Even though Korede and Ayoola are referred to as "good family" women—and this fact seems to be a weighty reason behind the sisters' systematic eluding the fatal results of Ayoola's eruptions—Korede makes it very explicit that she cannot trust the system. When she recalls helping Ayoola for the first time, she emphasises that she "never ever considered putting Ayoola at the mercy of the police. Why take the risk that her cry of self-defense might go unheard?" (147).

Ayoola's blurred murderous circumstances are fleetingly described and the names of her first two victims barely mentioned. She started carrying her father's knife on her on a regular basis. At seventeen, she had killed her first victim, Somto. Her second killing is even more ironically relegated to a number by referring to him as "#2: Peter" (197). Femi is allowed more individuality through Korede's reading of her poems and physical descriptions, Gboyega is delineated mainly by his double standards—and his social media posts—while Tade is prominently sketched because he is Korede's co-worker and daydream. Otherwise, except for Muhtar, men are shown in a much reified or distorted lens. What is more, the fact that the protagonist uses a derisive and mocking

tone to refer to men/corpses, and that her only preoccupation is how to remove all trace of them, could be interpreted as an authorial intention to exert poetic justice in a stifling patriarchal context. Braithwaite's explicit interest in the black widow biological drive to kill her mating partner mirrors, with an alleged ironical sneer, her fictional protagonists' attitude, especially Ayoola's. Hence, the novel seems to convey that there could be a space for women's individual sovereignty and freedom—a cathartic deliverance, so to speak. However, this unfettering demands some ethical compromise. The reader is compelled to witness the psychological quandary of the sisters, relegating the deaths—and especially the death of their father—to an almost anecdotal and matter-of-fact hindrance which re-emerges from time to time. Thus, in the fictive world of *MSSK*, family bonds prove to be more effective in exerting justice than the Nigerian social and legal establishment. The ethical concession the reader makes is fostered by the lightness of humour and the certainty that the only way-out to save the protagonists lives is to exercise their right to kill. One cannot help but laugh at the fact that Korede is more preoccupied by her sister being labelled a “serial killer” than by reflecting on the lives she has taken: “Femi makes three, you know. Three, and they label you a serial killer,” Korede tells Muhtar. She had been unable to sleep due to the fact that she had Googled “serial killer” and she had read “three or more murders... serial killer” (45).

All things considered, was there any other possible choice for Ayoola and Korede to oppose their father? The serial killings and their ensuing cover-ups are also food for thought. Can the reader ascertain the circumstances in which the killings take place? Is Ayoola in a position to discern right and wrong? By the same token, is Korede's account to be trusted? Likewise, is her mind capable of a detached assessment of the situation? One of the most important assets of *MSSK* is its light tone and its openness when it comes to ethical commitment and pondering. That is, precisely, what gives the novel its surreptitious strength. In other words, the explicit recourse to humour to tackle serious issues is what challenges the reader to give the novel a second reading.

### **3.2. The Killing/Cleaning Compulsion: Mental Instability and Trauma**

The DSM5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) enumerates possible observable symptoms for individuals who have been exposed to traumatic or stressful events and the possible psychiatric diagnoses they may preclude. Both Ayoola and Korede seem to suffer from trauma and stressor



related disorders, that is, they react to situations which remind them, or activate in them, responses of distress. These circumstances mirror the ones they have been exposed to during childhood. The commonplace physical and psychological violence they endured when being younger, either as victims or witnesses, engendered consequences in their adult behaviour. Both sisters show Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. In Korede's case, the reader knows about her recurrent flashback memories of wrenching events, guilty dreams and, increasingly along the narration, problems with concentration and sleep (DSM5 2013). In addition, Korede's mental deterioration in the closing chapters discloses some brief symptoms of depersonalisation —“persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body” (272). By contrast, although Ayoola's inner experience is not available to the reader, by witnessing the description of her actions, one could gather that she is hyper vigilant and prone to react in a reckless and startled manner. “Individuals with PTSD may be quick tempered and may even engage in aggressive verbal and/or physical behavior with little or no provocation” (275), the medical prognosis describes. In addition, “PTSD is often characterized by a heightened sensitivity to *potential* threats, including those that are related to the traumatic experience” (275-6; emphasis added). This reckless behaviour may lead to “accidental injury to self or others, thrill-seeking or high-risk behaviors” (277). “What's wrong with you?,” Korede ironically asks her sister when she on impulse is about to press the “open” button of the lift carrying the dead body of Femi with them. To what the nurse muses: “even though I knew her movement had been instinctive, possibly the same impulsiveness that caused her to drive knife into flesh.” To what the younger sister starts explaining: “My bad,’ was her only response” (Braithwaite, 12). Ayoola claims not being able to describe the happenstance of her killings in detail since she claims to having seen “red.” Tade, the only boyfriend survivor, defends himself by saying: “I did not hit her!’ cries Tade. [...]. ‘She came at me with a knife! Out of nowhere! Shit!’” (199). Much in the fashion of the widow spider, at other times Ayoola seems to regard the murder circumstances with cynicism. She is keen on playing Cluedo, a game in which the contestants have to discover who the murderer is. “Ayoola wins Cluedo, but only because I am forced to keep explaining the rules to Tade to prevent him from falling into the traps she is so adept at setting” (148). A guilty Korede mulls over her condition in contrast to her sister's, “[t]hese days I don't know what or even how to think. Femi haunts me; he intrudes upon my thoughts uninvited. He forces me to doubt what I thought I understood. [...]. And then there is her behavior. The last two times, at least she shed a tear” (77).

The killing compulsion or hyper arousal that the young sibling appears to exhibit is complemented by the cleaning compulsion her eldest relative duly complies with. The DSM5 refers to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder as attempts to neutralise negative thoughts with repetitive behaviours such as “hand washing, ordering or checking” (2013, 237). Those habits are performed according to rules which should be applied rigidly. The aim of these actions is either to prevent anxiety, or neutralise a distress-triggered situation. The fact that these obsessions are often time-consuming could be a cause of impairment in one’s life. Nowhere could these rituals be more evident than in nurse Korede’s daily routines. She is obsessed with order and pulchritude. So much so that this fixation conditions her entire social life. Not only does she ensure that blood is completely removed from the crime scenes, but she also has a fixation with hygiene at work, at home, she even judges people from the whiteness of their clothes. She observes the LASTMA official in his crisp uniform and concludes that “[a]n orderly uniform is a reflection of the owner’s respect for his profession” (Braithwaite, 28). As a matter of fact, this proves to be eventually wrong. After Femi’s murder, Korede cleans the crime scene, and her car boot from any blood remains. “If they find a dot of blood,” she proudly asserts, “it will be because they bled while they were searching” (105). Incidentally, the fact that the police do not seem to dwell upon—or even notice—that the car has been thoroughly cleaned with bleach could be an altogether too unambiguous oversight. Instead, it could be a weakness in the plot. Furthermore, our senior nurse even complains at her own untidiness when leaving the plucked rose petals on the floor. “Why did I leave them there? I abhor untidiness” (79), Korede blames herself. When she starts suspecting they could be investigated by the police, she sets to do what she best does: cleaning. She claims:

You can never clean a bathroom too many times, so I roll up my sleeves and head to the toilet. The cabinet under the sink is filled with everything required to tackle dirt and disease—gloves, bleach, disinfectant wipes, disinfectant spray, sponge, toilet bowl cleaner, all-purpose cleaner, multi-surface cleaner, bowl brush plunger and caddy, and odor-shield trash bags. I slip on the gloves and take out the multi surface cleaner. I need some time to think. (97)

Her further rumination seems tied up to sterilisation, to erasing her family’s dirt. “My mother sighs and walks away, because she knows I won’t be able to rest until there is not a speck of dust on the piano’s surface. I head to the supply cabinet and grab a set of wipes. If only I could wipe away all our memories with

it” (61). As is evidenced, order and sanitation are her own personal way to re-establish some kind of balance in her life. Smells are also Korede’s lingering ghosts, “[i]t is the smell of sweat, of unwashed hair, of cleaning products, of decomposed bodies under a bridge...” (65). Every foul smell is associated to the rotting bodies underwater. What is more, her aseptic standards seem somehow to be related to her low self-esteem. In other words, she sees no point in using make-up since she regards her face cannot be embellished with masks. “It’s as futile as using air freshener when you leave the toilet—it just inevitably ends up smelling like perfumed shit,” she bleakly concludes (71).

On the other end of the characterisation spectrum, Ayoola appears to be all chaos, impulse; apparently, showing no traces of guilt or moral constraints. Apart from her haphazard bouts of violence, she shows an extremely histrionic demeanour, which could be a condition called Histrionic Personality Disorder. “A pervasive pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking,” the mental health manual DSM5 describes (2013, 667). Ayoola craves for attention, and her interaction with people is usually “characterized by inappropriate sexually seductive or provocative behavior” (667). She also shows certain shallowness in her exteriorisation of emotions —except when angered or in fear. For the same reason, she displays a performative role which is described as theatrical and usually exaggerated. Her physical attributes are usually enhanced by her attire, which is always rousing —at least in the eyes of her sister. During the birthday party Ayoola organises at home (after eluding responsibility from her fourth victim), she shines while Korede observes, craves... and cleans. “She is wearing a fitted maxi dress so close to the color and shade of her skin that in the dim light she looks almost naked, with gold earrings, gold heels and the bracelet Tade gave her to top it off. I can detect a smattering of light gold bronzer on her skin,” silent Korede observes in her “quintessential black dress” (Braithwaite, 133-4). When Femi’s troubled sister, Peju, goes to their house pleading for any piece of information they could provide, Korede feels excruciatingly guilty while Ayoola is, apparently, more concerned about not being able to finish her ice-cream. Eventually, the young sister hugs Peju, cynically asking her, “You think he is... dead?” (161). All along the narrative, Korede compliments herself on having a sister who is an ace at performance. Ayoola can either proudly stare at a police officer while denying any participation in crime, or weep her innocence. Precisely her crying seems excessive to her elder sister. “I rarely cry,” Korede considers, “which is just as well. Her crying is loud and messy. Eventually, the sobs turn to hiccups” (23). Repeatedly, the portrayal of the sisters, one conjures up, proves to be

ambiguous and unstable. What remains undeniable is the fact that both Ayoola and Korede have mental issues. This certainty is likely to push the reader to suspend his/her ethical standards and allow him/herself a cathartic snort.

### 3.3. Power and Beauty

In an interview with Becca Schuh for the online magazine *Electric Lit*, Oyinkan Braithwaite reflects upon the social privilege beauty entails. “[B]eauty is treated as if it were a virtue or a quality that one should emulate,” the author claims. “Beauty is attractive, there’s nothing wrong with that. But beauty isn’t a characteristic. It’s not the same as being kind or being patient or being loving” (Braithwaite 2019a, *electriclit.com*). Braithwaite complains about the usual equation between *beautiful* with *good* as “part of the package.” “One is supposed to go with the other. So when they do something that’s not great, you’re more likely to forgive them,” the writer contends (2019a). In addition, she examines the excessive time people spend to fit into the normative aesthetic norms. She is also interested in how being treated differently —because of one’s looks— can eventually affect this individual’s personality. “When I was younger, I got a lot of attention, and I got older and fatter and the attention changed. It was weird because I was like I’m the same person, I’m not different. I have the same values. I like the same things. But people treat you differently” (Braithwaite 2019b, *podtail.com/booksandrhymes*). This issue is evidently tackled in the characterisation of Korede and how her sister’s attractiveness has affected her —and her sibling’s— mindset. Likewise, Braithwaite is caustic about the shallow arguments that many young couples have for choosing their companion. The “Insta Generation,” as she calls it, “aren’t having the right conversations before they decide to get married,” she ponders. She criticises that the “manufactured images” social media project may lead to shallow relations. “You need to say, who are you dating? What are their values? What are their principles? What do they believe in? Are you guys going in the same direction, as opposed to how the two of you look next to each other on Instagram?” (2019a). The desirable Ayoola, and the idealised Tade and Femi seem to have evolved out of these interrogations.

The novel unapologetically deals with the advantages that beauty can provide women with. In that sense, the reification of women is personalised in the figure of Ayoola. The same idea is reinforced by the notion of “bottom power” —or power exercised by sex appeal— women seem to exert on powerful men. The previously mentioned metaphor of women as being plankton

for wealthy men strikes as sharp but shocking. In addition, marriage, despite the unhappy consequences it could engender, especially for women, is considered by many characters in the novel a desirable status. As has been mentioned before, an example of these women is Korede's mother. "It's time you, the both of you, start thinking about settling down," Korede's mother sentences. To what the eldest daughter retorts, "Cause marriage worked so well for you..." (Braithwaite, 131). When Ayoola starts dating Tade, Korede describes their mother as having "a dreamy smile—she is already picking the *aso ebi*<sup>5</sup> and compiling the guest list for the wedding. I leave her with the flowers and her fantasies and retire to my room" (76). As Aunt Taiwo pronounces, cooking is an essential trait for a marriageable woman, not only at home, but also at work. In addition, chasing a husband is depicted as a ruthless women race. Evidently, any (preferable) prosperous suitor would do; Tade, Femi, or even Gboyega — well-off men, single, or happily married. In Nigeria polygamy is legal. Hence, when both their daughters reject going to an acquaintance's wedding party — an ideal event to chase a prospective husband— Korede's mother complains to her: "Korede, you know your sister will go if you do; don't you want her to marry?" As if Ayoola lives by anyone's rules but her own. I choose not to respond to my mother's illogical statement, nor acknowledge the fact that she is far more interested in Ayoola's marital fate than mine. It is as though love is only for the beautiful" (24).

This is an issue repeatedly stressed by the narrator. Women are to be judged mainly by bodily and aesthetic terms. Ayoola, therefore, becomes the epitome of beauty in the narrator's voice. Korede seems to bitterly recall the moment when she discovered she was not attractive to the opposite sex. As a matter of fact, this realisation appears to have contributed to shaping her rivalrous relation to Ayoola. Korede remembers her school days when she was mocked at by the boys on account of her thick lips and tall, angular body. She describes the boys making pictures of their classmates and classifying them into the "Coca-Cola bottle type" —or "figure eight"— and those who had a "figure one," thin and lanky. (55). "When they drew me, it was with lips that could belong to a gorilla and eyes that seemed to push every other feature out of the way" (55). Although she tried hard to be indifferent to such expressions of immaturity, she was prepared to defend her sister against such attacks:

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<sup>5</sup> *Aso ebi* is the family material —in matching colour and pattern— usually dressed at wedding and funeral ceremonies.

I was hardened and ready to protect my sister, who I was sure would receive the same treatment that I had. Maybe hers would be even worse. She would come to me each day weeping and I would wrap my arms around her and soothe her. It would be us against the world.

Rumour has it that she was asked out on the first day, by a boy of SS2. It was unprecedented. (56)

Korede reflects on the fact that she physically takes after her mother. “Her miniature eyes take in her wide nose and fat lips, too big for her chin oval face. [...]. My face is the spitting image of hers. We even share a beauty spot below the left eye” (24). On the contrary, Ayoola resembles their father. It is probable that her prettiness could even have atoned for her mother’s inconvenience at having a second daughter. “[T]he irony is not lost on me. Ayoola’s loveliness is the phenomenon that took my mother by surprise. She was so thankful that she forgot to keep trying for a boy,” Korede remarks (24). The ironical description of Ayoola entering the hospital where Korede works for the first time is quite telling of the beauty standards her coworkers share. Everyone is surprised at the different looks the sisters show. “You’re Korede’s sister? ’Yinka squeaks. I can see her trying to make the connection, measuring Ayoola’s looks against mine. The resemblance is there—we share the same mouth, the same eyes—but Ayoola looks like a Bratz doll and I resemble a voodoo figurine” (53). One cannot help but ponder whether that difference is so striking, or if it is possible that Korede should be overstating their lack of resemblance. What becomes unquestionable is that Korede has serious self-confidence issues due to her proximity to Ayoola who, Korede deems, is instantly adored by everyone.

As Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju points out, body images are personal constructions prominently based on public projections of our bodies by the media. In tune with Lightstone, he contends that body image “involves our perception, imagination, emotions, and physical sensations of and about our bodies” in relation to standards that are not apparently inherent but “learned or expected culturally” (Lightstone in Oloruntoba-Oju 2007, 1). Although the male body is expected to exhibit attributes of strength and resistance, women’s bodies are usually object of more specific aesthetic strictures. Oloruntoba-Oju summarises the Nigerian beauty stereotype as having a “Fanta face” and a “Coca-Cola” body (2007, 18). Commercial undertones aside, the description focuses on racial as well as a body built. By the same token, Aje-Ori Agbese observes that Nigerian media often depict women standards in relation to complexion, hair, and body size. In the African country, he maintains, “[f]air

skin is privileged and positivity equated, or perceived to be, to [sic] intelligence, wealth, kindness, poise, confidence, assertiveness, higher self-esteem, and beauty” (Dion, Berscheid and Walster 1972 in Agbese 2018, 13). “Dark skin tones are equated with suffering, dirt, hard labor, poverty, and oppression” (Hunter 2011 in Agbese, 13). It is noteworthy to claim that this has been the global narrative since the slave trade in the western world too. Thus, the use of bleaching cosmetics —with their potentially pernicious consequences for the skin— is an extant trend in the West African country. The same could be affirmed for hair. “Good hair” in Nigeria is “long, thick, shiny, smooth and straight” (Patton 2006 in Agbese, 15). Consequently, the use of relaxers, extensions of natural hair, or wigs is also commonplace. Agbese even claims that perming is “considered a worthwhile risk, with some perceiving it as a necessity in a hyper-class conscious society. No rich man will marry a girl with village [unstraightened or virgin] hair” (Mark 2011 in Agbese, 15).

As far as body size is concerned, the hourglass figure communicates health, fertility and womanhood, whereas “skinny women were once seen as sickly or malnourished” (Agbese, 15). Predictably, Ayoola is depicted as the commonly accepted beauty standard. Korede refers to her sister —in comparison to her self-image— in the following terms: “Ayoola is short—her only flaw, if you consider that to be a flaw—whereas I am almost six feet tall; Ayoola’s skin is a color that sits comfortably between cream and caramel and I am the color of a Brazil nut, before it is peeled; she is made of curves and I am composed only of hard edges” (Braithwaite, 64). In many descriptions, Ayoola’s hair is described in long dreadlocks or braided. The chapter titled “Mascara” could be read as Korede’s attempt to conceal her perceived imperfections, or an effort she makes to match an orthodox beauty benchmark, which does not seem to suit her. Alternatively, it could be yet an invitation for the others —evidently, Tade— to actually “see” her. Makeup notwithstanding, she ends up washing her face while facing the scorn from her co-workers. In addition, when Tade sends Ayoola a bouquet of orchids, Korede remarks quizzically, “Is this how he sees her? As an exotic beauty?” To what she bitterly ponders, “I console myself with the knowledge that even the most beautiful flowers wither and die” (75).

Interestingly, Korede presumes —probably rather simplistically— that her sister could be dismissed from any blame just because she is attractive enough to seduce people, policemen included. After Tade’s defence skirmish on Ayoola’s attack, a decidedly self-confident Korede warns him: “If you say anything about any of this, I will tell them that you attacked her. And who do

you think they will believe. You or Ayoola?” (201). During the police interview about Tade’s incident with Ayoola, Korede is summoned. She seems to rely too much on the possibility of her sisters’ acquittal due to her looks. “They shift uncomfortably. They have met her. They have looked into her eyes and fantasized about her. They are all the same,” she swiftly hypothesises (218). Two assumptions are made by Korede: that all policemen are heterosexual men, and that they would immediately fall for her sister, disregarding the responsibility for their job. It seems a feeble reason that the police investigation officers should dismiss what could be an easily traceable motif for inquiry. After all, it is not the first time Ayoola has been involved in strange disappearances or the deaths of her boyfriends. “It’s because she is beautiful, you know” Korede confides in unconscious Muhtar, “That’s all it is. They don’t really care about the rest of it. She gets a pass in life” (124). As a matter of fact, these overlooks in the police investigation may be considered as a foible in the plot structure—or in the narrator’s assumptions. It seems childish that beauty could represent a mollifying attribute for the police to consider when facing a crime. Or else, it seems quite improbable that they are willing to believe an attractive woman instead of a respected, professional man, given the misogynist and sexist structures the same Korede complains about. In addition, the jealous Korede is constantly trying to avoid her sister’s dreaded imprisonment. Korede compromises her affective life in order to save her sister. In all probability, were Korede to denounce Ayoola—as Muhtar advises her to—the voluptuous sibling would certainly not be able to elude condemnation. Furthermore, Ayoola’s beauty seems to be used as yet another weapon to objectify men. In the stunning sibling’s eyes, many potentially eligible suitors are utterly disregarded—and in time, accidentally killed. Men become mere cyphers in her carefree attitude to romantic relationships in general. She seems quite skeptical of marriage, having stable relationships, or bonds involving opposite-sex love, except the strong attachment—and secret—she shares with her big sister.

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han refers to these times as evincing a “compulsion to display the exploits of the visible” (2012, 21). He defines “exhibition value” in the following terms:

Exhibition value above all depends on beautiful looks. In this way, compulsive display produces the compulsion to achieve beauty and fitness. [...]. Today’s (role) models convey no inner values but outer measures to which one seeks to correspond, even by violent means. The imperative to exhibit leads to an absolutization of the Visible and the External. The Invisible does not exist, for it generates no exhibition value, no attention. [...] The increase of images is not



inherently problematic; what proves problematic is the iconic compulsion to become a picture. (12-13)

Because, he claims, there is no hermeneutic depth when nothing more than the evident is asked for. “Today visual communication occurs through infection, abreaction, or reflex,” Han proposes. “It lacks all aesthetic reflection. Its *aestheticization* is ultimately *anesthetic*” (2012, 13). In the same line, Ayoola seems to use her beauty in a way that could be beneficial for her to attract but, at the same time, *distract* the attention from herself. Most men seem to see her as a glamorous though, seemingly, hackneyed image of beauty. Do they get to know another Ayoola aside from the exotic doll/orchid? Do they really wish to do so? Predictably, men do not seem to see her as a real woman but as a decorative token to display. What is interesting about this circumstance is that she seems to acknowledge this, and use it to her own advantage.

In addition, I believe that Ayoola’s perceived captivating beauty is yet another distorted appreciation of Korede. While it may be true that the young sister meets many beauty advertised requisites, Korede does seem to have a self-distorted image. Muhtar appears to be genuinely interested in and affectively attached to her. The sisterly bond, however—either for survival, or kinship responsibility reasons—seems to outweigh all other possible commitments. “There will never be another Muhtar,” Korede eventually concedes—and goes on to say: “I know this. There will never be another opportunity to confess my sins or another chance to absolve myself of the crimes of the past... or the future. [...]. Ayoola needs me; she needs me more than I need untainted hands” (223). Our loyal nurse has once more decided to close ranks with her sister. “She was right. You have to choose a side, and my lot will always have her; no one else matters,” she finally resolves (220). Suggestively, there seems to be a double tie of blood, the family’s and also the crimes’. Hence, they are doubly bound by blood in a loop of never-ending criminal entanglements. The very last chapter of the book is called “#5,” which suggests an ominous closure—or the lack of it.

### **3.4. Social Media: A Show of the Intimate**

“I live from what the others don’t know about me,” reads the epigraph to *The Transparency Society* by Byung-Chul Han (Peter Handke 1998, 336). The idea seems to encapsulate the fulcrum of Braithwaite’s novel and the theme I will analyse in the present section. *MSSK* deals with how social media is crucial in

the double process of the centripetal scattering of attention over Ayoola's third victim and the construction of some characters' public lives on the net. In addition, the narrator exerts quite a judgemental criticism on the use of such platforms, which further contributes to her ambiguous ethical voice. In order to expand on the critique offered in the fictional work, I will briefly examine some crucial ideas introduced by Byung-Chul Han. The Korean-German philosopher analyses the role of mass media on what he refers to as the contemporary "post-privacy" (2012, 3) or "transparency society" (viii). He coins several interesting conceptualisations such as "digital panopticon," "liquid democracy" —which echoes Sygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity— the relation between transparency and truth, the "junkshop of images" in the theatrical construction of a public façade of intimacy. The concept of transparency has been equated to the idea of trust, he observes. And he goes on to speculate that "[w]hat is forgotten thereby is that such instance on transparency is occurring in a society where the meaning of 'trust' has been massively compromised" (vii). He claims there has been a shift from a disciplinary social focus —Bentham's control panopticon— to one he terms "digital panopticon" (viii, 46). Interestingly, he propounds the idea that the society of control achieved during modern times — by the awareness of a "supervisor's constant presence" (2012, 46)— has been replaced by a "self-generated need" from the subject, who freely surrenders his/her private spheres "to the need to put oneself on display without shame" (46). In other words, people expose their private lives voluntarily to the panoptic net gaze. Ayoola is the perfect example of such an individual. She shows an almost addictive compulsion to expose a constructed self on social media. She uses the net to advertise her clothes designs, but also to make public what she eats, even her body injuries. "Ayoola is lying on her bed, angling her body to show Snapchat her injury. I wait for her to finish, and she eventually pulls her shirt back down over her stitches, puts her phone to one side and grins at me" (Braithwaite, 212). In all likelihood, she is probably using this theatrical exposure in order to divert attention from the less publishable aspects of her life.

Another enlightening aspect of the transparency society Byung-Chul Han considers is the emergence of a "society of opinion" and a "liquid democracy" in which the political issues and interests seem to be superseded by economic ones. Since transparency is regarded as inherently positive, it cannot "radically question the political system as it stands. [...] It is blind to what lies outside the system. It confirms and optimizes only what already exists. For this reason, the society of positivity goes hand-in-hand with the postpolitical," he emphasises (2012, 7). By quoting Paul Virilio, Han reflects on the relation between social

media and memory. “Today memory is being positivized into a pile of garbage and data—a ‘junkshop’ or storage unit stuffed full of ‘images of all kinds and origins, used and worn-out symbols piled up any-old-how’” (Virilio 2006, 38), he suggests. In addition, he postulates that “[t]hings in a junkshop simply lie next to each other; they are not stratified. Therefore history is absent. The junkshop can neither remember nor forget” (Han 2012, 32). Such an idea seems hinted in the novel by the conspicuous slowness of the police investigation over Femi’s disappearance. His family is compelled to use social media to make up for the state only perfunctory function. Videos are uploaded pleading for any witness, a possible hint or proof. By the same token, the metaphor of the junkshop proves useful when describing the atomising or pulverising of information connected to Femi. After a time, the attention of social media users is diverted, and remembrance becomes obliterated. Contradictorily, social media are the only possible exposure Ayoola and Korede fear, not the Nigerian police. It is on Snapchat that Femi’s sister has uploaded a video explaining that a neighbour saw two women—one of them identified as Ayoola—coming out of her brother’s flat on the fateful night. “He couldn’t see them clearly, but he’s pretty certain one of them is Ayoola—the babe who was dating my brother. Ayoola didn’t tell us about a second woman with her... Why should she lie?” Peju ominously poses (Braithwaite, 94). In addition, when Femi’s family find a bloody napkin in his flat, they expose this evidence on social media. “It’s all there on Snapchat, for the world to see that whatever happened to Femi, it did not happen of his own volition. The family is asking again for answers” (91). In yet another gesture of pushing her good luck, Ayoola seems well-aware of how to use social posting by advertising her pretended astonishment at Femi’s sudden loss:

#FemiDurandIsMissing has gone viral. One post in particular is drawing attention— Ayoola’s. She has posted a picture of them together, announcing herself as the last person to have seen him alive, with a message begging anyone, *anyone*, to come forward if they know anything that can be of any help. (22; original emphasis)

The fact that social platforms are chosen to expose their intimate lives and not other institutions such as the police—at least the reader is not told about it—seems to either criticise the Nigerian police standards, or to stress the excessive reliance on media exposure as a possible road to justice or public control.

Another concept Byung-Chul Han examines is what he calls the “theatrical construction of intimacy” (2012, 35). “The world today is no theater where

actions and feelings are represented and interpreted,” he ascertains, “but a market on which intimacies are exhibited, sold, and consumed” (34). This “pornographic exhibition,” as he calls it, transforms the public sphere into a void swiftly filled by intimate, private —and shallow— issues. “Publicizing a persona takes the place of the public sphere. In the process, the public sphere becomes an exhibition space. It grows more and more distant from the space of communal action,” he concludes (35). This enunciation explains why the plot of *MSSK* is prominently crossed by social media constructions. The narrator, Korede, ironically ponders on people’s flickering attention span on hashtags: “#FemiDurandIsMissing has been sidelined by #NaijaJollofvsKenyanJollof. People may be drawn to the macabre, but not for very long, and so news of Femi’s disappearance has been trumped by conversations about which country’s jollof rice is better. Besides, he was almost thirty, not a child” (Braithwaite, 86). Without any possible remorse, our narrator preaches on the double standards of Gboyega’s wife. The chapter entitled “Research” is a direct critique against the façades of happiness, and perfect families —boasting about clothes, anniversaries and holidays abroad— as too frequent an occurrence on social platforms. Gboyega’s “blandly formulaic” life —in Korede’s terms— is described on Facebook with captions which “go on and on about how wonderful his wife is, and how lucky he is to have her, and I wonder if his wife knows that her husband seeks out other women” (Braithwaite, 115). Likewise, in a superbly caustic remark of a commonplace Instagram post, Korede refers to Gboyega’s wife writing along these sentimental —or fake— tones:

#MCM Oko mi, heart of my heart and father of my children. I thank God for the day you laid eyes on me. I did not know then you were afraid to speak to me, but I am glad you overcame that fear. I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without you. Thank you for being the man of my dreams. Happy anniversary bae. #mceveryday #throwbackthursday #loveisreal #blessed #grateful. (116)

The irony is double since the reader knows about Gboyega’s relationship with Ayoola. However, what seems to exert a quizzical mirth is the fact that it is Korede who criticises double standards. Precisely, truth —and its concealment— is the only means of survival the sisters appear to ascertain. The piling up of lies —and information— contributes to the blurring of reality. Truth is what the novel plot —and the protagonist narrator— seem to share with the implied reader. However, the opposite dynamics, the covering of truth is the main protagonists’ concern. In other words, appearances are the sisters’ sole hope for survival. Korede, once again, is subject to the reader’s ethical lens. She

has a highly moralising attitude concerning social media's effete standards. However, has she the ethical authority to prescribe on other people's lives when she is living on appearances? Moreover, Braithwaite has publicly acknowledged her intention to avoid any dogmatic or moralising stance in her novel to encourage debate (Braithwaite 2020b). Does this assertion convey that the implied author is mocking Korede's dogmatic diatribes against social media users? Or is Braithwaite really rooting for her character's critique on social media? As has been previously analysed, irony and satire presuppose a space for hope, for improvement, even though this circumstance could be difficult and untenable. *MSSK* is evidently an attempt to infuse the hope of black humour in order to denounce a very stifling familial and social context. It is, after all, as much about truth limits and familial bonds that transcend freedom as it reveals women agency—even though Korede and Ayoola's means to achieve deliverance may not be the most advisable or legal ones.

Undoubtedly, Braithwaite's fictional debut exerts a protean conversation with previous crime fiction, both globally and in Nigeria. *MSSK* depicts a subtle balance of social critique, ironic patriarchy reversal, and a deft delineation of quirky female characterisations. This balance is also further spiced up with domestic thriller undertones and an amusingly noir atmosphere peppered with witty dialogue. The novel is aesthetically and ethically singular and open to debate. Few writers can blend elements such as romance, domestic noir, irony, satire, trauma fragmentation and narrator unreliability in adequate doses, without recurring to excess, hyperbole, or an extended somber or gruesome mood. Braithwaite has let the ingredients of her fictional stew simmer and reveal a lingering flavour. An axial pattern has subtly emerged in brushstrokes, which spill not so much blood as broken memories and secrets, nor so many gory details as the realistic and nuanced texture of sibling love. This love which is not home, but homeliness. A space where one can be mean and generous, morose and graceful at the same time, having the familiarity and confidence, a sense of belonging without alacrity, and also, a welcome anonymity that only worn-out, shared spaces can offer. The unreliability exerted by the protagonist's narrative is intended as a meta-laughter—or rather a smirk—which the reader feels compelled to further explore. Korede is sometimes difficult to confide in, but then so is Ayoola. A character who sometimes resembles a kaleidoscope, sometimes a cypher. The excessive prerogative weighted on beauty, exerting dominance over social structures and narratives may be revealed as an overstatement and a possible plot shortcoming. However, it remains a query whether this caricature of the “plankton” women is not yet another ironical *cul-*

*de-sac* the author seems so comfortable to place the reader in. In addition, ethically speaking, *MSSK* plays with double standards, truth, and transparency. Women and men are transformed into pawns of power while readily disposed of, or silenced, in a frenzied plot. The reader is constantly reminded of social media straddling and muddling the characters' lives, of transparency obliterating truth as well as public and private boundaries. *MSSK* is as romantic as stark, depicting human ridicule and quirks but, above all, speaking the universal language of two sisters united by pain. The novel denounces injustice as much as it seeks to empower women —although resorting to *non-sanctum* dynamics. Eventually, the fiction is undeniably about hope. Laughter in all its tonalities —sneer, smirk, giggle, mirth or a hearty, echoing peal. It is catharsis against boredom, despondency, and even more so, against vacuity.

## EMBRACING DARKNESS AND SILENCE: ALTERNATIVE TROPES FOR HEALING AND RESISTANCE IN *A SMALL SILENCE* (2019) BY JUMOKE VERISSIMO

“We find our way in/to the dark, we go, we go, somewhere, we go into the dark even if it tells us  
it can swallow us.”

Jumoke Verissimo, *When Dark Became the Light, I Knew* (2019b).

Esta penumbra es lenta y no duele;  
fluye por un manso declive  
y se parece a la eternidad.

*Elogio de la Sombra*, Jorge Luis Borges (2019).

From the massive literary success of the peculiar Braithwaite’s sisters, I will presently move on to the quiet flux of *A Small Silence* by Olajumoke Verissimo. Well-known as Jumoke, Verissimo, the writer of the second novel chosen for analysis, is a Lagosian who has stepped into the international literary landscape with the nimbleness of a genie and the calm of someone who will remain. Having studied English Literature at Lagos State University and African Studies at Ibadan, she has worked as a freelance journalist for the Nigerian newspapers *The Guardian* and *NEXT*. She has also been a copywriter, sub-editor and editor and has written two acclaimed poetry books: *I Am Memory* (Dada Books 2008) and *The Birth of Illusion* (Fullpoint 2015), as well as a number of short stories for cutting-edge African literary online magazines such as *Saraba*, *Praxis* and *Brittle Paper*, among the most salient. *A Small Silence* (Cassava Republic 2019a) is her debut novel. In her writings, individual, historical and insidious trauma and the ideological commitment to narrativising grief, the role of memory and agency, sensory and bodily experience, and individual and communal healing are recurrent tropes, woven in an intimate, evocative, yet oftentimes angered voice. Verissimo claims her work seeks to resemble the capture of “emotions in beats” (Verissimo 2019c).

Electricity outages are commonplace to the Nigerian context. Allegedly, Verissimo’s story arises from this familiar occurrence which Nigerians are used to almost on a daily basis. “When electricity goes out,” she observed during an online interview, “everything becomes very quiet” (Verissimo 2019c) and thus, she found herself wondering “what would it mean to live the rest of one’s life in the dark?” (Verissimo 2019a). Her first novel is a lyrical attempt to deal with this question. Hence, the present chapter will seek to evince how this Me-Generation Nigerian writer deftly uses the tropes of darkness and silence in a

provocative new way. To begin with, my analysis will focus on the historically discredited motif of darkness. In order to do so, I will deploy a riposte of an oriental viewpoint on art and beauty such as the iconic “In Praise of Shadows” by Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1977). In like manner, I will put forward some aesthetic considerations suggested by Philip Dickinson (2016) on the use of the sublime (in relation to darkness) within the postcolonial novel. To continue, the tropes of silence and sensuous explorations will be brought to the fore by suggesting non-western approaches to trauma healing by recourse to the theoretical contributions made by Stef Craps (2013), Zoe Norridge (2013) and Sokari Ekine (2011). Subsequently, in the pages of the second section, I will provide a succinct overview of how trauma studies and their representation in literature have been gradually changing. I will start by focusing on extant trauma theories, such as the ground-breaking psychoanalytic/postmodern stance on narrativity propounded by Cathy Caruth (1995). Likewise, I will examine the view posited by Michael Rothberg (2000) on the attainable nexus between trauma and realism. In addition, new conceptions on cognitive trauma theory will be deployed as used by Joshua Pederson (2014, 2020a) and Richard McNally (2003) to explain the process of grappling with remembrance and its narrative possibilities in a realist fashion. Pederson’s alternative model for literary trauma analysis will be proposed with a view to exemplifying how the characters of *A Small Silence* are shown to remember their harrowing pasts through somatisation, augmented remembrance and, oftentimes, distorted self-images.

In the third section of this chapter, I will delve on the narrative relation established between personal, historical trauma and remembrance. In turn, I will attempt to show how this link is closely imbricated into the intersectionality between history and politics in an attempt to bring about fictional agency and change, especially to women characters. The neocolonial, socio-political and historical criticism the novel manifests seems to be in tune with a present distancing from the postmodern “stasis” of history as another instance of fictional narrative. In agreement with Peter Boxall’s claims on the alternative relation of twenty-first century fiction and history, this narrative seems concerned with the “new materiality of history” and his propounded new ethical turn. He aptly refers to the difficulty in representing the real and the relationship between narrative and experience (2013). Likewise, I will ponder how the South African literary critic Chielozona Eze has timely hypothesised about the role that a restorative, bottom-up approach to justice through artistic narratives can be exerted on the eminently violent condition witnessed in many African societies (2021). As many African writers have made manifest, the Achebean



assumption of the role of the writer as a *griot*, entertainer but also a teacher and political activist, is evidenced in the novel's narratorial attempt to maintain memory alive by denouncing historical —and contemporary— structural Nigerian flaws.

Mainly by recourse to a narratological framework, in the fourth section, I will explore the strong commitment of the narratorial voice to endow many female characters with determinacy and independence. In addition, I will foreground how similar thematic patterns —which I have dubbed “games of doubles”— are enacted so as to underline the same idea. Desire's predicament, straddling the role of victim and victimiser, will be especially considered in depth by focusing on the aligned notions of “moral injury” (Pederson 2020b) and “moral residue” (Quayson 2021) derived from trauma-spectrum studies and literary criticism theory respectively. The main female protagonist of *A Small Silence*, I will argue, is exercising a much controversial right —postulated by the Egyptian-American feminist activist Mona Eltahawy and the legal theorist Mary Anne Franks— termed “optimal violence” (Eltahawy 2021, Franks 2016). At the same time, the reader's intended involvement as a witness to individual and structural instability conditions will be examined in the light of James Phelan's “ethical reading” (1998). Last but not least, Verissimo's strategic use of benign humour reveals a balsamic caress in the affectionate delineation of some female characters, a recourse which further reveals these protagonists in a more nuanced portrayal. To wit, I will be deploying variegated theory concepts departing from the orthodox western-centred trauma studies to focus on cognitive trauma theory and the pathbreaking stance within trauma spectrum studies coined as moral injury. I will also revisit postcolonial literary criticism tenets in relation to history and collective memory considerations, as well as some narratology techniques with the aim of foregrounding authorial as well as readership commitment.

Initially stemming from a short story called “A Night without Darkness” (2012, [www.kwani.org](http://www.kwani.org)), *A Small Silence* appears to have evolved from a project originally entitled *There's No Forgetting*. The fictional plot is defined by the imbricated lives, dialogues, thoughts and memories of two characters: the former political activist Prof —Eniolorunda Durotimi Akanni— and the young and shrewd university student Desire Babangida Jones. The narration follows an alternate character focalisation, even though Desire's point of view appears somehow to outgrow and embrace Prof's. The novel starts when a broken Prof is released from a political imprisonment of ten years at Maiduguri Prison in

Lagos. His mother and childhood friend, Kayo, are deeply concerned when confronted with this new person who only craves for solitude and darkness. Rejecting all human presence, Prof adamantly chooses to live in the dilapidated house of his dead father. Desire, alternatively, emerges from Maroko slums in Lagos and, having survived a childhood of deprivation and violence, has striven to ensure herself a patron —her former boss, Mama T— who presently pays her university fees. Desire had met Prof when she was a little girl during a protest demonstration on account of the governmental order to demolish Maroko. Since then, he has been in her memory as an idealised paternal figure.

A very subtle sensory and intellectual relation is established between them. Surprisingly, Prof lets Desire enter the darkness of his apartment (and life), which allows them both to start sharing a very peculiar relation. They exchange faulty dialogues and intellectual musings, and listen to their bodies, to the tenuous sounds of the neighbourhood echoing through the background of silence as well as grope for the surfaces of the house in the dim light. However, what they seem to cherish most are moments of silence pregnant with their wandering memories. The story moves back and forth from the present to the past, from dreams, witty reflections on politics, relationships and art and remembrances towards climatic and excruciating disclosures from their past. Meanwhile, parallel subplots which mainly involve parental relations ensue. One of these stories introduces Irete —in all likelihood Prof's son from a fleeting relation of his youth— who appears to be one of the most important reasons behind Desire's returning to the shadowy existence of her childhood hero. With the expertise of a weaver, the narrator reassembles the mirroring lives of the main and secondary characters in order to reinforce themes such as the absence of fathers and the nourishing mothers. Moreover, the lingering ambiguity that characterises the relation between the two protagonists —straddling a steady arousal kindred to love and paternal idealisation— adds up to the sustained and increasing narrative tension. A promptly hinted secret underpinning Desire's life is eventually laid bare, together with the eventual effect of Prof's facing the streets in daylight. The final scenes find the two characters seeing each other for the first time while immersed in a reality which appears to be distanced —and estranged— from the shadowy security of Prof's house. An effect which, yet again, seems to avoid closure and questions given conceptions on light, sanity, remembrance and healing.

## 1. DARKNESS AND SILENCE: AN IN-BETWEEN LOCUS OF SENSORY HOMELINESS

In the acknowledgements to her novel, Verissimo reveals that the genesis of her fiction grew up during some nights of electricity outage when a friend offered her a “space to listen to silence and speak into the dark without fear” (Verissimo 2019a, 243). She is deeply grateful to him for teaching her to listen and for welcoming her silence into his house. “Your invitation to ‘talk,’ she offers, “opened my imagination to abandon trauma and seek shadows that tell stories” (243). In an interview, she admitted to having been jobless and in dire need at the time as a result of her adamant pursuit of being a full-time writer. In addition to having some family problems, “the country was going crazy” (Verissimo 2019c, *podtail.com/booksandrhymes*), she recounts. The author summarises her condition as if every part of her wanted to disappear. Undergoing a phase of dazed vulnerability, she is said to have returned to her friend’s apartment every night and out of the depths of her pain to ultimately conjure up Desire and Prof. In other words, this silent, dark *and* homely space was the improbable material and intellectual locus where thinking, dreaming and—as will be analysed— healing could be engendered.

### 1.1 Darkness

Verissimo also admits to having a penchant for exploring in-betweenness, “being in a place, being a thing or being anything” (Verissimo, 2019c). The main fictional characters are said to have been pulling her in many directions. She claims things are never definite for her, either black or white. Instead, she prefers moving in and out of realities and spaces (Verissimo 2019c). This liminal locus of silence and darkness is established from the very start in *A Small Silence* as a site for therapeutic care. Consequently, Prof’s atypical way of dealing with his protracted and traumatic prison isolation establishes an unfamiliar tone in the narrative. He seems to be craving for darkness; “[i]t was dark, but never dark enough” (Verissimo 2019a, 7), the narratorial voice declares. He rejects his mother and his friend’s company and goes out at night with a cloth covering his head like a burqa. This uncanny situation is further delineated by giving some evidence of Prof’s mental instability. He hears voices in his head, the most frequent of whom is even given a name: Desanya. “Prof observed the way the darkness of the flat established itself before the world around it. At these times, he would tell Desanya how bothered he was that the little brightness encroached on the darkness of the area” (10). The former

political activist constantly fears what could happen to him if light flooded his place. As a result, the blackness of his apartment seems to shroud him and “settle into it to brood over his past” (10). The non-verbalised memories are latent and appear to contribute to the growing narrative tension. Desire, on the other hand, is introduced in a vital and contrasting manner. She is a university student living with her friend Remilekun in a poor neighbourhood —Abesan. She is told by her flatmate that Prof has been released from prison and lives nearby. She also informs Desire of the man’s weird behaviour about which the people of the area gossip. Remilekun decides to tell her flatmate about Prof because she knows about her attachment to him and, also, understands the news may help Desire to cope with her persistent insomnia. After several failed attempts to visit her Maroko hero, Desire finds herself knocking on his door at night, and ends up reluctantly sharing this shadowy room with Prof. Although her initial intention could have been to save her former benefactor, Desire gradually learns how to feel at ease in this alternative dim space, where she can allow her memories to ramble. Desire “did not ask him to put his lights on because she welcomed the darkness, which covered her unease” (63). She felt obliged to start guessing the contours of the place, almost bare except for the conspicuous presence of a grandfather clock. “Desire was attentive to everything in the house, so much so that she could even tell when Prof moved to the edge of his seat or relaxed against the backrest. She followed the faint white of his eyes which were comparable to candlelight striving on a windy night” (64).

Evidently, the novel challenges conventional allegories and tropes of light and obscurity. Western culture has been defined by light as a symbol of unlimited progress and knowledge. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han claims that

[t]he metaphor of light, which dominates philosophical and theological discourse of antiquity over the Middle Ages up to the Enlightenment, offers strong referentiality. Light springs from a well source. It provides the medium for obligating, prohibiting, and promising instances of God and Reason. Consequently, it gives rise to negativity, which has a polarising effect and produces oppositions. Light and darkness are coeval. Light and shadow belong together. The Good has Evil as its corollary. The light of reason and the darkness of the irrational (or the merely sensory) bring each other forth. (2012, 39)

However, oriental —and some peripheral— cultures have historically delved on shadows and dark in a different fashion. In his iconic essay “In Praise of

Shadows” (1977), Jun'ichirō Tanizaki nostalgically ponders on the close implications between shadows and dim-lit spaces with mystery, trance, serenity, consciousness loss and, above all else, the appreciation of beauty. What is more, the Japanese writer closely associates mere shadowy corners with being immersed in atmospheres where “complete and utter silence” could reign (Tanizaki, 20). “In the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway,” he suggests. He also refers to the uncanny nature of dark places, where mystery lies. “Were the shadows to be banished from its corners, the alcove would in that instant revert to mere void” (20). The light, he continues, is repelled by the darkness, “creating a world of confusion where dark and light are indistinguishable” (22). “Have you never felt a sort of fear in the face of the ageless, a fear that in that room you might lose consciousness of the passage of time, that untold years might pass and upon emerging you should find you had grown old and grey?” (22). He argues that the West has never been able to experience the joy associated to the shadows. Tanizaki contends that the westerner has always been compelled to the notion of improving his lighting conditions: “From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light —his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate the minutest shadow” (31).

In contrast to this western obsession with illumination, the Japanese have traditionally experienced no discontent with scarce light, and have sought satisfaction even in environments which are full of grime. In the same line, and echoing the Japanese writer, Prof finds himself telling Desire that she

“shouldn't make the mistake of thinking darkness is bad. Sometimes having light is the problem. Darkness is a cypher. Things, potentials, are created in darkness—think of that Bible story in Genesis; the total darkness that engulfed the earth brought light. What brings darkness? Darkness welcomes light all the time. We can see in darkness, only if we let our eyes master the dark.” (Verissimo, 103)

In “Itineraries of the Sublime in the Postcolonial Novel,” Philip Dickinson argues that the sublime is present whenever, in representational terms, experience exceeds the language to narrativise it. In other words, there is tension in saying or, more accurately, in the unsayable. In addition, he contends that there is an imperative to narrate and “a possible encounter with unrepresentability” (2016, 153). The sublime in the postcolonial novel could be considered, according to Dickinson, as a *mode* of representation in art; that is, a narrativisation attempt, although this endeavour could often be bordering lack of representation. On the other hand, it could be regarded as a *feeling*, which

arises from “an encounter with an alienating world” (163). For Desire and Prof, traumatic experiences have left them momentarily speechless —although they cannot stop remembering— and those efforts at narrativisation are closely connected to sensory and bodily experiences, especially tied to responses to darkness and light. As a matter of fact, even when Desire could understand, and even find some pleasure in her visits to Prof’s shadowy house, she was gradually led to face her own secret memories: her mother being beaten by her father and her father’s murder. Hence, for her, light eventually came to be a device to blind her anxieties. So much so that she could not sleep with the lights off. “*How can you hope for a better sleep in your fear? People don’t like the dark,*” she ruminates. “She slept in the dark [...]—eyes shut to welcome the dark should be enveloped in the dark. She had not found a reason to question her answers until now. Leaving the lights on, she returned to her bed and tried to sleep” (204). In chapter Thirty-two (almost at the end of the novel), there are several images describing the sun and light swallowing everything. Extreme heat and daylight are, hence, ominous, and Desire gets more nervous by the hour. She wants to forget something she dreads and has repeatedly anticipated in the form of dreams and an acute awareness of a story she has not dared to tell anybody. Desire’s behaviour seems in direct contrast with that of Prof, who avoids light. The meanings of light and dark are, therefore, ambiguous in the lives and memories of each character. For Prof light means remembrance of torture and suffering in prison. For Desire light means covering a buried time of her past, her fear, the possibility of oblivion. Eventually, she realises that forgetfulness is not possible, and concludes: “Daytime feels like night” (219). For his part, Prof summarises what he has learnt about darkness:

“I’ve come to realise that it is best to be in the dark. You could compare it to a vacuum, a space. It is like being in a place where heads are left to roam and mature into their own form, a place without external forces beating your choices into shape. You know, darkness can be the place where one can understand existence better. Darkness... that state of assumption that brings continuity to our lives; we can hope in the dark. Don’t seek to fill it—you know, the emptiness, the rest of our lives is necessary.” (186)

The characters’ experiences are, therefore, suffused with associations of light and dark since they are coterminous with memories which cannot be fully articulated. At least, not at the beginning.

## 1.2. Silence, Sounds and the Sensuous Experience

Darkness opens up as a locus of healing, and so does silence—and the sensory explorations it enables. The talking cure has been historically regarded as a synonym for health rehabilitation and resilience in the so-called western world. However, in his article “Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age,” (2013) Stef Craps reflects on the tendency of classical trauma theory to marginalise the different ways in which non-western cultures have addressed trauma, thus taking for granted the western approach as regards the recovery processes involved and the literary forms used to represent it. He argues that there has been a pernicious overgeneralisation on the single traumatic stressor as the cause of grief, and an adamant recourse to non-linearity and aporia as a literary textual representation of these stressing conditions. He claims that there could be other mechanisms of survival and coping—alternatives to the talking cure—that have been disregarded by western health workers and writers. The occidental insistence on verbalising the troubled experiences has tended to overlook other possible healing practices. Silence, Zoe Norridge propounds, has been “another manner of bounding pain—instead of seeking narrative closure, barriers are erected by not allowing the stories to circulate actively (even if they do unconsciously or implicitly) within the social space” (2013, 196). By the same token, Sokari Ekine, in “Women Responses to State Violence in the Niger Delta” (2011), has been confronted with her interviewed subjects’ resistance to speak about their past grievances. Interviewing one of such victims was for Ekine a powerful experience:

Standing face-to-face with her silence was overpowering, as was her grief and loss. She chose a strategy of insulation by disengaging herself from her surroundings and continuing to live with dignity, refusing her violators any sense of victory. In this instance, she had to face her son’s murderers every day, possibly even selling them foodstuffs from the stall she runs to support her surviving children. Her silence, her stance, and her body language did not allow them to take away what was left of her. (241)

Although at first glance such behaviour may seem passive, Ekine sustains, silent response is turned into a powerful act of reaffirmation of their pain with pride in an effort to manage it inwardly on a personal—and, sometimes, communal—level.

These inner musings seem to be at play from the moment Desire decides to stay in Prof’s indefinable dark place. “She entered the house, acknowledging

fugitive silence that would become a major guest in their many conversations” (Verissimo, 62). Tanizaki’s effect of pulverising time is evinced in the extended moments they spent lost in their reveries. “Soon, a small silence drowned their intermittent sighs, deep breaths and pounding hearts. Neither of them gave an inkling of the thoughts in their minds” (184). Fifteen minutes could easily elapse just listening to their breathing patterns. Desire’s point of view is described in terms of a gradual forgetfulness of her material existence. The reader is led to believe that the passing of time is blurred: “[w]hen she opened her eyes, it was still dark, and she hadn’t asked any questions. There was even more silence in the room and it was as if they had both stopped breathing,” Desire acknowledges. Steadily, she becomes aware of the outside life; “[t]he humming of generators in the distance sounded like a trombone in her head” (185). The unspoken words do not seem to be a cause for stir or anguish. Even though she perceives the growing need for something to be said, “a stillness reigned asking that they both hold a one-minute silence for the death of important discussions” (205).

The novel foregrounds silence and, in the process, brings much attention to sound in a powerfully evocative manner. The narratorial insistence on unuttered words gives prominence to a minutiae of sounds which are sieved through the protagonists’ muted calm. Thus, every nuance, even of a muffled sound, is perceived. Prof’s voice was “wafting into [Desire’s] ears like the rustling of leaves in the wind. [...] He spoke so softly that she strained to hear him” (61). Desire’s initial reticence on being with an alleged madman in a dark room was gradually superseded, since “she noted the uncertainty in his voice. She sensed expectation in the way he responded although he tried to conceal it with rashness” (61). Prof’s craving for peace was also shown in the tone of his voice: “[h]e paused and made an attempt to talk louder but his voice still sounded like a whisper” (61). On the other hand, his peal of laughter echoes with vibrance and subtlety. So much so that it “was soft at first. He then rushed into a soft monotony of rippling laughter that grew in tempo until it sounded like a chorus she was required to join” (63).

The sensuous experience is also present all along, contributing to an in crescendo arousal of bodily responses in the main characters. The reader is probably placed in an ambiguous situation to decide whether the relation between Prof and Desire is emotional, intellectual, or mainly physical. In answer to Desire’s insistence for him to turn on the lights, Prof “found her hands in the darkness and tucked them into his, [...]. Desire could hardly hear



him over her pounding heart, like the sound of a horse's hoof stamping the ground" (154-5). After his first encounter with Desire, Prof felt like having had "slow, unhurried sex that begged for intensity after long years of abstinence. He felt ashamed but at the same time, he felt unwound" (71). Although their skins barely brushed, the sensuous feeling suggested in the narration is evident. A stark contrast is suggested in Desire's warm sensuality as experienced with Prof and the more sexually open possibility she wanted to experiment with Ireti. In chapter Twelve, Prof broods on his sexual craving for Desire and his fear of losing her if he openly invites her to stay over. However, the nature of their tie appears to be eminently spiritual as he remembers when they recited Niyi Osundare's "Not My Business" together. From chapter Thirty till the end, there is an intense climatic movement in the plot. Desire and Prof seem to be desperately looking for each other so as to have the chance to see their faces in daylight, while having a constant question in mind: "'Could this be love or what do we call this?'"(204).

## **2. PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA: A COGNITIVE LITERARY APPROACH**

Joshua Pederson contends that literature trauma theory has much to learn from the recent insights from cognitive psychology and neuroscience. He distances his position from the classical Freudian, poststructuralist and postmodern stance. This literary critic claims that there have been new discoveries in relation to the ways in which brain and body process and react to acute grief. Many of the discussions on trauma in the literary scene have been shaped by the seminal work of Cathy Caruth titled *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), along with the theorisation of other prominent figures, such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick LaCapra. In Caruth's early writings, traumatic experience is viewed as "unclaimed," that is, the ability to recover the traumatic past is tied up with "the ability to have access to it" (1995, 152). And she goes on to argue: "what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness" (152). Although Caruth develops a well-known corpus from prominent psychiatry and psychology authorities such as Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, she disagrees with them when it comes to considering "the survivor's unwillingness to talk about or to recall trauma for an *inability* to do so" (Pederson, 277; original emphasis). Simply put, classical trauma theory has pivoted round the fact that the emotional fear produced by wrenching events may overwhelm the psychic structure. Consequently, the

narrativisation of those exertions can hardly be a linear or straightforward undertaking. Postmodern literary narratives have accordingly proved to be suitable enough to convey such fragmented consciences as well as the involuntary, abrupt irruption of otherwise repressed memories.

This still oft-quoted theory of trauma has been partially brought into question by Michael Rothberg in *Traumatic Realism. The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000). He has suggested that realism and trauma are not necessarily mutually exclusive. He has evinced a borderline position between traditional literary trauma postures and the latest cognitive psychology theories—which will be analysed subsequently. Fragments of the real, Rothberg has claimed, could be turned into a narrative—an illusory coherence becomes apparent—by means of which realism could emerge. Additionally, Rothberg’s ground-breaking contention is that traumatic realism traces a negotiation between the *extreme*<sup>6</sup> circumstances of trauma and *everyday* experience. Hence, when one tries to grasp the extreme with language—as in testimony, history and other realist genres—the task seems to be elusive. However, if one insists on denying or avoiding its representation, the American scholar has argued, the “ghostly empty” returns and reality is, thus, doomed to remain perpetually ungraspable (136). Consequently, traumatic realism is an attempt “not to *reflect* the traumatic event mimetically but to *produce* it as an object of knowledge and to transform its readers” (140; original emphasis). As a matter of fact, Rothberg’s position seems to be at a crossroads between realistic and anti-realistic representation, the “banality of evil” and the unutterably exceptional (Arendt in Rothberg, 4). Hence, from the previous contentions it stems that there is an interrelation between *reality*—in this particular fictional instance, what actually happened to Prof (torture in prison) and Desire (domestic violence); *experience*, that is, the characters’ bodily and emotional pain as well as their memory re-enactments; and *representation*, namely, the narrator’s fictive actualisation of these realities and experiences which, though mediated, can conjure up a glimpse of the real. To put it simply, although through a difficult “non-reductive articulation of the extreme and the everyday,” trauma could be narrated by deploying realism (Rothberg, 118).

Furthermore, as Lucy Bond and Stef Craps contend in *Trauma* (2020), the once monolithic conceptualisation of trauma theory has taken a decidedly de-

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Rothberg’s trauma theorisations are always related to the *Shoah* or Holocaust.

centring pull. Apart from the shift from individual to collective trauma, cultural wounds and vicarious witnessing, emerging tendencies in trauma studies have underlined the necessity to regard these experiences and processes as distanced from the overarching western/European perspective. Thus, a decolonised and transcultural outlook has not only been relevant, but ethically necessary. This movement away from western literary representations of trauma has also implied, as Rothberg had initially rather timidly claimed, a clear aesthetic rejection of the monopolised postmodern, fragmented narratives. Trauma theorists such as Jill Bennett, Roxanne Kennedy, Roger Luckhurst, Anne Rothe, Stef Craps and Lucy Bond, among the most prominent, have called into question these widely accepted views on anti-realist narrativisation (Bond and Craps 2020).

Richard McNally, a psychologist at Harvard university, argues in *Remembering Trauma* (2003) that “traumatic memory, rather than being unclaimed, is deeply etched and perhaps *preternaturally detailed*” (McNally in Pederson 2020a, 277; emphasis added). “Traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they *cannot*” (McNally in Pederson 2014, 334; original emphasis). In other words, for McNally not only is trauma memorable, but also describable. Moreover, recent developments in cognitive psychology postulate that, after a painful event, the individual is bound to feel an “overgeneralized sense of fear or shame” which often leads to a sensation of “mental defeat” or the belief that s/he cannot have a positive influence over his/her life (Pederson 2020a, 278). Considering the different processes involved in the storage of memory, new research has put forward a distinction between *situationally accessible memories* (SAMs) —which are usually “visually based” and not easily retrieved— and *verbally accessible memories* (VAMs) which can be both remembered *and* put into words (Pederson 2020a, 278-9). By the same token, a single traumatic event may trigger different responses in different people. Two main reactions may be distinguished: *Trauma-related altered states of consciousness* (TRASC), that is, feelings of numbness, depersonalisation or derealisation and, on the other hand, *normal waking consciousness* (NWC) with symptoms characterised by intense anxiety, arousal and increased heart rate, among the most prominent (Lanius et al. 2003). Pederson poses a question which may prove very enlightening to trauma literary studies: “is it possible to tell a trauma story straight?” (2020a, 280). Simply put, can one trace trauma processes in realist modes of narration? He answers affirmatively.

Classical trauma theory has pivoted around the fact that the emotional fear produced by such events may overwhelm the mind. Consequently, narrativisation may not be linear or straightforward. However, recent research is relying not only on feeling and experience, but also on *cognition*, that is, on how the individual consciously *thinks* about grievance. In addition to fear and pain experiences on one's mind, recent cognitive trauma findings also point to the *somatic* symptoms evinced in the body. Two important conclusions may be drawn as a consequence. Firstly, there may be treatments which are not necessarily related to the iconic talking cure of working through, but may imply practices which involve healing the mind through *the body* or through *explicit thinking*. Yoga is a proposed example. Secondly, Pederson argues, literary critics should trace these acute memories and mind-bodily responses in more realistic-like contemporary fiction.

Hence, Pederson proposes an alternate model to literary trauma theory which underpins three premises. To start with, he postulates that critics should seek “to turn their focus from gaps into the text itself” (2014, 338). In other words, instead of gravitating to textual lacunae and experiences that cannot be uttered, critics should search for textual evidence of the real possibility of characters — or narratorial voices— to express their thoughts and memories in an attempt to gain agency and, eventually, healing. Additionally, he further postulates that “[t]rauma theorists should seek evidence of augmented narrative detail” (2014, 339; original emphasis). As McNally claims, “stress does not impair memory, it strengthens it” (2003, 62). These memories are potentially more powerful than normal ones. Consequently, literary critics should find evidence of trauma in narratives with a focus on excessive detail and textual overflow, in short, in narratives teemed with visual, aural, olfactory, tactile and even gustatory images. Moreover, “*Trauma theorists should focus on depictions of experience that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted*” (Pederson 2014, 338; original emphasis). These memories may be misshapen by affect. “Time may feel as if it is slowing down. Spaces may loom. The world may feel unreal or the victim slip outside of his or her own body” (338). This is defined as “peritraumatic dissociation,” namely, what victims feel when they regard themselves as spectators of their own lives in a film. “Evocations of confusions, shifts in place and time, out-of-the-body experiences, and a general sense of unreality” could mark these distortions (340).

As the previous analysis has sought to demonstrate, a gradual shift in trauma theory —and its representation in literature— has been attested to. This turn

unfurls from experiences of acute pain and amnesia, coupled with intrusive recall episodes, which have been frequently represented through fragmented non-realist fictional plots. However, in contrast to this, there has always been an adamant need to represent extreme pain in quasi-realist terms. Eventually, the current cognitive psychological claims postulate that memories may not in fact be suppressed, but be instead engraved in one's memory and body. What is more, as such, they can be apprehended by conscious thinking and narrativised in realist fiction.

## 2.1. Memories Written on the Mind and the Body

In *A Small Silence*, both Desire and Prof can remember their distressful experiences. However, their bodies can more clearly show what they are reluctant to articulate in words. Prof has undergone recurrent torture with light and fire in his long imprisonment, and Desire's alcoholic father beat her mother on a regular basis up until she was nine years old. Although Prof wishes to tell Desire about his excruciating plight, the moment is delayed—and, in all likelihood, the opportunity of verbalising it is entirely lost. “He wanted to tell her about how he screamed in the prison when the warders came to pick him for the usual routine. He would have loved to tell her how he decided light was not for him” (156). Desire, on the other hand, provides hints of her traumatic young years quite early in the narrative. “For the first time, she told someone everything—well, *almost* everything” (45; emphasis added). Desire is giving Mama T an account of her mother and her childhood on the beach, but often avoids talking about her parents with Prof. Her secret, however, is always hovering. Desire's obsession with the impossibility of forgetting is repeatedly mentioned. “She wanted so much to forget; the way a young tree forgets a leaf when it falls, but the leaf never forgets the tree, it rots so that it can become nutrient—and strengthens the tree. There really is no forgetting” (217). Eventually, she seems to have accepted the fact that she will always remember, that the only way-out for averting remembrance would be mental derangement. Thus, she wonders: “*When you cannot forget, is that what it means to be made crazy—over the top?*” (205; original emphasis).

Quite tellingly, as the previous quotation shows, there are moments when the omniscient narrator offers a *direct contact* with the characters' thoughts. This is always evidenced by the extemporaneous use of italics. While the omniscient narrator can fluidly enter Prof and Desire's memories, dreams and thoughts at ease—chapters Twenty-eight and Thirty-two are but two examples in which

their memories ramble— certain personal musings are singled out so that the reader can have the chance to witness what the characters’ actual internal monologue concocts. Some instances of such inner instantiations are the thoughts shared by Prof and her imaginary friend Desanya on pages 10, 24, 53 and 190. Moreover, Desire’s mulling over is actualised on pages 116, 120 and 125. When Desire is found reading at work by her boss Mama T, the narration goes: “Desire clamped the book shut. She knew what those eyes were telling her, ‘*You are here reading a book while the others are working, abi?*’” (43; original emphasis). To what Mama T actually retorts: ““See this *olowikowi*, you sure do not have a head on your neck *ke?*”” (43; original emphasis).

Predictably, Desire’s memories of Oshodi, her childhood neighbourhood, were tinged with fear and anguish. “[T]here was no better way to preserve a landscape than in the agonies of a childhood suffering. Just as the memories of Oshodi rested in her head like dew settled in the early morning on leaves,” the narratorial voice broods, “Oshodi, the place she was born in, was soaked in a terror which was beyond the pictures of a street with a panorama of dilapidated tenements, clinging side by side and running in bends” (127). Her remembrances of this area are especially foul and seedy, even though she was, at a later time, homeless in Maroko —one of the poorest slums of Lagos. Although her family had a proper house in Oshodi, she recalls playing with balls made with rags and used condoms, the water drains with brackish water were the children used to bathe in, the stench of urine and faeces, “the airlessness,” the garbage and flies, the idle area boys smoking weed, the screams of women at being robbed (127-8). She finds herself telling Ireti:

“We all turn towards imaginative questions, questions that empower us, so we can bury those stories that we won’t give words to because they’ve corrupted our memory [...]. I’ve always considered how some stories will never get told. It’s the way it is, Ireti. Silence is where we go to listen to these stories. Sit in silence and listen. Silence tells stories too, you know.” (115)

Desire and Prof hated Nigerian policemen. Desire’s father was a policeman. Gradually, the memories of him are disclosed to the reader. Thus, the tension in the plot is sustained by the reluctant unfolding secret that ties Desire to Babangida, her father; the understated and ironic *Small Silence* of the fictional title. Memories which do not seem to have been uttered aloud before are bound to be released, and with them, overwhelming pain. However, when Desire actually has the chance to tell her friend Remilekun what happened during her childhood, she purposefully changes the story. Desire admits to making the

story “juicier” by fabricating that Prof had paid her her secondary school fees. Desire’s shame—or pride—compels her not to disclose that she has killed her father when she was nine. “‘My mother killed my father,’ she began and it sounded true to her ears” (220). She even asks herself while telling the story of her father’s murder whether she has “reinvented the things that had really happened to her father” (221). Deliberately knowing she is lying, she vaguely explains to her flatmate: “‘You see, it is kind of complicated. I didn’t see it happen. You know, I wasn’t there, how can I explain this? I was there. I just knew. It was as if I made it happen.’” (221). However, a solid idea seems to have been etched on her mind; deciding that her mother had killed her father was her own way of giving the abused woman her lost dignity. Desire was eager to talk to Prof, to tell him what had happened to her. She had felt free in his dark and homely house, free from her past, from her secret. However, she had decided to forge ahead, probably due to the fact that she had accepted that living with her secret was the best option. “She shrugged, as she reminded herself that he was now to be forgotten. Prof would be forgotten—and forgetting meant rewriting her narratives” (229). Hence, Desire’s decision very much mirrors the active silence of the Niger Delta mothers described by Ekine. The ‘small silence’ seems to linger on, as it does the young protagonist’s inner quest for concealing—and healing.

In tune with Pederson’s assertion on traumatic verbal accessible memories, Prof and Desire evince no memory block. Additionally, they manifest bodily responses when they are faced with certain traumatic stressors. In the case of the activist, he experiences a reaction against light and noise. This has a tangible cause: light was the instrument of torture used by their perpetrators. Desire starts to feel a distaste of the darkness she initially enjoyed with Prof since, in this shadowy room, she has been able to bring to the surface a past she seems intent on burying. In chapter Twenty-eight, there is a minute description of the physical response Prof underwent when he tried to switch on the lights of his house. He trembled, his hands were wet and shook, he rested his head on the wall and sobbed, winced, his heart raced, he wept and wailed loudly, he squatted and crouched on the floor, twitched uncontrollably, felt a slow pain on his neck and, on the whole felt as if drained. However, he told himself it was time to stop remembering. Similarly, chapter Thirty-two starts with many references to Desire’s restlessness: the sunlight “swallowing” even the light of the electric bulb (216); her compulsion to clean the room; her mind appearing to drift from reality: “it was as if something unsaid wished to crack the state of

intimacy and mutual respect that always existed between them. Remilekun wished she could open her up and throw the dirt out of her friend's life" (219).

## 2.2. Augmented Memories against Oblivion

Prof's and Desire's memories hover and are often on the brink of verbal disclosure. Whenever these recollections are reinstated, details of sounds, images and somatic exertions are minutely evoked. Therefore, when it comes to considering Pederson's claim on fictional evidence for augmented trauma memories, chapter Twenty-eight is full of these magnified actualisations. Chronic references to Desire's detailed account of her father's maltreatment of her mother and his eventual death abound. In the case of Prof, chapter Thirty-two provides a precise and exhaustive account of the horror at Maiduguri Prison, especially at the time of the military dictator Sani Abacha. The narratorial voice is utterly accurate with facts. So much so that early in the narration the reader knows that Prof was detained on "3 October 1995. It was two days after Nigeria's independence celebration and four days before his 45th birthday" (20). Moreover, the young and arrogant university activist Eniolorunda Akanni had a relatively good first year in jail. He recalls:

Those days when he thought the worst thing was complaining and planning with other prisoners over the prison food; soups that lacked condiments: just "water, a sprinkle of dry pepper and salt." He was strong for the first year. He yelled at the warden and proclaimed how the country would become a better place because the people would fight back soon. The warders took him into rooms where he was beaten until his bruised body and broken bones made him walk with a bend. (156)

However, the punishments inflicted on him during the second year are painstakingly described: from being exposed to the scorching sun naked to the use of strobe lights for interrogations, exposure to Fuji music at full blast, and solitary confinement with a hood on his head for days on end. As a result of this, Prof developed a sort of ease—or peace—for being in the dark:

This was the routine until the head of state who threw him in jail died and another military government came to power. There was no longer any need for the warders to put the hood over his head. Yet, in the five years of having his face concealed, he had enjoyed the way it sealed the darkness and enclosed him in his own thoughts. (157)



As far as Desire is concerned, chapter Nineteen opens up with a gradual disclosure of her violent infancy. Her mother used to be a prostitute before marriage, and his father hated her wife and daughter since he believed the child was not his. In fact, Desire's father named her "Undesired." Her mother, so the reader is told, changed her name to "Desire" for short. "Desire's mother was not ready for anything but hope that her husband would change and love her again," the reader is informed. However, Desire "remembered those mornings when she woke up to Babangida beating her mother until she was arranged like a torn puppet on the floor" (147). Desire was also punished whenever she attempted to help her mother. A description of the night of her father's death is provided with the drunken policeman insulting her mother and belting her. Desire remembers her mother's screams until she "felt asleep or fainted" (224). A very suggestive dialogue shows how the young girl felt towards her father:

"I think you should run away-o." [Desire]

"And who will take care of you?" [Desire's mother]

"What if he dies? At least someone will take care of me."

Her mother pinched her nose slightly, "What will kill him? He's your father, okay? Don't say such things again."

"He's not my father. He says it. If I was the one he beats like this, one day, I would just kill him." (224)

Desire remembers her mother embracing her while the world was drowsy, and how "the sweat on their palms mixed and their pain came together" (225). At the end of her story, Desire makes explicit a deep-rooted fear she has to Remilekun: that she may kill someone she loves. In order to deflect tension, Desire banters the blood of a killer is inside her while her friend nervously giggles. This uncanny situation is given a perfect closure when Desire covers herself with the bedspread. Once again, her secret is inside and concealed.

The omniscient narrator, therefore, seems to act as a mediator or conduit who exposes the characters' experiences so as to forge an alliance with the witnessing reader, thus establishing a fictional contract that strives to keep memory of structural Nigerian violence persistently alive. The said narrator claims representation of Prof's and Desire's actions, dreams and memories. However, as was mentioned previously, there are certain singular moments when the characters' thoughts are directly exposed, which reinforces the impression of unmediated access. One final remark could be made in relation to omniscient narration. As has been made apparent, the narrator does not appear to be exercising the role of a psychoanalyst by fostering a healing cure, since

many are the traces in the story which show that there is no forgetting—even though the characters would very much wish to do so.

### 2.3. Memories and Distortions of the Self

The last feature Pederson lists in his argumentation in favour of a theory of cognitive trauma is related to the depictions of memories as temporarily, physically or ontologically distorted. These enactments are also found in *A Small Silence* as further evidence of the characters constant grappling with waking self-images. Prof is described as a broken man from the beginning of the narrative. Although the reader could somehow imagine he must look like a shadow of the handsome and egotistic political leader of the eighties, it is in chapter Thirty-three—the one before the last—that one is brutally confronted with his mental, but especially physical, wreckage. When Prof does not want his mother to remain in his house, she starts reciting him his *oriki*—a family Yoruba birth praise. At this moment, he acutely perceives the absence of that self his mother used to know: “he felt like he was disappearing from his skin; with a cannibalistic void taking the place where he should be. He would be there, but suddenly feel absent and inexistent” (34). When Prof’s mother—Maami—adamantly asks her son to stay tall again, to come back to her, Prof thinks “of prison and the feeling of himself floating up to the skies. When was he ever himself? How did deciding to live in the dark become the criteria for judging the total life of a man?” (170). He is described by the distorted versions of the neighbourhood people as a monster, as a ghost who eats cockroaches, even human beings. A neighbour who has repeatedly seen Desire knocking on Prof’s door warns her: ““you will not know him again. He has changed from human being to something else”” (59). In one of their meetings in the dark, Prof tells Desire: ““I am not the one in this body any more. They took me away”” (107) and he ends up describing himself as a ““lighter without a flame.”” (107).

Similarly, Desire tends to project her moods onto her surroundings and the people she meets. Thus, she is bound to perceive fear in the eyes of girls. “Desire did not know if she was the one making assumptions, but the fear in the girl’s eyes as the man approached mirrored the one she felt for her father as a child, those days in Oshodi, before she and her mother moved to Maroko” (127). The night Desire decides to tell her story to her flatmate, Remilekun gradually suspects Desire’s mind is not sane, especially when Desire insists on going to Prof’s house at 3:45 am. The protagonist is, for the first time, afraid of being mentally ill; “it dawned on Desire that she was losing control of herself.

She closed her eyes, placed her back against the door and slipped to the ground shaking. [...] In Remilekun's embrace, they cried together" (203). Hollowness and failure seem to be the outcome of her confrontation with her childhood predicament again. In the last chapter of the novel, she walks along the street to get water, and her defeated mood seems to be projected onto the place: "It appeared as if everybody around walked with their heads bowed and their shoulders drooping" (229). She failed to tell her story, so her future is bound to unfold only in surrender. However, she is intent on cleaning her house as yet another attempt to cleanse memory.

Prof's memories are triggered off in a torrent when he is compelled to face the light and the pain it brings to his mind—and body. Desire's unfolding memories are much more subtle: she acknowledges a deprived and harsh childhood, but is reluctant to put it into words. This remains her untold secret. Prof's scars are more visible—he is clearly a deranged man in the eyes of the people—but he can, or at least one is led to believe so at the end of the novel, face his past ghosts. As for Desire, her rather more normal life and countenance nonetheless appear to have a pretence of healing. What is more, her personal wound would probably stalk her for life. In short, the dishevelled and broken-hearted Prof has achieved some sort of redemption which Desire has to keep fighting for. Her standing for herself, her journey to become seems opaqued by her failure to narrativise it. "How easy would it be to forget, was there really something called forgetting?" (199), she rhetorically asks.

### **3. HISTORICAL TRAUMA: COLONIALITY AND EXPERIENCE**

#### **3.1. The Postcolonial Novel: Some Useful Terms**

The postcolonial novel, according to Ato Quayson, has been closely linked to the effects of imperialism and colonialism, let alone the ensuing conditions in the colonies after the end of imperial rule. In addition, the term post-, he contends, is not only used to describe experiences that transcend the colonial encounter and its aftermath, but it also encompasses a wide range of interconnected representations such as "slavery, oppression and resistance, migration, race, gender and colonial space-making, as well as the responses to the discourses of a reconstituted imperial Europe in modern times" (2016, 3). He maintains that, in tune with the postulations and exertions of the so-called Postcolonial Studies, the novel is the preferred genre. Other important variables that characterise the contemporary postcolonial literary fiction are the ties it

evinces with history as germane to the socio-political explanations embedded in its rhetorical and aesthetic explorations. Additionally, the postcolonial novel has been enriched by interdisciplinary contributions from different fields. Apart from the iconic seminal works of authors such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Robert Young, Abdul JanMohamed, Neil Lazarous and Fredric Jameson, the anthropological perspective of, say, Arjun Appadurai and Mary Louise Pratt, the contributions of Ann Stoler and Dipesh Chakrabarty on history, and the political insights of Achille Mbembe have had an important effect on these texts. In other words, rhetorical considerations are currently crisscrossed by introspections related to their conditions of production and contextual discursive variables.

Two terms need to be further defined so as to accurately discern nuances in the terminology commonly deployed in Postcolonial Studies. The term *postcolonialism* itself needs due consideration. According to Akin Adesokan, postcolonialism “refers to the deterritorialized rule of empire that, given the nature of neoliberal capitalism, pertains equally to societies that may never have experienced colonialism, whether of British, French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, or Belgian provenance” (2012, 2). Stephanie Newell further expands on the difference between the hyphenated term —post-colonialism— used to refer to the *ideological* effects of colonialism when considering subjugation under and after colonialism, and the non-hyphenated term, mainly used to refer to “resistance, desire, difference and responses to the dictums of imperial Europe alongside with issues of “slavery, migration and political independence” (2009, 4) On the other hand, the oftentimes employed term *postcoloniality* is often used in connection to “the institutional aftermath of British colonialism,” and is also closely related to the term ‘neo-colonialism’ (Adesokan 2012, 2).

Biodun Jeyifo argues that two main colonality orientations have characterised the ideological relation between the postcolonial novel and their contexts of origin. On the one hand, he refers to the postcoloniality termed as “normativity or proleptic designation,” which is used to account for the literary contestation space which implies the Achebean role of the writer as a teacher. Simply put, an ethical and ideological stance is evidenced in many African authors, which implies the racial and cultural will to identity, together with an “internal political and social critique that writers and critics feel themselves obliged to undertake on behalf of their people” (Jeyifo in Quayson 2016, 5). Furthermore, Jeyifo contends that “African writers, and indeed postcolonial

writers, feel themselves to be part of a larger social struggle in the quest for absent or vanishing agents of democratic social change” (5). On the other hand, the other coloniality category Jeyifo introduces is defined as “interstitial or liminal.” This viewpoint seems to embrace “what is normally perceived as a hybrid cosmopolitan sensibility,” this being defined as “an ambivalent mode of self-fashioning of the writer or critic which is neither First World nor Third World, neither securely and smugly metropolitan, nor assertively and combatively Third-Worldist.” These fictional works could be better referred to as “diasporic, exilic, hybrid, in-between cosmopolitan” (Jeyifo in Quayson 2016, 5). Although these designations are used to refer to two extreme positions in the dialectic spectrum, they are not mutually exclusive, as both could be present in literary postcolonial novels. As a matter of fact, these distinctions can be used to highlight Verissimo’s alleged ideological perspective, which is evidently more in tune with the Marxist role of speaking for the voiceless while accomplishing some committed historical criticism. In other words, Verissimo is visibly compliant with a proleptic designation of coloniality and, for the time being, her fiction is not defined by the diasporic cosmopolitanism which has gained momentum within a prominent number of Third-Generation Nigerian writers.

### **3.2. Disability and Historical Broken Promises**

In her chapter “Disability and the Postcolonial Novel,” Clare Barker ponders on the intersection between aesthetics and ethics in recent peripheral literary productions. The suffering individual is seen as a metonymic allegory of the community or the nation, that is, the often dysfunctional body of the fictional characters accounts for the ailing neocolonial—and neoliberal—condition of the states into question. Disability is hence used by the postcolonial novel to address issues of “voice, self-representation and agency” (2016, 9). Barker supports the view that the ailing body

brings to mind the notion of a body politic—a nation state—that is dysfunctional or under pressure: if the Ruler’s body stands metonymically for the nation [...], the inexplicable disorder of this body points toward wider *national* pathologies of corruption, oppression, and social disorder, “symptoms” of both the horror and the impossibility of absolute power. (100; original emphasis)

Barker claims that the trope of disability can function as a metaphor that covers both individual suffering and national or even global structural flaws. By including this trope, postcolonial novels become sites of the legacies of

colonialism, and especially neocolonialism —this is no doubt the case of *A Small Silence*. Stories “resonate outward,” Barker proposes, “from a character’s disabled body to address ‘damage,’ inequality, and power and its abuses in the postcolonial world” (100). Disability is often closely connected to both ethical and violence issues. The prominent associations of mental and physical illness or impairment with negative processes such as “disorder, deviance, or dehumanization” imply an underlying ethical fictional stance (Barker, 103). In addition, new postcolonial states establish what could be termed as “disabling environments,” that is, “spaces where human bodies and minds are rendered especially vulnerable by ongoing states sociopolitical disorder (wars, human rights violations, autocratic or racist forms of government)” (Barker, 104). Issues connected to citizenship, belonging and state accountability are therefore posed in direct relation to violent events and their impact on individuals and communities. Needless to say, in like vein the novel under analysis clearly denounces historical injustice and the contemporary structural consequences evidenced in the Nigerian state.

In keeping with this argumentation, there is Chielozone Eze’s contention that narratives, especially artistic ones, have the effect of what he calls “restorative justice” (2021, 1). In his article “‘Death, Here I Am’: Violence and Redemption in Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*” (2013), Eze observes that the violence depicted in African literature cannot be isolated from the politically volatile environments from which it usually emerges. “The prevalence of violence in such societies is an expression of the people’s desperate search for meaning and for solutions to the particular postcolonial dysfunction to which history and various African governments have subjected them” (2013, 88). This violence, he goes on to explain by quoting René Girard, is the result of “a loss of hierarchies and differentiation among people” (88). In other words, the loss of social order, clear ethical roles and rules which could actually function and be effective in their socio-political-economic contexts, lead to feelings of distrust and skepticism about the system at large, and undermine its capacity to cater for common good. When this social contract is broken, injustice is rife and violence is usually ready to erupt. Literature appears to mirror this reality, not because writers are prone to aesthetically gloat in violence for its own sake, but rather because this is what they witness in their everyday lives. “Their narratives,” Eze emphasises, “represent violence for cathartic reasons” (88). This catharsis, he aptly concludes, eventually has the aim of raising ethical challenges and eliciting reader responses. Hence, the so-called poverty porn and violence tropes share, to some extent, a message of denunciation, together with the aim of

conjuring up possible bridges of hope. This South African literary critic believes in a *bottom-up* approach to human rights, as he emphasises the fact that justice rights and collective wellbeing concerns are in the hands of ordinary people. To put it simply, Eze contends that Africa's hope for change is at the grassroots level, where the so-called *ubuntu* dynamics can be generated —a “condition related to people's right to live with dignity, equality, freedom, and respect for bodies” (2021, 9). Literary fictions can consequently unleash a creative imaginative impulse that can contribute to galvanising a world that is yet to come.

Eze prioritises a bottom-up approach to justice since *top-down*-generated dynamics are heralded by legal and governmental apparatuses which are often prone to by-pass individuals and their collective and cultural institutions. In tune with Eze's contention, Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué suggest that the emergence of cultural trauma “begins with a series of *carrier groups* broadcasting claims of an injury and demanding reparation to an audience that needs to understand the nature of pain, of the victim, and those responsible for it” (2011, xii; emphasis added). By contrast, they point out that this process of collective recognition could also be articulated in institutional contexts such as “the mass media, state bureaucracy, the legal system, and even the aesthetic domains through narratives of trauma” (xii). An interesting point the authors make is that the possible outcome of such dynamics may require a collective *identity revision* and that, after a period of “calming down,” the actual “institutionalisation” of historical or structural trauma can thus be narrativised and elaborated (xii; emphasis added). Although academic theorists may be analysing the situation of violence and injustice from different theoretical frameworks —philosophy, sociology, literary criticism and trauma literary studies respectively— their arguments seem to converge when it comes to considering the necessity of collective circulation and articulation of *healing discourses* —which recognise the common humanity of every individual and her/his right to justice and wellbeing.

As I already mentioned in the previous chapter on Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Aquille Mbembe has elaborated on the corporate “power to kill” usually exerted on African bodies (Mbembe 2001). Individual life is accordingly turned into the locus of religious, economic and cultural politics of power and dominance. In a timely manner, Eze poses the following interrogations: “what is the African body to another African? What are the Africans to one another?” (2021, 9). Justice in African contexts is clearly

questioned through literary, among other possible artistic and cultural, narratives. The violence exerted in several realms related to, say, ecology and gender is actively included and discussed in contemporary African novels. After all, it is up to African societies to put an end to violence. As Eze affirms, the African continent should resort to its individual narratives of care and hope, even when they are begotten from despondency and suffering.

The manifest social and historical criticism which *A Small Silence* undertakes is explicit in the vital quandaries of most characters in the story. This condemnation is especially foregrounded in the debasement experienced by Prof, whose life unfolds from a utopian activist to a broken (and in all likelihood mentally impaired) man who struggles to recognise the humanity in him. The same critical stance is shown through the life of Desire, a girl who has suffered psychological and physical parental violence and is also taking advantage of the educational system's foibles to study at university. Many characters strive to succeed in a difficult social environment, as shown in the lives of Mama T, the downtrodden Basira (Desire's childhood friend), and Desire's mother. The novel's criticism also embraces other aspects, such as references to recent wounds in Nigeria's history and some lyrically worded — and at the same time uncanny— considerations of contemporary Nigeria's systemic "madness."

One of the best examples of the repudiated contract between post-independence ideals and the stark reality of present Nigeria is provided by an exchange between Desire and Remilekun. Desire explains to her rich flatmate that she is at university because of Prof's motivation and the fact that he gave his life for an ideal country. Remilekun retorts that she is at university because Remilekun's mother pays her university fees. Prof is, then, the long-lost inspiration and Mama T's money the resource that has made this possible. Interestingly, a book that Prof gave Desire when she was a child was entitled *How to Be a Nigerian*, which invites readers to reflect on the country's contemporary social malfunctions and the vices of those in power. The passion for books that this gift engendered in the helpless girl could never be appeased. A young Prof Eniolorunda Akanni was intent on changing his country, to the extent that he renounced having family life. He could see his people's suffering and

[t]he pain which was trapped in their eyes, which begged him to fight for them—the tired, hungry mouths which were like locked lips deprived of drinking water.



He compared them to lamps burning without oil. He walked the streets, each time convinced he was born to save the people from suffering. (144)

Nigeria's historical references are interspersed in the novel. The most recurrent one is the allusion to the Sani Abacha military regime and the feeble democracy ensuing afterwards, with former military rulers elected as presidents. These direct references to historical events are fleetingly mentioned so as to give the account a grip of the real and, in all likelihood, to foreground the way people actually experienced life during those times. In this respect, *A Small Silence* seems to adhere to Peter Boxall's proposition of the "new materiality of history"; he defines it as "a fresh awareness of the reality of the past, and our ethical obligation to bear witness to it" (2013, 12). The new relation between the contemporary novel and historical memory, Boxall believes, appears to be distanced from postmodern standards which associated history with fiction or fabulation and the "loosening of the bonds that attach historical narrative to material event" (2013, 57). The new tendency, the English critic argues, is "an attempt to rethink the relationship between history and narrative, and to gain a new understanding of the way that historical material asserts itself in the contemporary imagination" (41). The new relation between history and fiction reinstates history on a level in which it does not succumb to the machinery of fiction; rather, "fiction opens up the discussion of the *difficult gap* between fiction and history" (Boxall, 67; emphasis added). In short, contemporary fiction appears to expose a natural tendency to privilege *experience* over narrative, since suffering is too intense to be accurately recorded, and the actual moment of experience will never be caught up in all its intensity and violence.

In the case of the protagonists of Verissimo's novel, one can have access to an omniscient narrative exposing their physical and mental suffering, their lingering grief and unuttered or reshaped stories, as well as their impairments and struggles to survive. History seems to be written on their minds and bodies, and this shows in their eventually ungraspable pain. Historical experience offers fiction a material source of narrative which, nevertheless, cannot be captured in all its materiality. In other words, as Boxall argues, the material world of history remains, so to say, pristine and unshaped, "stubbornly resistant," in spite of the attempts to narrativise it, "to mould, to sculpt, to refashion" it (2013, 75). It is this gap between history and its actual representation that shapes this new fiction's efforts to articulate what Boxall calls the "ethics of testimony" (77). Simply put, and in tune with the alleged intention of the novel under analysis, these texts must seek to adamantly bear witness to the past events, even though

such a reality might be hindered by its dependence on the limitations of the narrative that frames it. In this sense, the acute detail with which the sufferings and plights of the main characters of *A Small Silence* are depicted is a clear example of the contemporary ethical and aesthetic commitment to substantiate history as deeply moulding individual lives and collective structures. Prof suggests in his defeated tone that “we lose ourselves to many things when life chances upon us” (Verissimo, 187). In this assertion, the term “life” could be traded to “history” to fully convey Boxall’s position.

In relation to the actual historical references interspersed in the narrative, one could begin by mentioning the moment Prof is released from prison. He quizzically observes the traces of Nigerian political turmoil on the walls of the city. The presidential campaign propaganda signs suggest a palimpsest of the broken promises of democracy made by contesting former military leaders such as Obasanjo and Buhari. Prof

stopped by one of the kiosks defaced with campaign posters for the just concluded election, which had seen President Obasanjo elected for a second term. The poster that caught his attention was torn and what was left of it was the lean face of Muhammadu Buhari, the name of Chuba Okadigbo, his ANPP running mate, and the words: “WE’LL NOT DO... IT’S A PROMISE.” (9)

Prof derisively wonders to which of the several lost promises these words could refer. Bitterly, he ponders on the fact that, after ten years of imprisonment, he has returned to a political arena where the same military heads of state prevail in democratic times. His youth anger returns as he reflects on the irony of the situation: “‘Obasanjo of the 70s contesting against Buhari of the 80s, and this is 2005!’ He blurted out. ‘How can this country move forward when it seeks the dead to bring revival?’” (9). Other historical events mentioned in the novel contribute to articulating the social and political background against which the plot unfurls. Chapter Five offers an account of the eviction of Maroko, one of the biggest slums in Lagos. People in Maroko were unexpectedly given a seven-day notice to leave their homes. Police arrived with bulldozers, and the community was turned to rubble while its inhabitants were dispersed or killed (2017, *punchng.com*). Desire met Prof at a political rally in these turbulent times. This episode is branded on Desire’s memory as the beginning of change in her childhood. Her meeting with the activist triggered her protracted infatuation with the man’s energy at defying power and the tenderness he showed to her.

In addition, when Maami visited her son in prison, she mentioned the difficulties of the Ogoni people. Although this is not explained in the novel, they were suffering because of the devastation of their living environment by oil extraction companies. The government had “killed some activists in the Niger Delta,” she observes, and it is “getting crazier” (67). By this time, the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was imprisoned and killed. Prof remembers that, while being at Maiduguri Prison, a reference was made to the Third Republic elected president who had also been convicted:

[Prof] raised his swollen, bloodied eyes, and caught a name graffitied on a wall in white: MKO. Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola, the billionaire businessman who was in prison for treason, because he had declared himself president four months after his victory was annulled by the government. (20)

Imprisoned during the Abacha regime, Prof was not liberated after the former’s death: “He woke up one morning and learnt that Abacha was dead and there was a new head of state, who released Obasanjo from prison.” Prof cannot find a reason why he was not released immediately after Abacha’s death. Nigerian governments changed from military regimes to ill-fated democracies, but in any case his release seemed to be part of a whimsical decision. Or rather, he was a forlorn prisoner nobody was much concerned to remember: “Later, they told him there was an election and Obasanjo was now the head of state. He woke up each morning filled with the hope that he was going to be released soon. They never did.’ [...] ‘I just know I left prison when the president desired a second term. I am one of those who he granted mercy’” (65).

Verissimo’s ideological commitment is made explicit throughout the narrative. She recurrently denounces contemporary Nigerian structural social flaws and historical failures. Chapter Twenty-three starts with a narratorial voice claiming “*The past is always a place to look for directions for tomorrow*” (158; original emphasis). Political and historical analyses are present in many dialogues between characters. One of the most enlightening exchanges is the one young Prof is having with Fire—in all likelihood Ireti’s mother:

“You think stopping coups and military rule in Africa will change our lives,” she said.

“It is one step towards it. I know that these leaders, change from military to civilian and remain in power...”

“You have answered yourself. See, Prof. It is the West calling us to join their train and that we “need” to fall into the democracy league.”

“You don’t think democracy works.”

“I don’t believe in democracy, Prof. We never had democracy.”

“The Igbos were a democratic...”

“Prof! You shouldn’t be saying this. We have categorised the Igbo form of rulership into democracy based on the structure expected of us. While I do not have a name for it, it was certainly not democracy. Not like America’s.”

“I’m trying to understand you. You want this military rule to continue or what?”

“Prof, I don’t care. See, coups and military rules may no longer be in fashion, but *the dehumanisation of human beings is dateless*. It never goes archaic.” (161-2; emphasis added)

Fire seems to be claiming that the problem in Africa is the question of human rights and trying to stick to structures and socio-political categories imposed from the West. As was previously put forth, Pius Adesanmi contended that the postcolonial state failed to detach itself from the violence of the institutions that had begotten it. Nigeria seems to have failed, he believed, to search into the pre-colonial institutions which appeared to have worked—in spite of all their imperfections—on account of a legitimacy acquired through a sense of collective ownership. The Yoruba ancestry of Prof is recurrently alluded to by his mother. When there is no form of communication between them, she starts singing his *oriki*—which is a personal praise poem. She wants to remind him of who he is and where he comes from. Maami probably believes that, when suffering has changed her son beyond recognition and dialogue is not possible, ancestral praise will be able to remind him of who he once was. However, Prof cannot remember his *oriki*, and this “felt like another loss and a bigger emptiness ate at him” (34). Verissimo, in line with Adesanmi, appears to suggest that Africa should not be defined, let alone healed, by the narratives of the West.

Interestingly, some episodes which seem to point at the systemic madness that the stifling social conditions inflict upon people are included in an inadvertent manner. In Chapter Seventeen, Desire reflects on the nonsense of not being able to look out of one’s window at night for fear of being shot down by a stray street guard bullet. “The question many in the area were asking was why anyone would wake up in the middle of the night to look out of their window, especially after hearing shots being fired?,” Desire broods. And she subsequently wonders: “*What was wrong with looking out of the window at the skies? Was the world no longer ours? Was the world ever ours?*” (116; original emphasis). In chapter Twenty-four, one is unexpectedly faced with an account of a stranger Desire meets on the street—well-dressed in a suit and tie, carrying

a suitcase— who insists on asking her to smile at him. She refuses to comply with his request so the young man starts to pull off his clothes. Once naked, he starts walking with his swaying penis while laughing at Desire and the astonished passers-by. A moment later, on the bus, she is confronted with a man telling everybody on board that the hole pots in the street would swallow them all one day and everybody will die. “It was one of those moments when words seemed inadequate to question the absurdity of such things,” she reflects (167). Similarly, Desire witnessed a situation which has apparently become commonplace in Nigeria. Two policemen jump down from their van and ask a young man carrying a laptop computer to show them the receipt of the purchase. Since he is not able to provide it, the policemen accuse him of having robbed the gadget and proceed to take it from him and push him into the van. Desire bitterly concludes: “[t]he second term of democracy, and each day, freedom still appeared to be a foreign tongue” (228). As regards Prof, when he ventures outside, the world unravels as a site of apparent instability. To give but one example, he is the silent witness of an episode involving an *okada* —a public transport motorbike— man and another with a Chaplin moustache who happens to be the owner of a Toyota Avensis. The episode turns out dramatically when the *okada* man brings a rat to threaten his opponent —*juju* magic is much more effective than fists. The former activist who sought to change the world was a numbed witness of chaos and excess. Is the scene a Chaplin-like episode in which humour reveals the excess and vitality of Lagosians? Or is this Prof’s distorted perception of an unfamiliar world he has returned to?

The poet and literary critic Amatoritsero Ede contends that there is a growing tendency in Third-Generation Nigerian writers to deploy what he defines as a “self-anthropologising discourse” of the country (2015). He addresses these authors’ literary urge to underline poverty-stricken and seedy aspects of the reality of the country with a view to depicting a hackneyed impression of it in compliance with the tastes for exoticism of western readership and editors. He and other Nigerian literary critics, such as Ikhide Ikheola (2013) and Pius Adesanmi (2020), refer to this trend as the “poverty porn” view of Nigeria (Ede 2015). The narratorial voice of the novel seems to border this discursive line. The descriptions of the neighbourhoods —the one Desire lives in and the ones she inhabited during her childhood— illustrate the so-called “poverty porn” outlook. She makes reference to cultist practices in the neighbourhood near university, area boys or *agberos* (street gangsters) and students’ riots. Far-fetched stories are told about a mad criminal —Clifford Orji— who ate human flesh for a long time. Remilekun cringes at the

conditions on Nigerian prisons by claiming: ““Have you been to the police stations? Now, imagine what the maximum prisons are like, *abeg*, hell is closer than we think”” (16). Kidnapping is rampant in the city, Desire informs. She also steals water from her neighbours since the area where she lives does not provide them with running water, nor regular electricity power. They have to go to a tap or else pay to *mai ruwa* to get it for a small fee. Moreover, when Desire and her mother claimed a piece of land in Maroko, Baba Ondo, a local chief, was a kind man who helped them to set in. “She was beginning to believe she would have a father figure in Baba Ondo, when he was lynched to death by boys who wanted to snatch his bag, a few months after their arrival” (122). Desire’s gaze adamantly focuses on the mixture of smells and sights of the city surroundings. She refers to the “smell of fried plantain set against the stinging odour of stale piss” (123), the faded paint of the houses, the dust coating everything in a red hue, and the open gutters full of discarded plastic take-outs and faeces: “The electric cables twined like wire meshes; one pole had fallen onto the road and was causing heavy traffic. Car honk belted out an incongruous tune, beating the sanity from her head” (129). An *okada* rider caused her notebooks to fall into a gutter, while she observed a stray dog half ridden by fleas sniffing at a plastic bag containing a dead rat.

As Pius Adesanmi claimed, Africa —and Nigeria in particular— should seek to define the questions which could in turn lead to finding answers to the deeply entrenched violent structures and practices of historical and contemporary power in the continent. In keeping with this, and returning to Jeyifo’s contention about the ideological stance of the postcolonial novel, *A Small Silence* takes a proleptic designation stance, one that equates the plight of individuals with the disabilities of the country, one that seeks to expose experience as a way to approach the materiality of history on the lives of the voiceless. On the whole, the novel exposes a collective mental instability more akin to a self-anthropologising discourse, which may thus encapsulate authorial anger in pursuit of some kind of catharsis.

#### **4. AGENCY AND RESISTANCE: WITNESSING READERS AND STRONG WOMEN CHARACTERS**

##### **4.1. On Griots and Songs of Abuse**

In this section, I will carry out a preeminently narratological analysis which will seek to demonstrate how the choice of narrative voice and focalisation, thematic

iterations and characterisation contribute to giving the novel a persistent ideological foundation. To start with, I will refer to the activist stance of the narratorial voice, and analyse how this allows the novel to deal with a process of historical healing and contestation. Secondly, I will trace some parallel thematic imbrications which stress the absence of the paternal figure in a staunchly patriarchal context. As a result, women emerge as the nurturing mothers and agents of possible hope and change. Furthermore, I will ponder on the main characters' switching roles from victims to owners of their own lives and self-narratives. Particularly, I will devote some time to analyse Desire's ethical affliction by relying on the conflation of two notions: those of moral injury and moral residue. By the same token, I will also consider how the inclusion of the reader as a witness of trauma narratives can contribute to raising awareness and bearing witness to the Nigerian historical faulty lines and present sociopolitical predicament. Last but not least, I will show how humour surfaces through the contour of three characters as a balsamic layer which seems to suggest that, even in the most dire circumstances, people need to laugh in order to make reality more palatable.

In the Foreword to the book *Who Owns the Problem? Africa and the Struggle for Agency* (2020) by Pius Adesanmi, Kenneth Harrow refers to the indefatigable efforts made by the tragically disappeared author in search of understanding and defining African problems with a view to generating African's own narratives. He also considers the active role of literature in such an undertaking. "If we do not understand why we lack agency," he declared, "we will never find a way to it" (Adesanmi, xviii). Adesanmi considered himself to be part of a generation who madly embraced Nigeria "in the craziness of a lover's scream" (xviii). Moreover, he invited his fellow Nigerian writers to never limit their creative imagination "to chronicle and narrativise" the country (xvx). He was celebrating being part of a group who "is animating and rocking the Nigerian scene" (xix). Furthermore, he claimed that "my generation had for raw material a Nigeria sapped beyond recognition by SAP<sup>7</sup> and military rape and we tried out a poetics of love on her" (xix). The writer, in Adesanmi's words, can seriously contribute to thinking Nigeria differently, to reflecting on her foibles and putting forward narratives of recognition, criticism and betterment.

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<sup>7</sup> Structural Adjustment Programs, or SAPs for short, are a complex of loans that the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) implemented in Nigeria.

*A Small Silence* is about trauma —individual and collective— but is also about healing and agency, even if having to grope for them in the dark and in silence. As was argued before, the African writer is usually regarded as an entertainer and teacher —a role derived from the oral narratives of the *griots*. The term is etymologically French and is used to refer to “spokespersons, ambassadors, masters of ceremony, tutors, praise singers, historians, genealogists, musicians, composers, town-criers, and exhorters of troops about to go into battle” (Bowles and Hale 1996, 78). Verissimo seems to be comfortable in her *griot* role since she masters the lyrical and critical word with suppleness, economy, and the force of a master of ceremonies. Moreover, the sediments her novel leaves behind could be likened to the effect of *songs of abuse*. As Stephanie Newell explains, these songs were oral genres usually deployed by ordinary people in West Africa to express their discontent and oppressive condition against those in power (2009, 62). As a genre, she puts forward, “the song of abuse is a powerful weapon which enables ordinary members of society to express themselves in an effective manner. Individually or collectively, singers can make demands upon chiefs and leaders, even insult them without fear of punishment” (62). In Western Africa, Newell emphasises, the word is as powerful as the sword.

An important variable to consider in relation to the possible effect of Verissimo’s novel is her intended audience. *A Small Silence* was originally edited by Cassava Republic, a Nigerian based editing house. This variable invites some practical and ideological considerations. To begin with, Verissimo’s primarily intended audience was African, and specifically Nigerian. The story, as she has claimed, is about Nigerians for Nigerians (Verissimo 2019c). In this sense, she seems to be distancing herself from her contemporary diaspora generation writers, who seek to offer a more cosmopolitan image of the country, especially of Nigerians’ experience abroad. At the same time, as Akin Adesokan has proposed —in tune with Ede and Ikheola— the “strategic exoticism” that novels such as Verissimo’s depict makes them likewise highly ‘marketable’ for a western readership. Yet, as Adesokan contends:

the exoticist allures of the marginal in recent African writings work in more complex ways than these claims demonstrate mainly because, in representational terms, such allures are signs of Africa’s postcoloniality as a site of perennial political and other emergencies. They are better appreciated as manifestations of reproducible difference based on race and culture, and are underwritten by actually existing global inequalities, not simply attempts to subvert prior codes of representation. (2012, 3)



Adesokan reflects on the remarkable effect that these new narratives have had on western milieus. He labels them as “New African Writing” and attributes them some unifying features: they are mainly authored by women; they are focalised from the viewpoints of peripheral voiceless characters; they deal with “the emotional consequences of familial or public upheavals”; they are not too long and usually realistic in style; “and they end happily, or at any rate, not too grimly” (4). Adesokan also emphasises the fact that these new novels written by women deal with topics which were not tackled before by previous generation writers, issues such as sexuality, gender, cultural estrangement and social exclusion. He also delves on the centripetal dynamics that these novels are exerting by crossing local frontiers and reaching for a global readership.

#### **4.2. The Narratorial Voice and the Novel as Writing Cure**

The plot of the novel depicts an interconnection of trauma locations. To start with, the personal or individual, such as the one undergone by Prof and Desire, although the secondary characters —the peripheral plights of Remilekun, Maami, Kayo and Basira— also contribute to showing their struggles. Secondly, a historical or communal experience of trauma testifies to Nigeria’s insidious trauma structures, both past and present, and continues to shape the country’s circumstances. In addition, the novel describes a *narratorial process* of remembering and re-writing that the two main characters cannot fully articulate. The omniscient narrator moves back and forth in time and space, and is focalised on the perspectives of Prof and Desire. Desire’s point of view seems to outnumber that of Prof. As a matter of fact, the novel begins with Prof’s strange condition when released from prison and, gradually, the shift of fictional weight is slanted in favour of Desire’s secret disclosure, which actually gives the title to the novel. The last two chapters of the book show the so-called *Rashomon effect*, that is, the same situation is witnessed from the perspective of Desire and Prof respectively. Hence, the same event is recreated by an illusion of simultaneity.

The use of this narratorial voice relying on analeptic remembrance in subtle imbrication with the lineal development of the plot has two main fictional effects. The first is to involve the reader as a witness and to consider her/him, as Verissimo has claimed, as another character of the story (Verissimo 2019c). The second possible outcome is —as Msiska Mpalive-Hangson has argued— a metafictional process of re-representation or re-historisation of traumatic

structures of feeling as defined by Raymond Williams (Mpalive-Hangson 2018). In other words, the omniscient narrator seeks to re-enact different ways of thinking and experiencing reality and their underlying power relations at the time the story occurred. The implied object of the novel is, as it were, to propose a road to agency and, eventually, envision healing through the empowerment gained by some women characters. As Mpalive-Hangson observes, “decolonization [...] failed adequately to resolve the historical trauma of colonialism, making the postcolonial formation an unworked-through pathology” (2018, 47). The message the novel seems to articulate is that Nigeria needs to listen to the voices of the wounded, the ones who are rarely noticed, especially the ones who are unable to fully narrativise their grief. Consequently, writing becomes a therapy of visibility and “unravelling the historical formation of the trauma manifest in the contemporary formation” as a “prerequisite for the curative transformation of the existing order” (Mpalive-Hangson, 48). The ontological distance —in a Levinasian sense— between the original trauma moment and its literary re-writing has the possible effect of ensuing agency. Simply put, there is a twofold movement of trauma subjectivity —“the first cuts the wound and the second reopens it” (Levinas 1969, 36). Once again, as Mpalive-Hangson suggests, “the aim is not to retrieve an accurate historical account, but rather to recover the main *affective cartography*” of the extant neocolonial or poscoloniality structures (50; emphasis added). This affective cartography is in tune with Peter Boxall’s notion of the intended recuperation of history as experience in the contemporary literary narrative of history. Interestingly, Ato Quayson refers to the process of “rememory” (when analysing Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*), which is aptly in tune with Mpalive-Hangson’s notion of retrieving the past (2021). Quayson defines rememory as a subtle narrative mechanism which intensifies the past by “making it both subtend and intrude into the present” (2021, 196). For him, the significance of rememory has ramifications which involve not only the fictional characters within the text, but also a prominent influence on the “ethics of reading enjoined for the reader” (203). Rememory, thus, could be likened to an “affective leakage into history” which bears implications on how the reader interacts with the text. Above all, it accounts for the interpretation process and how the audience can have an *experiential* as well as an *epistemological* understanding of the past and its intrusion on the present circumstances of the country.

As regards the ethical reading notion proposed by rememory, James Phelan focuses on “how the very act of reading entails ethical engagement and response,” and attests to the relation between the textual techniques and the

“reader’s cognitive understanding, emotional response, and ethical positioning” (1998, 320). He has argued that a central concept in the ethical reading approach is *position*, “a concept that combines *acting from* and *being placed in* an ethical location” (320; original emphasis). The reader’s ethical stance depends on her/his interaction within different layers of “ethical situations” (320). To start with, he refers to the relation between the character and the fictional world. Secondly, he examines the relation between the narrator and the intended audience. At this point, narration reliability and focalisation become prominent in the establishment of a stable communication —and identification— between the reader and the storyteller. Thirdly, the implied author also makes ethical choices and enters into conversation with the audience. In other words, the implied narrator’s writing strategies will convey the authorial attitude to the intended audience. Finally, Phelan stresses the importance of the “flesh and blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations that the narrative invites one to occupy” (320).

Interestingly, Phelan has also pointed out how, in some cases, authors create characters that face difficult ethical circumstances. Actually, they can even guide the reader “to see both the difficulty and their own judgement of the situation” (321). At other times, the implied author will “show characters who transgress standard societal and legal norms but nevertheless follow an ethically superior path” (321). Authors usually provide ethical guidance, that is, they overtly or surreptitiously reveal their stance. Phelan contends that, when an author limits her/his ethical guidance and position, s/he risks her/his audience’s commitment to the fictional work. However, by so doing, the author is also transferring her/his authorial *responsibility* to the reader. Thus, although the reading experience may be more risky and demanding for the audience, in the long term it is rather more rewarding and ever-lasting. As regards *A Small Silence*, the reader is turned into a witness of the traumatic events Prof and Desire experience. S/he is compelled to accept Desire’s reluctance to face her moral injury, thus avoiding fictional closure. However, the ethical authorial position seems to be clear: s/he wants women to be able to stand for themselves. S/he strives to endow her female characters with psychic and *physical strength* and, in some instances, *sexual pleasure*. The overall message seems to be clear: women are the owners of their bodies and destinies and, which is more, they can defy stiffening and violent patriarchal contexts such as the one described in the novel.

As to the ethical relation between the narrator and the intended audience propounded by Phelan, it is worth pointing out that Verissimo's use of a mixture of third-person narrative with the active characters' exchanges creates an effect similar to that of the "middle voice" proposed by Rick Crownshaw in memory studies (2010, 13). This voice aims at generating a sort of "empathic unsettlement" with the victims. It "allows engagement with, critical distance on and self-reflectivity towards transferential relations rather than their disavowal" (Craps 2017, 62). As Michael Rothberg argues, these kind of stories may activate a solidarity—either among the Nigerian audience or a transnational one—that could keep fiction's immanent local characteristics while, at the same time, suggesting that the entangled ups and downs of neocolonial dynamics should be closely linked to human rights issues (2020).

One of the most striking assets of the novel is the seamless exploration of time during the encounters in the dark. Although silence seems to be very prominent when the two main characters meet, their intellectual musings about gender, politics and art, together with their bitter or stirring memories and dreams, are all the time in conversation thanks to the unifying perspective of the third person narrator. From Desire's childhood to Prof's university activism, from Maami's boldness to raise her son single-handedly to Prof's remembrances of his childhood and youth with Kayo, from Remilekun's failed love affairs and abortions to Ireti's mother's political intelligence and maternal grit, from Desire's mother's frailty to Babangida's brutality, from Desire's erotic dreams with Prof to the street madness demeanour of Lagosians, analepsis is smoothly used back and forth as if time was a malleable substance in the house in Abesan. The reader seems to be likewise immersed in this shadowy room—or rather peeping from the keyhole as it were. S/he is given the chance to share not only their dialogues, but also their internal monologues, in a word, to become aware of what they cannot articulate. *A Small Silence* is, therefore, about a continuous dialogue, an uncontrollable dialectic deliverance to avoid forgetting.

### **4.3. Games of Doubles in Search of Agency**

Thematically speaking, Verissimo's novel displays a recurrent portrayal of parallel stories, or games of doubles. These mirroring subplots have the effect of supporting two main ideas: the absent father and the nourishing and independent single mother. As a consequence of the pre-eminence attained by

women, some male characters experience some degree of emasculation. Moreover, there is another iterated trope dynamics foregrounded: the alternating positions of victims and saviours —as is mainly depicted in the lives of the protagonists. These cyclical occurrences have the effect of endowing the women characters with agency, as was previously mentioned. The same story is replicated in the different generations included in the novel. Most love relations follow the same pattern of men showing fear of commitment and leaving women alone with their pregnancies or children: Maami and her husband, Prof with Blessing and Fire, Desire's parents, Remilekun and her lovers, Mama T and her polygynous husband. This could therefore become an overt reference to fathers' failure as providers. In a significantly patriarchal society such as the Nigerian, this may also be underwriting the extreme burden these structures also impose on men. They frequently reject assuming the familial responsibility of being the usual income providers. The shift of agency is thus posited on women, who become, not only the breadwinners, but also the healers, in other words, the self-assertive protagonists who are in charge of their lives and single-handedly raise their children.

After telling her son the story of how she was coaxed by her husband to plead for a job for him, Prof's father was convinced that Maami's pregnancy was not his. Their relationship began to deteriorate when Prof's father started beating Maami. During one of those arguments, she hit his penis and, as a result, Prof's father was afterwards unable to beget children. Although Prof was his only legitimate child, his father adamantly denied him. Maami told Prof his father knew about his infertility condition. However, he was not prepared to accept the fact that he could not engender progeny and acquiesced to having his second wife's children, even though he knew they were not his flesh and blood. Therefore, all of his life Prof carried the stigma of being considered a bastard. Prof's father only recognised his paternity on his deathbed. The lawyer who read Prof's father's will asked Prof to maintain his father's memory: "his father's legacy ensured he felt his place: a bastard" (Verissimo, 52). Prof could perceive his mother's pain when, after being freed from prison, he adamantly wanted to live in his father's inherited house. He asked his mother and friend to take him "home" to his "father's house" (21). Once in the house, they realise everything there is dusty and decrepit, but Prof prefers to remain there all the same. His mother wonders "why you'd choose to come to your father's house and not mine, [...] I would have washed the window blinds or changed them for one with a brighter colour, so *gbo*" (21). Prof wants to be alone, but he also needs to break free from her ever providing mother.

The same story is repeated with Prof's alleged son, Ireti. "Sometimes [Prof] wondered if there was something generational about absent paternalism in his lineage" (84). In a moment of anger, Maami tells his son "You choose your father's innards and not mine! His lineage is known for abandoning loved ones, they always push those they love away!" (84). The young university activist Eniolorunda Akanni decided he did not want to have secure sex with his many fleeting love affairs. Two of them, Blessing and Fire, accept his selfish disposition, although they eventually vanish from his life, much to his perplexity. Both women, especially Fire, seem to have been very supportive mothers. Ireti tells Desire about his "born-by-mistake" burden: his constant will to please his mother —exactly like Prof— and his desire to know his father in spite of his fear to betray his mother. "Have I been less than a mother *and a father* to you?" (115; emphasis added), his mother had asked him before dying. Ireti could not have sex with Desire when he discovered a birthmark on Desire's body which reminded him of his mother. Ireti is Prof's possible son, Desire probably sees Prof as her absent father, and Prof's story is mirrored in Ireti's. Similarly, Desire's father wanted a son and beat his wife because he suspected the girl was an illegitimate child, another rejected bastard. In short, they made another dysfunctional family blaming women for infidelity. Furthermore, Remilekun has a very determined mother —Mama "T" for Terror— who neither sees nor lives with her husband. "Remilekun was the 54th child of a man with the skin of a shrunken banana. [...] a man who she had to make an appointment to see every three months. Although Mama T had not seen her husband in many years, she made sure that Remilekun visited her father every year" (120). Prof candidly summarises his position to Desire: "Women are a source of strength, you know. If anyone decides not to keep that source of strength around them, it's an acceptance of one's weakness.' he paused, 'I was raised by my mother, you know. Solely by her'" (105). Hence, Prof seems to imply that, by rejecting his mother's protection, he is accepting his own weakness. To what Desire snaps, "How do you mean source of strength? Keep them? Are women artefacts?" (105). All through the novel, women are the ones bearing the burdens of raising their children *and* offering their support to oftentimes cruel or indifferent men. In a very enlightening dialogue that Desire has with Prof, one can realise her intellectual wit, which seems to eclipse her former hero's:

"There is a way you make one feel that women are meant to be kept for their strength-oozing power."

“What is it about women that makes you want so desperately to deemphasise the idea of their becoming as an unbecoming?”

“On whose standard is a woman judged? How does she become? What does she become? Prof, listen, womanhood is a process. We have never even been allowed to begin a journey to become. Whatever you have, or think we emphasise is that we are ensuring a presence that will make us become.” (105)

Once again, it is Desire with her clarity of thought who summarises the fulcrum in these mirroring sub-plots. She reflected on “how society placed so much emphasis on family, yet there was more dysfunction than normality” (120). Most women characters are bound to move in a very stifling patriarchal context but manage to emerge as the owners of their lives. What is more, they embrace their responsibilities of love and protection towards their children. Thus, they are the actual catalysts of change and agency. They seem to accept restraining structures and, eventually, are capable of making headway by breaking with unhealthy ties. On the contrary, many male characters become apparently emasculated—in a literal and/or a metaphorical sense. Prof’s father is one example, and Prof himself another. Desire’s father is abusive with her wife and daughter, in all likelihood because he is browbeaten at work. In Desire’s mother’s memories, he had been once a loving husband. What happened to him? Why was he a heavy drinker and accused her wife of bringing him bad luck? Was Nigerian society demanding too much from him? Although answers are not provided, they are subtly hinted. In any case, what becomes certain is that the narrator is more concerned about her female characters and Prof, who has always needed his mother for survival—probably as much as he claims to need Desire in his present condition—and this in spite of the fact of having seemed to play the role of saviour. Ireti is another secondary character that is described in the same light as Prof: charismatic, articulated and vain. However, when Desire openly invites him to have sex, he excuses himself and appears to feel overwhelmed. Even Babangida, Desire’s pitiless father, is killed by his nine-year-old daughter. *A Small Silence* therefore suggests that patriarchal strictures may beget encumbered situations for women and men alike. Moreover, even when men seem to apparently benefit from such a status quo, the imposed conditions have negative effects on everyone. This being said, literary justice nonetheless takes sides with steadfast women.

#### 4.4. Characterisation: Victims or Saviours?

Another persistent element in the characterisation of the novel is the unstable switching role of being along a continuum from victim to saviour. Prof was Desire's childhood paternal model, the one who instilled hope in her and her future. However, he becomes a defeated shadow of a man after many years of torture in jail. Although there is some hope for Prof's redemption at the end of the story, it is not altogether clear whether his facing life in daylight will free him from his inner penchant for isolation. On the other hand, although Desire was a victim of poverty and violence as a child, she eventually becomes Prof's support and faith in overcoming pain. Yet, Desire's secret unhinges a traumatic event that she cannot forget and will probably haunt her for life. Like Prof, at the end of the novel she seems to be able to move on, but ambiguity nonetheless remains. The arrogant Prof whom Desire remembers was a daring authority, a generous man who stood for the people: "“You see, all I am doing is for you”" (37). His behaviour is described as excessive, even performative; he screams and suddenly sniffs and shouts at full blast alternatively. When Desire eventually meets Prof in daylight in chapter Thirty-three, she mistakes him for a vagabond. He is crudely described as wearing clothes that neither suit nor match. He seems physically handicapped and his face full of scars, his hair wild and unkempt, and his twitching eyes out of focus. Still, she cannot help feeling the familiarity the man provoked in her. This is what she thought when they stared at each other:

She always knew how to read feelings through the eyes —she always believed she did. She looked into the man's eyes and they held a brief hold—his and hers, and she saw *shame* and *confusion*. She turned to go, these were not the ones she had wanted to see. She left him with the feelings she saw in his eyes, too. She understood that when you learn to read a man's eyes, you must also learn to forget some of the words you find in them. (233; emphasis added).

Prof had been on Desire's imagination as the paternal figure she was not granted. She often dreamed of him taking care of her: "She owned the dream. She loved the kindness in his voice and how it calmed her. It became the voice that calmed her fears and anxieties" (135). She carried with her, under her bra, a newspaper excerpt with a photo of Prof for fourteen years.

On the contrary, Desire is not very conscious of her beauty and actual power over men when she grows up. She remembers being called "cockroach," "stick-hand girl," *wain-wain* or puppet when she was a child because she was skinny



and malnourished. Interestingly, she evolves from a performing “puppet” when she was little to become the puppeteer who rehearses in her mind the possible contexts of a meeting between Irete and Prof. In addition, she turns out to be a redeemer in both men’s lives and in many women’s. The secondary female characters also embody this somewhat ambiguous demeanour. All the brave mothers are, to some extent, overprotective and make their children dependent on them. This is the case of Mama T, Maami and Fire. As a way of example, one of the most eloquent and humorous portrayals of Maami is achieved when she insists on not giving up on her son: “Eniolorunda Durotimi Akanni, whatever you are, you are still my son. They may call you Professor. They may call you activity—or is it activist?—these breasts fed you! She said, grabbing her breasts with her hands” (31). Prof’s life had been a constant attempt to show her mother he could live without her. As an adult, he felt neutered by her as his sole provider in times of need. Although he was a famous activist, his mother frequently supplied him with food and money. He eventually appears to feel ready to accept that he misses her, and will be reconciled with Maami at last. Likewise, Mama T is a strong-willed female character who becomes a self-made businesswoman. She pays Desire’s university fees in exchange for her helping her daughter, Remilekun, with the entrance exams by using fraudulent practices. Her pronounced Yoruba accent is another source of humour in the novel. During the time she is Desire’s boss, she tells her off while she is reading during work time: “*Se*, you’re learning how to cawwy material from twuck to shop inside the book? Do you think that is how we make money in Lagos?” (43). However, she is the one who bribes an invigilator so that her daughter can study at university. Clearly, these nurturing, sturdy and ready-to-act women are the carriers of the little hope that *A Small Silence* instils.

#### 4.4.1. *Desire’s Predicament: Moral Injury and Moral Residue*

In the last decades, an interesting shift has taken place within overarching trauma theorisations. A relatively new-fangled area of study related to the category “perpetrator trauma” (Bond and Craps 2020) has developed, and this in spite of the fact that Michael Rothberg has argued that the categories of victim and perpetrator should be devoid of moral and guilt strains, since such differentiation —victim/perpetrator— is not a clean-cut and ready discernible one. What is more, the observable trend in recent perpetrator trauma studies is the difficulty in disentangling the “moral landscape serving to identify legitimate victims” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 90). Primo Levi’s consideration of a “grey zone” accounting for a range of gradations between a

guiltless sufferer and an evil inhumane victimiser is under contemporary close scrutiny (Levi 1989). So much so that a new area of study known as “moral injury” has recently emerged in connection to this issue (Bond and Craps 2020, Pederson 2020b). The main tenets of this concept will be delineated with a view to demonstrating that *A Small Silence* also shows traces of moral injury, mainly in the characterisation of Desire.

The concept Moral Injury was first coined by Jonathan Shay (1995), and studied in depth by Brett Litz et al. in 2009. These theoreticians sought to describe certain symptoms suffered by American soldiers who had participated in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. These afflictions differed from PTSD and usually entailed having witnessed or having inflicted cruel actions. Additionally, these soldiers suffered from what they perceived as ethical incongruences with the establishment in power they responded to or had to hierarchically obey. As a result, they experienced a sense of having transgressed ethical codes, and were at great pains to cope with a normal life once they returned home (Bond and Craps 2020, Pederson 2020b). At this point it is necessary to underline that, although there may be some meaningful ontological differences attached to the terms morals and ethics—as was mentioned in the previous chapter on *My Sister, the Serial Killer*—I will presently use them synonymously. Brett Litz has defined moral injury as “the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (Litz et al. 2009, 697). In brief, as Pederson claims, moral injury may be the result of acts of “commission or omission” (2020b, 13). Although, to some extent, trauma symptoms may overlap with those evinced by moral injury, Pederson purports that moral injury distances from PTSD since the classical symptoms of hyperarousal and hyper vigilance closely connected to *fear*, and so characteristic of this ailment, are usually not observed in patients who evince the former malaise. In addition, the list of moral injury—henceforth referred to as MI—observable manifestations are usually not found in PTSD diagnoses. A person suffering from MI usually shows bouts of sudden anger, as s/he believes that if the same circumstances arose s/he might kill or injure somebody again. For this reason, s/he usually tends to distance her/himself from family and friends and begets feelings of mistrust in others. Another cluster of symptoms are related to lack of self-care, which can escalate to “self-handicapping and self-harm, and even suicide” (Drescher et al. 2011, 9). The aforementioned circumstance may lead to the belief that the individual is regarded as *intrinsically* evil, that is, s/he sees

her/himself, rather than the acts s/he commits, as evil. By transference, the world also becomes a wasteland and an “irretrievably unethical” context (Pederson 2020b, 41).

Consequently, if one seeks to recognise MI in a literary character, anger and the use of hyperbole are to be part of her/his portrayal. Moreover, a lack of concern for her/his appearance and the feeling that her/his character is tainted should also be evinced. Social withdrawal and the impossibility of trusting others are other characteristic peculiarities, together with the tendency to overuse the pronoun “I.” Self-isolation is the result of overemphasising her/his own vision of reality. Eventually, the world at large is seen through a downcast light, as if it were a sublime locus which may cause “astonishment, stupor and awe” (Jameson in Hemling 2000, 77). In the same vein, in *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (2021), Ato Quayson considers the notion of “moral residue,” which he defines as

an agent’s experience of doubt, regret, remorse, guilt, or shame as generated from making an ethically significant choice. [...]. [T]he anxiety, doubt, hesitation, and self-interrogation which precedes a difficult moral decision is inevitably followed by guilt, remorse, and *more uncertainty after the fact*, such that the moment of choosing, the moment of action, is logical unease. (2021, 221; emphasis added)

Quayson points out striking similarities between moral residue and the Akan concept of *musuo*. This West African philosophical notion accounts for certain ethical infractions, whose translation could be likened to “harms of the soul” (10). This African social taboo is consequently as detrimental for the community as for the individual in question. This particular instance of social betrayal could also be regarded as the “killing of one’s soul” (10) and “may cause the affected individual to suffer a loss of faith in society that may, consequently, also affect their capacity for making ethically informed choices” (10). Quayson observes a close relation between *musuo* and the Aristotelian tragedy reversal of fortune —*eudaimonia*— that the moral injury unmistakably echoes. “The effect of *musuo* on interpersonal relations,” he contends, “is to impair faith in the affected person’s own sense of judgement in that they become afflicted by strong feelings of guilt, confusion, deep sorrow, and may seriously begin to doubt their own capacity for doing good or for living a meaningful life (and even opening up the possibility of suicide) as they move forward” (11). The Ghanaian critic is particularly drawn to the concept of *musuo* because, he claims, the existential collective responsibility is thus

reinstated in what is otherwise a solipsistic “focus on individual agency” (12). He emphasises the “fluid and interacting contours of the two” (12). Simply stated, not only is the group affected by the individual soul’s wound, but the group itself could be the cause of the killing of a person’s soul. Such is the case of Desire, who was confronted with a threatening circumstance at a very early age, a difficult situation posed by someone at home and by the social structure at large —as the story of Prof also lays bare. She was thus forced to take a drastic choice which has since then tainted her sense of self. A stimulating idea underscores the argumentations so far discussed. Straddling theoretical backgrounds and artistic manifestations throughout time and geographies, there seems to be a contemporary evident move towards communal sources of distress on the one hand, and plural sources of soothing and repair on the other.

As will be shown, Desire could be said to suffer from MI —or *musuo* moral residue. The young woman is not depicted as an angry character, but rather as someone who persistently suffers from insomnia and shame. As Pederson proposes, “[m]oral injury can be analysed in the light of long-standing discussions on emotions such as guilt and shame” (2020b, 16). Shame in particular becomes a personal debasement attribution that Desire perceives to have herself. Although her outbursts of anger are rare, except when she is involved in gender discussions with Prof, she is often heard articulating these exaggerated feelings when listening to a neighbour couple having marital arguments: “When they first started to live in the neighbourhood, Desire once told Remilekun that she feared she might break down their door and kill them because of what they made her remember, her parents” (Verissimo 2019a, 147). Growing tension mirrors the female protagonist’s mounting stress at the possible disclosure of having killed her father. So much so that a similar scene is reproduced between Remilekun and Desire, which suggests a striking replication of her mother holding her and stroking her hair on that fateful night. The same drowsy atmosphere and hazy awareness is echoed. After telling Remilekun how her mother was beaten by her father and the allegedly proud woman later killed her father —she is evidently lying— Desire concludes: “I never want to be married. I have the fear that I will kill my husband or maybe my child” (226). Half tongue-in-cheek she remarks that the blood of a killer is inside her. During the same night, Remilekun repeatedly expresses her anxiety at seeing her friend in a strange mood. Desire is sweating and her friend’s voice sounds to her “as if it was from the end of a tunnel” (218). “Daytime feels like night,” she says. To what Remilekun snaps, “Night-not! Turn here and look at

me. See, I can't live in the same room with a mad woman-o. What's wrong with you? I have the feeling you will wake up one day and bite my ears off" (219).

As a matter of fact, this night becomes a turning point in Desire's life. Her opportunity to tell her secret will probably never come as the novel ends and no articulation has been possible. The narrator observes that Desire and Remilekun's relation was falling apart: "it was as if something unsaid wished to crack the state of intimacy and mutual respect that always existed between them" (219). "*She wouldn't understand the lights,*" Desire weirdly ruminates (219). And she goes on to explain, "'I don't know what it is. I feel empty. I loved going there [to Prof's house] and then I just don't know what happened. I feel very empty'" (219). Desire evidently feels alienated and isolated. "Her heartbeat increased as a story came to the tip of her tongue and she wondered if what she was about to reveal would make Remilekun behave differently towards her. Her lips were weighty" (220). Predictably, her lips did not utter any truth. From that moment on, shallowness floods not only Desire's self-regard, but also the world at large. As if she were perceiving her flat room for the first time, the narrator reveals:

She walked to her bed and sank into it, observing everything around her but finding nothing tangible to hold her focus. Her eyes panned the piles of unwashed pots, dishes, dirty clothes, and the piles of books mounted in their different spaces, forming little hills. Finally, she rested her gaze on crumpled pieces of paper on the floor, around the waste basket. Desire wondered why she never noticed that the room needed some tidying. (229)

Likewise, the streets seem either especially filthy or devoid of life. "Although people walked around, she still felt as if the place was empty. Even the air seemed languid," and she describes the passers-by revealing, to her mind, a defeated countenance (229). The word "empty" reverberates. The descriptions of the neighbourhood, which had been previously plagued with smells, dirt and noise, are gradually populated by either crestfallen or utterly mad people: a nude man in the street and policemen abusing a citizen.

Desire's gradual isolation from her friend becomes apparent, as well as her incapacity to find an interlocutor with whom she could liberate her injury. Not even Prof is a meaningful listener for her by the end of the narration. "There was a time Desire could keep her thoughts in her head, unbothered about wanting to speak to anyone," the narrator observes. She thinks about Remilekun, Basira, Prof or Irete as people who could understand her

predicament. However, she eventually “pushed the thought from her mind and walked into the street, although people were around her, she was oblivious to them” (166). Desire’s final isolation is explicitly conveyed when she convinces herself that Prof has to be erased from her life. As she concludes, “Prof was now just a part of her imagination” (228).

Not only did Desire endure her father’s murder but, during a long time, she also witnessed and undergone her father’s beatings on her mother. The nine-year-old girl is portrayed as watching “it all from a corner of the house, her hand in her mouth to choke the cries that wanted to come out. Over time, she had practised stuffing her mouth with a handkerchief (150). The attitude of the neighbours is one of guilty detachment, since she “already knew the landlord would not come to rescue her mother. Some of the tenants rushed about, seemingly more busily, to start their day. Not one stopped or offered to stop the beating because they were used to seeing this happen” (150). Hence, moral injury —and its extended aftermath pathos— seems to be present in *A Small Silence* at several levels. To start with, Desire is a silent witness of domestic abuse. Initially, she is morally injured for not being able to help her mother. Quite tellingly, when she *does* act, she is a victim/victimiser: she decides to save her mother and exercise her right of self-defence. This decision, however, has inflicted a moral pain —or soul killing— she cannot tell even Prof. In addition, the violence Babangida inflicted upon them was not counteracted by any of the people around the mother and child. To cap it all, structural and social violence are rife. As has been aforementioned, Eze’s argumentation in favour of a desired return to the African notion of collective balance and harmony —*ubuntu*— is in the novel, therefore, violated. The individual soul is left wandering for healing in a tragic Shakespearean fashion, as much as the community is in want of mutual recognition and a more humane sustenance.

#### **4.5. Patriarchy and Women’s Bodies**

Another clear critical stance the novel shows against patriarchy is related to the treatment of some women characters’ bodies as a locus of sexist manifestations and, literally, scars. If there is a number of resolute and hardboiled women, there are some others who are passive victims of the depicted Nigerian paternalistic environment. Remilekun, Basira and Desire’s mother are examples of this. Basira is one of the childhood friends Desire had, together with Kemi, Sikira, Funmi and Chioma. All of them are *waka*, or walked away, as Basira explains. She is portrayed as a half-illiterate though fulfilled mother. Basira has

recently had a miscarriage and is thinking of having more children to keep her husband by her side. She confesses to Desire:

“Anyway, to have baby you fuck, you lose baby you fuck,” Basira laughed.

“Pray for me, or anything you know how to do. I am starting to think I should have more children. Maybe four or five children in a house are good. I want plenty.”

“Take it easy. I thought we agreed you won’t have more babies.”

“I have to do baby more-o. How person will hold man down?” (176)

Basira was a mother at fifteen. Desire’s memories roam towards their pubescent bodily and sex discoveries through the precocious size of Basira’s breasts. Some humorous anecdotes are foregrounded, such as Basira’s advice of putting an insect to bite her breasts so that they could grow. Their main concerns had been with boys and family planning. Desire, the intellectual in the group, taught them what she could learn about contraception in the library books. Desire asks Basira about the lives of Kemi, Sikira, Funmi and Chioma: Kemi ended up being a sex worker, Sikira died, Funmi is a thug and Chioma a traveller. Their lives are somehow contrasted with Desire’s. She could have been any of them were it not for Prof’s fatherly infused love for books —and Mama T’s payment of her university fees.

Unexpectedly, Basira’s place and the market stalls in the open air do not underline the poverty porn of other contexts in Lagos. Even Basira’s house is described as poor but bearing a cosy family atmosphere. Basira seems to be happy with her simple life. She has a good husband —a car mechanic— she is proud of and has a project for improving her job in the market. Their communication is sometimes hindered by Basira’s insistence on speaking broken English instead of the more comfortable Yoruba they can both understand. Her use of English seems to stress her dignity or pride, in contrast with her childhood friend, who appears to have been more successful in life.

The same situation is experienced by Remilekun, who has had several abortions in order to keep her many boyfriends by her side. Desire’s flatmate is the only child of Mama T and one of the many children from a polygynous and absent father. Her life seems to have been much influenced by the sex possibilities she has —or their absence. Remilekun was the one who insisted on living in Abesan —even though she was a rich girl— because she was in love with a boy living in the neighbourhood. Remilekun’s relationships with men seem to show her strong dependence on them, her wish to have a family and the

objectified connection she seems to establish with her usually short lived flings. Sex seems to be quite connected to men's pleasure whereas abortions, in contrast, are solely a woman's circumstance. Desire has accompanied Remilekun to several clandestine abortion interventions. Although Remilekun wanted to keep the baby of her last pregnancy, she eventually decided against it, since having a baby without a father was ruled out for her. "Desire said nothing to her. She knew that if the baby was Mr. America's, then it was never going to have a father" (177). When Desire asked her friend why she got pregnant again, Remilekun answered:

"I thought he would ask me to marry him this time."

"Remilekun, we've been on this road before! What do you see in that guy?"

"What do you see in the madman you go to see every night?" Her voice was strong, yet Desire knew that the response was just a defence mechanism. (178)

The details of Remilekun's abortion are thoroughly described, together with the clinic's insanitary conditions and the risks to which Remilekun is exposed every time she terminates her pregnancies. The double moral of the situation is evident, as shown: in the nurses hinting that the place is a non-abortion site; in the doctor and nurse injecting Remilekun some sort of somnific she had duly rejected beforehand; in the exceptionality of the situation; in the lies involved in their identity; and in the high amount of money expected for the medical intervention.

Desire's mother —also called Mama Undee— is undoubtedly the most extreme case of male abuse. She had been a prostitute before marrying Babangida, a policeman who is always described as drowsy on marijuana and gin. He beats his wife on a regular basis because he suspects Desire is not his daughter. He always blames his failures on his wife as "a bringer of bad luck and lack of promotion at work" (150). Mama Undee never gave up hope on her husband loving her again. She always expected him to change his mind. "A man can know the right thing but own a wrong mind. A man's mind is formed by the people around him. The wrong set of people is equal to a wrong mind. Knowledge is not enough to do the right thing. The right people is equal to a right mind," she said about her husband (122). Once Babangida is killed, Mama Undee appears to have gained some pride, which eventually turns into insanity. She ends up talking to her own shadow: "Whenever she was alone in the room, she watched her converse with her shadow. 'You have not treated me well at all—at all. Is this the life I asked for? Sometimes Desire's mother screamed at the shadow. She moved from one side to another like one moving



to a song, before breaking into a loud wail, panting” (36). Desire was compelled to take care of her mother, thus performing the role of an adult at a premature age. Due to this circumstance, her memory of Prof is idealised and probably a projection of her absent parents. She had always wished that her mother would defy her father and fight him back. She secretly admired a neighbour who could confront her husband on her own terms:

The difference between Bolaji’s family and hers was that her father beat her mother. He beat her anytime he returned home drunk. Her own mother waited to be beaten. Desire’s mother was nothing like Bolaji’s mother, whose screams alerted the neighbours that they were about to fight. Once Desire heard, “I am battle-ready for you today. I am a woman! I am a woman and I can stand on my own.” (147)

Desire is decidedly a victim who has been confronted with a heart-breaking choice: to kill her abusive progenitor. A child who, undergoing repeated violence —physical and psychological— from an addict and loveless father, chose dignity for her mother and herself. This drastic decision becomes her intimate and constant source of unrest. She chronically suffers from insomnia, and her mind shows signs of instability when her past actions are near disclosure. Two questions linger: could Desire have an option other than killing her father? Could she have been spared the suffering that haunted her afterwards?

Similar questions have been posed by Egyptian-American activist Mona Eltahawy and the American legal theorist Mary Anne Franks. They claim that women’s bodies are all too often deemed as *an asset* or a masculine *target*. Both feminist activists have proposed the extremely polemical term of “optimal violence” (Franks 2016, Eltahawy 2021). I will briefly bring their considerations to the fore since I believe they are pertinent to shed some light on Desire’s decision and further ethical injury. I definitely do not adhere to the dynamics such proposal may escalate into. I believe the ideal of *ubuntu* could only be achieved through dialogue and peaceful step-by-step agreements stemming from active resistance and collaboration. This being said, it is also true that analysing the contentions of the aforementioned feminist activists can be of use in this matter. In an extremely angered voice, Eltahawy wonders: “Why can’t a Black woman —or any woman— act out of revenge and anger? How else is she supposed to react to abuse and violence?” (2021, 173). The same reasoning is behind Frank’s postulation. According to common law, she examines, “a person can use deadly force in self-defense only when it is

*necessary, proportionate, and the danger is imminent*” (2016, 951; emphasis added). Moreover, she observes that many women suffer from men who are usually the members of their own family, that the state tends to “strongly restrict women’s responsive violence,” and that the law and social norms are bound to “discourage female victims in particular from using violence to defend themselves” (932). Furthermore, Franks sustains that, when confronted with domestic violence, women usually have two choices: either they “rely on the State to protect them, or engage in self-help” (946). The state, she reasons, is quite likely to avoid intervention on their behalf to end domestic violence (let us not forget that Frank is referring to legal cases in the American context). “This lack of response can range from failure to enforce protective orders, to make arrests or lenient sentences for domestic abuse, thus failing to provide either deterrence or protection,” Frank maintains. However, she goes on to argue, “[w]hen a battered woman, often precisely because of this lack of response, resorts to the option of self-help, the State frequently metes out harsh punishment” (946). As a result, she comes up with a much debatable proposal: counterbalancing violence with what she labels as “optimal violence” (958). In other words, patriarchal abuse —and violence in general— could, according to her, be reduced if women resorted to “responsive violence” on a regular basis, much in the same way as men have been socialised to do. She declares that

[t]o move the use of violence between men and women closer to optimal level, women must increase their willingness and ability to use violence against men. The goal here is not only justice, but social efficiency: the more responsive, justified violence women use against men, the less unjustified violence men will use against women. In some respects, this proposition should be non-controversial; women should be able to enjoy the same robust right to self-defense as men, encouraged and protected when they use proportional force in response to credible threats. (958).

Upbringing and socialisation have trained us, women, to reject such proposals. The very existence of the state is founded on a relation of men dominating men —and women, language bias aside. As Max Weber writes (and questions), “[I]f the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be. When and why do men obey? Upon what inner justifications and upon what external means does this domination rest?” (Weber in Franks, 968). A question remains: is Desire’s situation lawfully enabling? Provided she *could* have the right to retaliate against her father in order to save her mother — and her own life— who could have saved her from the ethical quandary she was compelled to face?

In a tongue-in-cheek fashion, the narrator of *A Small Silence* cannot avoid showing some admiration towards Bolaji's mother. Desire is overhearing a conversation of some boys in her neighbourhood:

"Yes now, men are stronger than women," the boy who started the conversation said.

"Who told you that? I don't even know who is stronger in my daddy and my mummy. My daddy can beat, but my mother would beat you so much you won't talk for many days. Let me show you how she punches my father in the eyes." He stopped to demonstrate the punch by wheeling his right-hand several times before he continued.

The other two boys laughed. Desire fiddled with the door but tried not to interrupt their conversation. Bolaji continued, "My mummy would then give him blow in his eyes so that it can swell up like watermelon."

"It is a lie *joor!* Your daddy told my mummy he was in a car accident when she asked him about his swollen eyes." (145-6)

It is by no means my contention that gender inequities should be solved by punching first or harder. It seems at this point necessary, however, to discern what options a woman—or a nine-year-old girl such as Desire for that matter—may have when the enemy is one of those you are supposed to trust. What options has a girl whose relatives, together with the system at large, most of the time choose to ignore her suffering? Is this not violence already? Is it not the Christian attitude of offering the other cheek, as it were, a naïve notion? In contrast to this, Desire chooses to restore her mother's dignity, no matter the price she has to pay: her mother's mental sanity, and probably hers, too. I strongly believe that fictions like *A Small Silence* bring these debatable issues to the fore and oblige readers, not only to revolve in anger, but also to think this over and favour narratives that offer alternative solutions.

Desire's mother's insanity compelled her to work for Iya Mufu—a *tuwo* (rice pudding balls) and *gbegiri* soup (bean soup) street seller—washing dishes. After that, she worked for Mama T, who eventually proposed her to pay her university fees in exchange for small favours. Are Iya Mufu and Mama T the *ubuntu* sisterly hands that allowed her to stand tall? Or was it her own instinct for survival and adamant life drive? At the end of chapter Twenty-three, when she apparently recognises Prof in the street, she cannot stand the look of "shame and confusion" in his eyes. In all likelihood, because she cannot bear more shame and confusion in hers any longer. That may be the reason why she

decides to start afresh, to re-write her narrative, although carrying a secret inside. Undeniably, she has learned to survive in a cruel environment; Desire's adamant will to give herself a second chance can by no means be denied.

#### **4.6. Humour: A Spark of Nostalgia and Revealing Dialogue**

The crisscrossing stories of Prof and Desire are not always about wrenching memories. Once again the portrayal of female characters is peppered with some benign and sometimes nostalgic humour. Especially facetious are the scenes in which the reader encounters Basira and her obstinate use of broken English and the haughty disposition of Mama T, who is heard through her heavy Yoruba accent and pragmatic outlook on life. Especially amusing sound Remilekun's remarks on how reality unfolds in her view. For her, life consists in having sex and warning Desire about the pernicious effects of not having it. The occasional recourse to humour somehow relieves traumatic memories and further nuances the already prominent female portrayals.

The encounter of Desire with Basira triggers spicy dialogues and warm recollections in the main protagonist. Desire is lost in her reveries of a poor though simple and unpretentious life with her five childhood friends: Basira, Chioma, Sikira, Kemi and Funmi. Desire ruminates:

Like all the girls there, their first admiration for boys fell on the teen bus conductors, who had been hand-picked as 'forward-looking,' for renting half-lit one-room flats, as opposed to sleeping under the bridge drinking *paraga* or building their own shack on the beach. The boys with their own rooms invited teen girls to watch Indian and Yoruba films on video players, and perhaps, even enjoy meat pie and soft drink, usually Coca-Cola or Goldspot from an eat-out restaurant. Love, if that was what happened to them, seemed simple in those years. It was all about springing a breast, finding a boy who played films in the one-room flats and figuring out sex there if you were being pruned for wifehood; and if you weren't, it was many days of sprightly fondling lemon-sized breasts behind make-shift stalls and on danfo buses. (132).

As was mentioned previously, Basira's big breasts were the cause of Desire's early research on biology and reproduction risks. Thus, she was the five girls' appointed lecturer in charge of enlightening them against undesired pregnancies. Basira, in turn, was to apprise the group on the correct use of bras and some popular advice on how to make their breasts double-sized. Basira instructed them on wearing fitted T-shirts "which would increase attention from

boys” (132). As it happened, some of them “would even touch them and run off” (192). The right use of bras was Basira’s specialty; she warned her friends about the dangers of their breasts falling off and becoming “slippers like grandmama’s own” (192). Basira’s admiration for Desire is evident when she remembers that her friend had always been an intellectual. ““You still carry books. I am no surprised at all to see you here [at university]. You like book since we are a child. You like to read in that err—pubic library,’ Basira said, patting Desire’s face again and again, like she needed to assure herself she was not hallucinating” (134).

In a similar facetious tone, Mama T’s Yoruba cadency contrasts with her booming voice and domineering gravity. Desire is secretly amused by her former boss’ inability to produce the sound “r.” When she finds Desire reading at work, she exclaims:

“Me, I’m an *akilapa*—sturdy and stwong hands like iron. *So gbo?*”

Desire hurried to meet the others. She dropped her book on one of the bags of sachet milk as she did. Mama T picked it up and studied the cover. “War and Peace? What kind of book is this? Leo Toy-toy? What kind of name is this?” She held Desire in a long stare before saying, “Come for your big book with the stwange name when you finish your work-o. *So gbo?* Who goes around reading this kind of big book inside the market?” Mama T shook her head and paddled her heavy buttocks to her seat. (42-43)

In the same vein, Remilekun, Mama T’s daughter, appears to have very clear ideas. She repeatedly scolds Desire for her reluctance to have sex, which for her is the solution to every human problem. She can barely understand why Desire is visiting a single man in his house—in the dark—and they have not had sexual intercourse yet. By the same token, she cannot understand the peculiar relation they have forged. “See, if you people want to fuck, just do it. No need for all this darkroom preparations,” she plainly suggests. However, she concedes that darkness can be of use: ““Okay, okay. Some people like sex in the dark though,’ she laughed, ‘Oh, please, take candles the next time and pretend it’s romantic”” (73). When Desire is trying to explain to her friend her decision to stop visiting Prof in the darkness, Remilekun snaps, ““Are you trying to say, would you guys have fucked?”” (201). To what Desire intends to reason, ““Can you try to think straight for once? Life between a man and a woman is not all about physical attraction,’ she said” (202). Remilekun is by no means a philosophical listener: ““Hear yourself,’ Remilekun said and then took a turn to mimic her, animating her words in a funny voice, ‘A search for the soul! What

is that?” (202). Once again, when Desire tells her flatmate she is not seeing Irete any longer, she predictably asks, ““Okay. No vex. At least you can answer this one: who is *yanshing* you now?’ ‘Re-mi. Pleaseee!’ ‘Why don’t you ever want to talk about sex?’” she pleads, probably asking a genuinely important question (218). On another occasion, Desire is telling her about her distrust of Nigerian policemen, and Remilekun sentences: ““Who cares? A bad man is a bad man. A bad man in a uniform is just a consistent badass man,’ drunken Remilekun had said, in a voice filled with laughter. ‘As long as they fuck, they can be fucked, and they respond to fucking, they must mean some-fucking-thing to somebody’” (128). These instances of childhood remembrance in the imperfect English of Basira, together with the uncomplicated vision of life conveyed by Mama T’s accent and Remilekun’s binary coitus/ceibacy mindset, contribute a more subtle delineation of the three characters in question, while adding a tinge of tenderness and amusement to the narrative.

These times are particularly uncertain. Chaos looms large when the future is imagined. Literature seems to be, once again, a site of contestation and hope. Can darkness and isolation mean something positive? Can silence eventually connect us with our intimate fears, ghosts and contingent existences? *A Small Silence* answers these questions. Darkness and silence are introduced so as to question their long-standing negative western history of irrationality and ignorance, and are subsequently turned into their obverse. Darkness and silence eventually provide the fictional characters with a space of homeliness in which vivid remembrances can finally be faced eye-to-eye. As the novel seems to convey, memories, both individual and historical, are written on the protagonists minds and bodies and on the collective conscience. They lay bare the coloniality of Nigerian disabilities and the scars of a country which is still trying to pose its own questions as regards a robbed past and a hijacked present. Verissimo’s novel is a lingering poem, an extended sensory experience in which mirroring stories—in a Borgesian style— speak to each other in parallel channels. Saviours and victims are difficult to discern here. *A Small Silence* is, above all, about grit and the possibility of change. It is also about the arduous process of denouncing the failure of human rights on the road to healing. It is about women who turn their disgrace into a path they can cope with, about men who are afraid of not being manly enough, and of ultimately forgetting their humanity in the process of boasting about manhood. Verissimo’s novel delves into Lagos and Nigeria, and certainly offers a humane connection which moves and rocks at the same time. Its evocative ending is an invitation to let both imagination and experience on the loose, just as Prof walks down the streets

considering “going home to lift the curtains of his house, so that the lame lights of the moon could walk in” (242).

One cannot but attempt an imaginary exercise and conjure up a fictive encounter between Desire, Ayoola and Korede. Dialogue and the fictional undertones of the sisters created by Braithwaite seem to be very much in-synch with Verissimo’s female protagonist. A community of women who want to be freed from psychological and physical pain. Indeed, one cannot avoid but wonder what Korede could teach Desire to do, were they given the chance to interact. Transpiring chutzpah, Ayoola could gingerly apprise Desire with a piece of her experienced mind. As will be seen in the next chapter on Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater*, Asughara could in turn offer these three fictional minds her own version on how to deal with their bodies. This sisterly community would most predictably sympathise and see eye to eye on a number of issues since they all share patriarchal scars. Another fact is plainly certain: they have chosen not to be victims of their circumstances.





## PRECOLONIAL IGBO VOICES IN AKWAEKE EMEZI'S *FRESHWATER* (2018A): A PALIMPSESTIC BRIDGE TOWARDS "HOME"

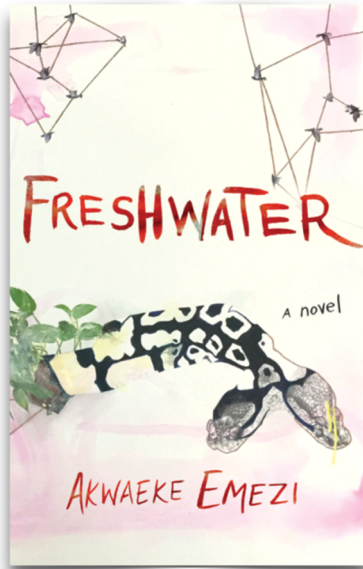
Mgbe ihe guzoro, ihe ozo guzoro n'akuku ya  
"When something stands, something else stands beside it"  
Igbo Proverb

The quiet and yet unsettling prose of Verissimo turns into an equally daunting whirlpool of spiritual and ontological vision in Akweake Emezi's fictive universe. An Igbo-Tamil writer born in Umuahia and raised in Aba (Nigeria) while currently living in New York, Akweake Emezi defines herself as an "artist based in liminal spaces" (2018j, *granta.com*) and prefers the pronoun "they" to be addressed to. Even though Emezi claims that pronouns are not a particularly significant reference issue, the writer accepts she could shift from "he" to "she." However, "they," the author believes, is a pronoun that has the flexibility of being "neither male nor female, neither plural nor singular" and seems to more accurately mirror her present self-definition (Waldman 2018).

Henceforward, in order to avoid misunderstandings with readers, and out of respect for the author's non-binary gender choice, whenever I refer to Emezi, I will use both pronouns "they" and "she" and verb concord/agreement with the third person singular pronoun. The artist also describes themselves/herself as loosely "Nigerian," "Black," "trans," and "non-binary" though they/she seems rather reluctant to be pigeonholed into such clear-cut categories. They/she expresses their/her art through auto-fiction, experimental shorts and video art. They/she has authored many short stories, mostly published in online magazines, and another novel: a fiction for young adults, *Pet* (2019a). *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir* (Diversified Publishing 2021b) is an autobiography. Their/her oncoming publications are a poetry collection, *Content Warning: Everything*, and a romance fiction, *You Made a Fool of Death with your Beauty* (Atria Books), to be released in 2022 (Emezi 2021a, *Twitter*).

*Freshwater* (2018a) is Akweake Emezi's first novel, a rocketing success which is in the first stages of a TV series produced by FX Networks. This debut fiction has mostly had rave reviews in western literary milieus, and less so in African ones. It has been defined as an "indigenous fairy tale" (Waldman 2018), as "[p]oetic and disturbing" (Mzezewa 2018), "layered and dark and complicated" (Bryant 2018), as "the long and arduous journey to claiming our

many selves, or to setting our many selves free” (Okparanta 2018), as a “brutal work of truth-telling, [...] a fucking (sic) masterpiece” (Older 2018), as a “catharsis,” a work “against originality” (Adeosun 2018), and as “curious and frustrating in equal measure” as “a butterfly-net” (Mbao 2018). *Freshwater* is part of Emezi’s ongoing project called *The Unblinding*, which has been referred to as a “multi-year, multidisciplinary series of self-portraits” including paintings and videos. The author’s main aim is to show their/her self-progression from “awareness to clarity” as an Igbo demigod called *ogbanje* (Emezi 2018e). In Nigerian Igbo cosmology, an *ogbanje* —also referred to as *abiku* in Nigerian Yoruba ontology— is a trickster godling who constantly straddles the realms of spirit and flesh, life and death, being half human and half numen. His/her somehow malevolent and mischievous nature is predestined to be born in order to die again in a never-ending loop of woe inflicted upon the human mother and family. This deity is also a carrier of multiple consciousnesses whose precocity and imagination appear to be beyond those of ordinary humans (Ogunyemi 1996). Quite tellingly, *Freshwater*’s introductory epigraph reads “For those of us/with one foot/on the other side.” According to Emezi, the title of the book comes from an Igbo proverb: “All freshwater comes out of the mouth of a python,” which is a way of saying that life flows from Igbo/Yoruba Ala/Ani — the goddess of earth and fertility— represented by the python (Emezi 2018a). *Freshwater*’s book cover (in the edition by Grove Press 2018a) shows a watercolour designed by artist Ruby Oyinyechi Amanze depicting a two-headed python. One of the heads seems to be either bleeding a yellowish ooze or in the process of skin shedding. The reptile is emerging from a wormhole located in the bush into a multi-dimensional vacuum space (see fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Grove Press book jacket by artist Ruby Oyinyechi Amanze (2018a).

Many Nigerian writers have already tackled the trope of *ogbanje*; from Amos Tutuola in *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (2014), Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1994), Wole Soyinka in *Abiku* (2016) and *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a), J. P. Clark in *Abiku* (1988), Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* (1991), to more recent fictions such as Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2006) or Ayobámi Adébáyọ’s *Stay with Me* (2017), to name but the most well-known. The novel’s plot is about the tortuous life of Ada, a Nigerian girl born as an *ogbanje* also mothered by the python deity Ala. Her process of growing up and transition from innocence to the realisation of this circumstance unfolds as a *bildungsroman* mostly tainted by suffering and a spiritual quest. Ada is abandoned by her human mother Saachi—who leaves Nigeria and her family behind for a job in Saudi Arabia. Hence, the lonely Ada grows up yearning for love while developing an increasing attachment to some mystical companions who embody her and constantly speak in the “marble room” of her mind (Emezi 2018a, 122). During her lonely childhood, Ada has to endure her eldest brother Chima’s harsh discipline logic and the sexual advances of two male neighbours. By this time, Ada discovers that she feels uncomfortable with her body changes during puberty and longs for a time when she could be regarded either as a boy or girl. Through the voices of the *ogbanje* ‘brothersisters,’ the reader witnesses

the protagonist’s emigration to America to finish up her studies at college and her traumatic involvement with Soren —who ends up raping her. A rather idyllic relationship with an Irish student —Ewan— lands up in a disappointing marriage and a subsequent divorce. Ada’s liminal demigod condition is understood only by few people; henceforth, after showing signs of self-inflicted body harm, anorexia and depression, she attempts to commit suicide with the assistance of one of her inner companions, Asughara. Ada’s gender uneasiness results in a surgery to reduce her breasts and enhance love involvements with women. Eventually, she meets a Nigerian Yoruba priest —Leshi— who helps her to understand her true hybrid condition and reach a deeper understanding of herself. Among the voices which recount Ada’s quandary, the reader is provided with the shifting ogbanje demigods’ perspectives. Thus, one is faced with a somehow neutral “we” —in Chapters One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Eight, Eleven, Seventeen, Eighteen, Twenty and Twenty-One— and with the presumably unreliable point of view of an ambiguous and lust-driven Asughara —in Chapters Six, Seven, Ten, Twelve, Thirteen, Fourteen and Sixteen. Ada’s narration is scantily found —in Chapters Nine, Fifteen, Nineteen and Twenty-Two. Ada’s story proves to be a highly fragmented account which mainly seeks to mimic orality with direct intimations to the reader. For a detailed chronology of the plot mainly based on Ada’s life, see figure 2.

Chronology of the Plot	
<b>Chapter One</b>	Saul and Saachi meet in London and get married. They move to Aba, Nigeria. Chima, Ada’s elder brother is born. After three years in Aba, the family moves to Umuahia where Saul works as a gynaecologist for Queen Elizabeth Hospital while Saachi is a nurse. They live in a house in the hospital’s quarters. Ada, the second child, is born. De Obinna, Saul’s brother, who is a devotee of <i>Uwummriri</i> , the Igbo goddess of water, chooses Ada’s name. Ada is baptised in a catholic church. When Ada is six months old, Saachi flies with her to Malaysia to visit her relatives. After that, Ada’s family moves to Aba. She is a difficult child, she screams and crawls like a serpent. Saul runs a small clinic on Ekenna Avenue, Number Seventeen. Añuli, Ada’s little sister is born.

<b>Chapter Two</b>	Saachi has anxiety fits. Saul does not offer her any help. Saachi gets support from other expatriate women to babysit Añuli and Ada. Chima goes to school. Saul distances from her wife and children. Ada gets a tetanus injection after Añuli hits her on Chima's instruction.
<b>Chapter One</b>	Ada finds a snake in the bathroom. She screams and Saul comes with a machete and kills the animal. Ada usually sneaks out of her parents' apartment to play with her neighbours. The family moves to another house —Number Three— in the same street.
<b>Chapter Two</b>	Ada goes to Umuawa, to her friend Lisa's house, for Christmas. She sees a Masquerade. The "we" narrators are born: First birth. Ada is a moody child, often losing her temper and having bouts of weeping.
<b>Chapter Three</b>	When Añuli is six, she has an accident. A pick-up hits her while she is trying to cross the street. When Ada is eight, Saachi travels to Malaysia with Añuli to have second medical opinions on her leg injure. While on the trip, Saachi gets an offer to work abroad in Saudi Arabia. Saul obtains a chieftaincy title. He spends much money on the ceremony. Saachi transfers some family money to London bank accounts. Eventually, Saachi leaves the family for the job in Saudi Arabia. She stays abroad for five years.
<b>Chapter Four</b>	Ada cries for her absent mother to come back and retreats into a world of her own. She reads a lot. Saachi returns to London for a short while. She comes down with depression.
<b>Chapter Three</b>	Saachi flies to Saudi Arabia again and works there for another five years.
<b>Chapter Twenty</b>	Ada is sexually molested by Chima's neighbour friend and the boy's father. Chima often beats Ada since she is his responsibility —Saul is at the hospital and Saachi overseas.

<b>Chapter Eleven</b>	When Ada is eleven, she discovers she is comfortable when being taken for a boy at the swimming pool. Ada starts having body changes during adolescence. She feels uncomfortable with her breasts and period. She wears her father's clothes. She cuts herself to placate her demigods discomfort with her body.
<b>Chapter Five</b>	Saachi plans the details of her children's future. Chima goes to Malaysia and Ada to the US —a little town in the Appalachian Mountains, in Virginia. Saachi stays with Ada for two weeks in America before going to see Chima in Malaysia.
<b>Chapter Four</b>	Ada is in America. She has no clear memory of her classmates. She cuts herself.
<b>Chapter Five</b>	When Ada is seventeen, she is still living in Virginia. First, she wants to make American friends, but she ends up socializing with people from different parts of the world. She meets Luka, a Serbian boy.
<b>Chapter Eight</b>	Ada meets Malena, her god-ridden Dominican friend.
<b>Chapter Five</b>	Ada is eighteen, she remembers meeting college friends at Gilligan's while drinking and dancing.
<b>Chapter Ten</b>	In Virginia, Ada meets Ewan. She's eighteen. Ewan goes home (Ireland) for a semester.
<b>Chapter Five</b>	Saachi and Añuli live in the US, but not with Ada.
<b>Chapter Four</b>	In Virginia, she meets Soren. One night a couple of runners come into the room where she has been sleeping with him. They are injured, Ada and her oġbanje hosts are marvelled at the sight of blood. The second birth occurs: Ada names her inner demigods Shade and Shadow.

<b>Chapter Five</b>	Ada is sexually abused by Soren. Asughara is born: Third birth.
<b>Chapter Eleven</b>	Saint Vincent is born with Asughara.
<b>Chapter Six</b>	Ada cuts her body as offerings to placate the inner oġbanje. Soren repeatedly rapes Ada. She has anorexia. She goes to Georgia for the summer. She stays at her friend Itohan’s house. She cuts her hair and shaves her eyebrows. She’s nineteen, she breaks up with Soren on the phone.
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	While in Georgia, Ada/Asughara sleeps with Itohan’s younger brother. Ada flies back to Virginia to finish her final year at university.
<b>Chapter Eleven</b>	Ada has her first approximation to a college girl friend she likes. Saint Vincent —whom the reader knows for the first time— is exerting his masculine influences on her.
<b>Chapter Ten</b>	Ada meets Ewan again, She is nineteen and he is twenty-seven. She starts drinking heavily.
<b>Chapter Eight</b>	Ada speaks with Malena. The Dominican friend tells her she has saved her from Soren through her religion rituals.
<b>Chapter Ten</b>	Ada hurts herself with a broken mirror. She has anti pregnancy hormones that made her bleed.
<b>Chapter Fourteen</b>	Ada and Ewan meet in Texas. She breaks up with him.
<b>Chapter Five</b>	When Ada is twenty, she is studying in Veterinary School.

<b>Chapter Ten</b>	Ada graduates at college. Saachi, Añuli and Chima come to visit her. Ada goes back to Georgia to Itohan's house. She tries to seduce Itohan's older brother. She cannot though. She sleeps with her younger brother again, instead.
<b>Chapter Fourteen</b>	Ada and Ewan meet again in Texas. Ewan has broken up with her girlfriend. They get engaged in Boston. Ewan's family organise their engagement party in Ireland. Saachi and Añuli fly to Ireland.
<b>Chapter Sixteen</b>	Ada reads the definition of rape on the Internet while in Ireland. Eventually, she realises what had happened with Soren.
<b>Chapter Fifteen</b>	Uche, Ada's gay cousin flies to Ireland with his partner.
<b>Chapter Fourteen</b>	Ada and Ewan get married in Manhattan and move to Brooklyn. They separate. Ewan quits school, leaving Saachi with a loan they had co-signed. He flees to Ireland.
<b>Chapter Thirteen</b>	Ada/Asughara date cruel men who are violent in bed. Ada tries to look for a psychiatric explanation to what is happening to her. She tries to distance herself from Asughara.
<b>Chapter Fourteen</b>	Ada goes to a psychologist. However, she does not tell her much about the inner voices.
<b>Chapter Sixteen</b>	Ada starts to wear a binder and dating women. She is in a psychiatric ward for a night. She dates Donyen. Uche visits her in the US. Uche dies in London. Ada has interesting new friends who can understand her god-ridden nature. She breaks up with Donyen and cuts herself with blades. She starts dating Hassan.
<b>Chapter Seventeen</b>	Ada starts looking for doctors who can operate and alter her body.



<b>Chapter Sixteen</b>	Ada/Asughara tries to commit suicide. She “sees” Uche’s corpse in her apartment. She fails to kill herself. She is in hospital. Hassan breaks up with her. She does not answer Saachi or Chima’s telephone calls.
<b>Chapter Seventeen</b>	Ada has occasional relations with many men. She travels to Lagos, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Five months after the failed suicide attempt, Ada has an operation to reduce her breasts. Malena accompanies her.
<b>Chapters Eighteen/ Nineteen</b>	Ada has casual sex with many men.
<b>Chapter Twenty</b>	Ada gets tattoos of her oḡbanje hosts in many parts of her body.
<b>Chapter Twenty-One</b>	Ada meets a Yoruba priest in Nigeria —Lẹshi— who teaches her to eventually accept and control her inner demigods.
<b>Chapter Twenty-Two</b>	Ada meets an Igbo historian who advises her to find her roots. She has a panic attack after that. Ada goes back to Umuahia, Nigeria.

**Figure 2.** This chart offers a chronological sequence of the main events of the plot based on Ada’s life. Although there is a progressive unfolding of the storyline, the fragmentation in the narrative is shown by the discontinuous chapters.

In the following section, I will start by contextualising *Freshwater* within the current literary tendencies. The Meta-modern/Trans-modern axis<sup>8</sup> deployed by Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, Rosa María Rodríguez Magda and Enrique Dussel, respectively, will be offered as the

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<sup>8</sup> Meta-modernism and Trans-modernism are contemporary labels used to signal a paradigm departure from the Postmodernist *zeitgeist*.

theoretical context the novel seems to be in line with. I will also define the concepts of narratives of the limit and pluriversal dialogue with a view to expanding on these notions subsequently in the present chapter. In addition, Harry Garuba's notion of "re-enchantment of the world" will be introduced to argue for the need of a historical-cultural paradigm of change in the African context. Another significant aspect to consider is the categorisation of Emezi's debut fiction as a hybrid instance of auto-fiction sharing some traits of animistic realism. At the end of this section, I will briefly consider why *Freshwater* depicts some aesthetic tropes which challenge certain western stereotypes of Africa while, to all intents and purposes, the novel is likely to remain predictably categorised as an exotic African fiction by a western readership.

### **1. NARRATIVES OF THE LIMIT AND LITERARY RE-ENCHANTMENT: AESTHETICS AND ETHICS RE-WRITINGS**

*Freshwater* seems to share many contemporary fiction traits in tune with the so-called meta-modernist/trans-modernist literary shift from Postmodernism. Alison Gibbons hypothesises that several global historical and socio-economic events have led to the death of Postmodernism—or, at least, to its increasing coalescence with a paradigm change she calls Meta-modernism. For the English intellectual, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing wars on terror and in the Middle East, together with the global subprime financial crisis have determined the global sense of failure of the capitalist system. The planetary dismal distribution of resources has resulted in an ongoing sense of disillusionment with the neoliberal project. The increasing migration of entire populations has, in turn, marshaled the strengthening of state borders and the emergence of a fracture between extreme Left and extreme Right, while a befuddled Left has conspicuously receded from the political sphere, given the prominent populist promises of jingoist and racist state isolationism. Only to render our future and present day reality even more precarious, the global pandemic of Covid-19 we are immersed in has timely reminded the world population of the ever contingent existence of human life on the planet. "The cumulative effect of these events," Gibbons argues, "and the accompanying hyper-anxiety brought about by twenty-four hour news— has made the western world feel like a more precarious and volatile place, in which we can no longer be nonchalant about our safety or our future" (2017, 5).

Gibbons, Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) theorise on the current literary return to the mode of realism in an attempt "to reconnect fiction to

social reality” (Gibbons 2015). Realism is also evinced in the emergence of original biographical genres such as auto-fiction. A new focus on emotions and the connectedness of human experience seems in vogue, together with the advent of a new humanist and communal ethics, which can account for the precariousness of life on the planet. “Meta-modernism,” Moraru asserts, is “best understood as a primarily formal (stylistic-generic) and secondarily thematic-philosophical model” (2013, 4). Contemporary literature appears to focus on some conflicting issues, such as the transient consideration of space and time in a world that grows increasingly hybrid and borderless, and literary fictions frequently tackle the effects of neocolonialism, globalism, localisms, post-nationalisms and non-western world-views. Accordingly, Emezi’s novel testifies to a revival of mythical and spiritual awareness without resorting to escapist tendencies. Instead, they/she seeks to inscribe their/her account in the realm of the real, that is, within the new realism of auto-fiction. This novel’s narrativisation of the self is not meant to be a postmodern game of metanarratives, but rather a way towards enhancing the realism of the text and dealing with the “phenomenological dimensions of personal life” (Gibbons 2017, 8).

When it comes to considering the novel’s postcolonial stance, *Freshwater* could also be enlisted within the boundaries of what Rodríguez Magda has termed as *narratives of fracture* or *narratives of the limit*, that is, those fictions whose undertakings are related to the recovery of repressed, excluded or erased precolonial knowledge and traditions (2017). These new emerging narratives, Enrique Dussel proposes, are engaged in a pluriversal dialogue of trans-modern liberation.<sup>9</sup> The Latin-American philosopher contends that such a project of cultural synthesis is paramount for this globalised global context. This process involves a manyfold movement. First, self-affirmation and self-valorisation of one own’s debauched cultural identity. Secondly, a critique from within the cultural system. Thirdly, the proposal of a bi-cultural project of thought understood as the blend project of the borders, that is, a dialectic proposal which encompasses (post-)modernity and precolonial (or pre-modern) narratives. Finally, a period of resistance and “accumulation of forces” which should be regarded as a path towards a transmodern utopia (2012, 49). This emerging renewed culture would not merely be a decolonised project, but an entirely new discourse. The original negotiation required is neither modern nor post-modern.

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<sup>9</sup> A similar view has been purported by the philosopher Walter D. Mignolo. See “Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto (1)” (2011).

It is transmodern since it departs from the “borderlands” of modernity. It is, in Dussel’s words, “the positivity rooted in a tradition distinct from the Modern” (50). Simply put, pluriversal dialogue involves the integration of all the elements of modernity that entail technological growth, together with the affirmation of cultural alterity from postcolonial peoples and communities. In this respect, *Freshwater* is clearly a narrative involved in such cultural dialectic. Igbo ontology is inextricably knit with scientific, religious and socio-cultural long-established western tenets.

Very much in tune with Dussel’s cultural dialogue is the notion of “re-enchantment of the world” introduced by Harry Garuba. The South African critic has contextualised the necessity of a similar cultural synthesis in the African context in particular. He explained that tropes of crisis and failure have been a constant as far as African “failed states” are concerned. “Since social and political behaviour in these societies,” he reasoned, “cannot be explained by the Weberian criterion of ‘rationalization,’ it follows that they have failed the test of modernization” (2003, 281). Thinking beyond the paradigm of European referents, he proposed that a different prospect of rationalisation could emerge. Garuba examined Weber’s use of the expression “disenchantment of the world” to account for a tendency which involved the displacement of magical elements of thought in the establishment and organisation of social systems in favour of a “systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency” of reason (Weber in Gerth and Wright Mills 1991, 51). By contrast, Garuba agreed with Dipesh Chakrabarty when the Bengali historian asserted that the challenge of the contemporary historical and cultural narratives is to devise “a rationally defensible principle in terms of modern public life that accounts for that other [subaltern narrative] principle not based on a ‘disenchantment of the world’” (1998, 26). Garuba believed that animist logic can contribute to a process he described as “re-enchantment of the world” (2003, 266). He posed that the meanings generated by animist cultures over natural phenomena and human relations can actually resist the Weberian goal of rationalisation and secularisation. Hence, these anti-modern trends can provide an understanding of the world—and of everyday life—“cornering the instruments and technologies of the modern world and bringing them into their orbit of operation” (283). This process of synthesis—on a par with Dussel’s pluriversal dialogue—can certainly provide agency in post- and neocolonial Africa.

In the following section, I will discuss the rather elusive nature of *Freshwater* when it comes to considering the literary genre it may belong to.

Emezi emphasises that *Freshwater* is “an autobiographical novel —a breath away from being a memoir.” In addition, they/she claims that “[t]here are chapters in there that are my journal entries which I copied and pasted.” The author further highlights the fact that their/her narrative is not fiction or fictionalised, and underlines that they/she wants the readers to corroborate that their/her novel is not magical realism or speculative fiction (Emezi 2018h). At this stage, it seems necessary to mention some key concepts in connection to the current burgeoning of terms connected to authorial personal narratives, and to make a distinction between frequently overlapping labels such as memoir, autobiography and auto-fiction. By the same token, it is also significant to ponder on the deployment of auto-fiction as a common narrative genre these days. Frank Zipfel points out an important feature which characterises auto-fiction. He contends there is a double author-reader contract which entails a demand of truth while, at the same time, *an implicit bind of fabulation is expected* from the author (Zipfel 2010; emphasis added). Marjorie Worthington argues that “unlike memoir or autobiography, auto-fiction often depicts its author-characters in clearly fictional situations, thus blurring the already hazy boundaries between fiction and nonfiction” (2018, 1-2). In a similar vein, Korthals Altes defines auto-fiction as “a hybrid of autobiography and fiction” (2014, 191). Hence, auto-fiction is more likely to be associated with the creative narrativisation of a life without the strictures of historical accuracy. In Doubrovsky’s terms, “autobiography retraces a life, while autofiction presents a self” (Doubrovsky in Worthington 9). Thus, for him, auto-fiction is not *fictional* but *fictive*, that is, it retains certain referentiality traits while allowing for the creative possibilities involved in the literary writing process (Worthington 2018). In addition, Van Laer considers the rather pejorative connotations associated with the term memoir, often regarded as a “limited genre, one that tries to make sense of an individual life in a neat, straightforward way so that it can serve as an example.” She claims that this genre has been “pitted against writing that is ‘literary’ (symbolic, shaped, crafted), formally experimental, and innovative.” Moreover, she points out that memoirs have been “negatively associated with the feminine as it became popular” (2018, *electricliterature.com*) especially during the nineteenth and twentieth century — their head-day period.

Moreover, Alison Gibbons reflects upon the contemporary tendency of self exposure on social media in the context of a post-truth and narcissistic culture. The urge to exhibit a usually contrived self image or identity has resulted in a tendency to regard subjectivity as “fragmented, socially constructed and

textually fabricated” (2017, 130). The English critic also contends that auto-fiction depicts what she calls “affective logic” (118). This dynamics entails a tendency to locate the self within a particular place, time and body. Auto-fiction seems to be —when compared to autobiographies and memoirs— more complex and reflective. Likewise, this genre often poses ethical questions on the egotistic stance of writers and their tendency to reveal intimate experiences (Korthals Altes 2014). Another trait which is frequently equated with auto-fiction is the therapeutic function that authors place on the exhibitionism of their private lives. These confidential experiences are much in tune with the transformation of the commonplace into the uniqueness of art (Korthals Altes, 200).

Allegedly, Emezi’s first fictional work evinces many of the characteristics previously mentioned. The avowed truthfulness of the novel in relation to the author’s life could be easily corroborated by considering Emezi’s interviews and their/her public revelation of their/her personal story. However, the yet not so clear boundaries between fact and fiction remain unsolved in her *ogbanje* account. When reading *Freshwater* one is, many a time, affected by the shocking events the different narrative voices depict. The circumstances of Ada/Emezi exhibit rather unexpected body and psychological violence. However, one can also perceive the authorial cathartic process, which is aesthetic and lyrical in a sublime fashion.

When it comes to considering formal and literary labels attached to *Freshwater*, Emezi has repeatedly made it clear that they/she has chosen to narrate their/her story by recourse to auto-fiction. In all likelihood, they/she has sought to confer their/her account with the so-called causality of realism; that is, they/she seeks to give her personal history preeminence or a privileged status. However, the textual structure and tropes they/she uses —Igbo aesthetics and demigod narrators, polyphonic focalisations, textual fragmentation and spatio-temporal vagueness— imbue their/her novel with the exoticism usually associated in the West with indigenous, and especially African, world-views. In other words, realism may be the intended mode of narration to mirror Ada’s reality but, soon enough, one is confronted with the inadequacy of realistic fiction to account for the spiritual and supernatural realities they/she wants to depict. Interestingly, one can consider the Igbo discourse taking the lead, to some extent, while the western/Christian background still remains reverberating. Or, conversely, the readers can understand the novel’s message

as the failure of colonialism and neo-colonialism to fully erase the spiritual roots of pre-colonial ontologies.

In addition, Emezi plays all the time with the idea of reality, both ontologically and phenomenologically. In other words, she contests western givens on what is generally considered to be real and how reality is perceived. According to the Igbo worldview, reality could be deceitful since many existing entities which are not perceived as such —i.e. they are not seen— clearly have an existence of their own. So much so that they are the ones who narrate the tale. As Christopher Warnes contends, writers —such as Okri or Emezi— want “to clear the space for an assertion of cultural alterity” (2014, 148). Simply put, the negotiation —or struggle— between the pre-colonial and the modern world-views seems to contend that reason and realism are to be contested with an alternative vision of existence.

However, if magical realism is to be understood as a literary response to the colonial brutal erasure of cultural loss, then *Freshwater* may have some elements of what Warnes has defined as *faith-based* or *ontological* magical realism. The South-African literary critic contends that there can be two approaches to magical realism. A faith-based or ontological approach, which “utilise[s] the magical in order to expand and enrich already-existing conceptions of the real” (Warnes 2014, 14). Conversely, a *discursive* magical realism is defined as an approach which “deliberately elevates the non-real to the status of the real in order to cast the epistemological status of both into doubt” (14). The former is related to faith and metonymy —it depends on contiguity, and is ruled by the logic of proximity. On the other hand the latter, referred to as *irreverent* or *discursive* magical realism, depends on metaphor and is ruled by the logic of similarity. Warnes warns about the frequent overlapping of such categories. Following the above mentioned distinctions, *Freshwater* could be said to share some similarities with ontologically-based magical realism. Emezi’s novel seems immersed in an alternative way of conceiving reality —Igbo cosmovision— with a view to challenging (or obliterating?) western narratives.

Nevertheless, many African intellectuals, such as Kwame Appiah (1992), Wole Soyinka (1976), Caroline Rooney (2000), Ben Okri (1993a) and Harry Garuba (2003) support the view that several African novels are at pains with other versions of the supernatural magical realism of, say, the iconic Latin-American writers. They contend that for African writers “[t]he harmonisation of

human functions, external phenomena and supernatural suppositions within individual consciousness merges as a normal self-adjusting process in the African temper of mind” (Warnes 2014, 122). In other words, the metaphorical or spiritual realms depicted in the works of fiction are much part and parcel of African everyday life. Thus, to regard these representations “in the order of the mythopoeic or to displace [them] into allegorical or symbolic discourse, is to unhitch them from their quasi-realistic moorings and to dilute the strength of its informing indigenous world view” (Wright 1997, 182-3). In tune with Ben Okri’s definition of his novel *The Famished Road*, Emezi’s *Freshwater* may also be considered as part of a multi-dimensional, faith-based and ontological realism (Okri 1993a). Garuba argues, in the same line with Rooney and Okri, that magical realism seems too narrow a term to define the multiplicity of animism representations. For him, magical realism is a narrower interpretation of reality which can be subsumed under a broader term that he labels as *animist realism*. Garuba states that animism is an elastic mode of religious consciousness mainly characterised by “its almost total refusal to countenance *unlocalized, unembodied, unphysicalized* gods and spirits” (2003, 267; emphasis added). To put it differently, the animist creed is based on two basic assumptions: the first is that things have a life of their own, while the second presupposes that, when things are awakened, their spirits usually migrate into objects. Garuba goes on to argue that the Cartesian dualism mind/body is rejected by animism. “The Enlightenment rationality,” he claims, “is reverted and revised in such a way that *meaning* [...] is now seen as central to consciousness because it is meaning that stands between man and the object world and between men and other men” (279; original emphasis).

In summary, animist realism can, to some extent, be apposite with Emezi’s allegedly auto-fictional endeavour. Moreover, the two categories —auto-fiction and animist realism— are not incompatible. Admittedly, the Igbo world-view seems to be coterminous to the author’s manifest and literary experience of the world. However, certain caveats should be made. If animism —and by extension animist realism— is seen as an overarching set of beliefs in which spirits are manifest in objects, thus “spiritualising the object world” (Garuba 2003, 267), then Emezi’s novel can be said to bring to the fore an animist contradiction. The characteristic animist reification movement seems to be at odds with Emezi’s body suffering. If animism presupposes that spirits are located and embodied in objects —that is, if animism has an urge to reify spirits— then, paradoxically, Ada’s spirit(s) suffering embodiment would entail a distancing from the animist stance. If spirits need objects to be contained in



order to be at ease, Ada's ọgbanje demigods's crave for deliverance from their human body would not presuppose an animist perspective, but rather a Christian one. In other words, the demigods —and Ada— seem to be spirits which *reject* being in a body. Although Emezi seems to be more focused on blurring the contours of reality perception, they/she seems to be anchored in a binary spirit/body opposition which appears to be more occidental than animist. Since the constant drift from body to spirit in an unencumbered fashion seems to be at the core of the animist creed, it seems contradictory, to some extent, that their/her novel narrators should experience so much stress on account of being inside a body. All things considered, what remains evident is the difficulty one has when trying to classify the novel into clear-cut categories. Hybridity seems to define the artist's choice. Currently, not only do literature genres persist in being elusive, but they also tend to be further blended with other art representational modes such as video, digital online platforms and live performances.

In harmony with meta-modern tendencies, Emezi's novel and its numinous discourse seem fine-tuned with the contemporary "aesth-ethical" turn towards a new humanism which could explore a new collective relationality and provide a revisited access to the lyrical sublime. It also depicts fresh ways of interpellation to the reader and polyphony, thus attesting to distance from omniscience. In addition, *Freshwater* also illustrates the recurrent contemporary oscillations between "hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 5-6). Another characteristic feature of meta-modernism, also defined as *heterochrony*, is particularly noticeable in Emezi's debut fiction. Vermeulen and van den Akker define this trope as "a deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretence that that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not" (2010, 12). This sense of placetime topos as being sequenced and yet vague, emerges as a surreal context in which, all things considered, the dystopian locus of a planet is on the brink of collapse. "The destiny of the metamodern wo/man," the aforementioned authors conclude, is "to pursue a horizon that is forever receding" (2010, 12).

A further remarkable feature in *Freshwater* is Emezi's conscious effort to break with certain limitations —symbolic or real— imposed on African transgender writers. Emezi claims to be writing from a perspective other than an LGTB activist stance. Since her existence has been much troubled with

psychological ailments, they/she postulates that being alive, being able to exist is “activism enough.” In other words, they/she does not seek to be regarded as a spokesperson for a collective since they/she claims that she writes from a very personal experiential stance which they/she does not seek to impose on anyone. “When I write,” Emezi observes, “I’m just writing as myself, and I’m writing from the reality that I know, that is perhaps more inclusive because I occupy so many spaces at once” (Emezi 2018i). Interestingly, in some respects, their/her novel does not deal with the usual western editorial tropes of racism, immigration and African poverty. Instead, Emezi seems to be intent on exploring the world of metaphysical identity in an allegedly Nabokovian fashion, thus opening a path for a new redefinition of African literature canon strictures (Emezi 2018b). Emezi agrees to Tope Folarin’s essay “Against Accessibility” (2016), which openly challenges the idea that Africa has to be defined in terms of openness towards the West, “a criterion that is not applied to white artists and writers” (Emezi 2018f). Emezi points out that the use of epigraphs, sayings or expressions in Igbo without translation or paraphrasing could have the effect of enhancing textual meanings by compelling their/her interlocutors to search for those new meanings (2018f). However, it cannot be ignored that the exoticism exerted by the Igbo world-view, so often presented in such a cryptic manner in the novel, no doubt contributes to pigeonholing the novel within hackneyed portrayals of African peculiarity.

## **2. IGBO WORLDVIEW: SOME USEFUL NOTIONS**

In order to better comprehend the world-view presented in *Freshwater*, I will provide the readers with some crucial terms and rituals in connection to Igbo/ogbanje ontology. This section will be devoted to defining the iyi-*ṣ*wa, Ada’s naming and Masquerades. In addition, I will describe the three ogbanje births. Subsequently, I will argue that, contrary to what many reviewers have stressed (Emezi in Philyaw 2018i, Emezi in Richards 2018d, Emezi in Bonét 2018f, Isama 2019, Halderman 2018, Waldman 2018), *Freshwater* does not deserve to be categorised within (trans)gender fiction, as this issue is not its most relevant thematic feature. Rather, I contend, the novel offers an intricate negotiation of Igbo and western discourses in a constant tug of war, a journey back and forth that strives to redefine the hybridity of self and reality. I will focus my analysis on four main subsections. The first will be devoted to spiritual concerns. I will trace and exemplify the extant imbrication between Igbo cosmology (and animism) and Christianity. Secondly, I will concentrate on the identity dynamics of the self and the construction of a polyphonic fictional

reality. I will also delve on the existing negotiating contours between mental disorder and trauma and Igbo precolonial world-view. Thirdly, I will address gender issues mapped up and brought to the fore through Ada's predicament. In so doing, I will deal with western clinical terms such as gender dysphoria and the Igbo metaphorical sheddings or bodily metamorphosis. Eventually, I will explore the conspicuous use of the trope of motherhood within the manifest patriarchal background of the novel. Finally, the role of the different maternal—or quasi-maternal—characters in relation to Ada will be examined: the human mother, Saachi; a surrogate-like mother within, Asughara; and the spiritual one, Ala.

A quote by Toni Morrison has been claimed to be Emezi's personal, artistic and aesthetic manifesto. The Nigerian writer assumes that they/she "stood at the border, stood at the edge, and claimed it as central. And let the rest of the world move over to where [they/she] was" (Halderman 2018). From the very beginning of the novel, the thematic and stylistic shift is evident and tantalising. Chapter One is opened by a nondescript "we" who openly provokes the reader: "The first time our mother came for us, we screamed. We were three and she was a snake, coiled up on the tile in the bathroom, waiting" (Emezi 2018a, 1). From this moment onwards, one is given a detailed account of some *ogbanje* spirits having a half-conscious existence inside and outside a foetus which was to become Ada —*the* Ada as they call her. The reader is first enlightened on Igbo cosmology and the whimsical instincts of its gods.

Three occurrences, central to the development of the plot, are revealed on these introductory pages. First, the gates which are usually opened when an *ogbanje* is born into a human child are supposed to be tightly closed after the delivery of the human mother so that the godling living inside the child cannot remember his/her previous demigod existence. The plural narrators admit that the pantheon higher gods are oftentimes capricious and aloof in their relation to humans and their suffering. Hence, in one of such whimsical divine oversights, they leave the gates of the two worlds—human and spiritual—open. Thus, they compel Ada and the *ogbanje* hatchlings inside her to be conscious of their various and parallel existence. As the narrator "we" declares:

Those carved monstrosities [the gates] those clay and chalk portals, existing everywhere and nowhere and all at once. [...]. The opening is easy, a pushing out, an expansion, an inhalation: the dust of divinity released into the world. It has to be a temporary channel, though, a thing that is sealed afterward, because the gates stink of knowledge, they cannot be left swinging wide like a slack

mouth, leaking mindlessly. That would contaminate the human world—bodies are not meant to remember things from the other side. (33)

Secondly, one is faced with the importance of naming a new-born child in Nigerian culture. Ada's name means "the egg of a python" which, therefore, turns the child into a daughter of Ala, "the source of stream, [...] the earth herself, the judge and mother, the giver of law" (Emezi 2018a, 9). The twin narrators admit that Ala's power was subjected to colonial erasure. So much so that they mockingly remark: "Before a christ-induced amnesia struck the humans, it was well known that the python was sacred, beyond reptile" (9). There is a certain ominous tone in the following lines, which seem to signal how special Ada is: "[i]t was taboo to kill her python, and of its egg, they would say, you cannot touch it. For the egg of a python is the child of Ala, and the child of Ala is not, and can never be, intended for your [human/the reader's] hands" (9).

Another key term to define is the *iyi- $\dot{u}$ wa* or the "oath of the world" (Emezi 2018a, 14). The *iyi- $\dot{u}$ wa* is tokenised in an object such as a rock, a bone or a piece of cloth, and should be hidden or buried so that the *ogbanje* can ensure his/her coming back to his/her cohort of companions. If this talisman is found and destroyed by the child's parents or family, the *ogbanje* infant cannot die, that is, s/he cannot return to his/her otherworld home (14-15). In another twist of circumstances or mischievous concoction, the godlings inside Ada conceal the *iyi- $\dot{u}$ wa* inside the walls of the girl's vagina. Simply put, the child is the hiding place and the covenant. Hence, "[t]o destroy it, they would have to destroy her. To keep her alive, they would have to send her back" (15). "Poor thing. It wasn't her fault—she didn't know that we lived in her, not yet," the *ogbanje* ruminates. "The gates were open and she was the bridge" (16). These intricacies in Ada's fate pave the way for a life that, from the very beginning, appears to be doomed by carelessness, errancy and chaos.

Ironically, it is during Christmas time that an event in Ada's life triggers off the first birth of the *ogbanje* inside her. She has the chance to watch a Masquerade ceremony in Umuawa. Masquerades are usually enacted by men of the community who, attired in colourful raffia robes and wooden masks, represent Igbo deities or dead ancestor relatives. In the old times, the aim of this ritual was to keep a communal moral check. As Widjaja in "Masquerades and Festivals" explains:

While entertaining through dances and exhibiting extra-human feats, the masquerades would walk up to certain individuals and loudly expose any bad habits, crimes or misbehaviour of that person. As people would always take corrections from these exposures, the masquerades were effective in keeping up with traditional norms and values in the communities. (2000, *igboguide.org*)

Thus, the first *ogbanje* ‘awakening’ occurs. The brothersisterhood speaks to the Ada and her godlings within. They are angry because Ada should have been dead by then. So, the cohort of demigods is urging them to fulfil the promises of returning. For the first time, what Ada has considered to be (day)dreaming is to be revealed as a reality inside her. The slumbering hatchlings recall: “That moment, when our eyes opened in the dust of the village square and we were both awake in both her realm and ours for the first time, it felt like pure brightness. We were all one, together, balanced for a brief velvet moment in a village night” (Emezi, 20). Moreover, this birth signals Ada’s enduring madness and future struggle to be a stuffed god “into a bag of skin” (20). The fact that the first emergence of the *ogbanje* in Ada’s consciousness is at Christmas time cannot be a mere coincidence. Even when masquerades may be considered by some Nigerians as past cultural rituals, the author seems to place these two together in an effort to overwrite Christian traditions. They seem to be relegated to the background, the far away reference in which the real birth —not Jesus’— is happening.

The second *ogbanje* birth occurs with their naming. “Many things start with a name” (Emezi, 7) is a punch line which appears to openly denounce the intent colonial erasure of the Nigerian past. Hence, this name calling brings about the unearthing of Igbo discourse, the origins of Shadow and Shade. Since *ogbanje* are seduced by red and blood, when Ada’s little sister —Añuli— has a serious car accident that almost severs one of her legs, Ada’s hosts seem aroused by the acrid scent of human leakage. Ada feels at fault for not having protected her little sister, and thus refuses to see her in hospital. This guilt will be Ada’s constant source of distress throughout her life. The readers are only given the point of view of Ada’s hosts, mulling over the girl’s plight: “with one foot on the other side and gates in between” (27). However, since their nature is spiteful, the new-born godlings can only think of their baptism in “the best liquid, that mother color, then a clotting movement, a scrambled look at mortality and the weakness of the vessel.” (27). Again, birth and baptism are on a par with the ceremonies of Christianity. The holy water and the oil ointment are, however, traded by blood, and the sign of the cross by body cuts. From this

moment on, the hosts become bloodthirsty. Ada “was just a child when these sacrifices began. She slashed her skin without fully knowing why; the intricacies of self-worship were lost on her” (42). Ada gives the *ogbanje* agency by providing them with individuality: “Smoke, was a complicated gray, swirled layers and depths, barely held together in a vaguely human shape” (42). Instead, Shadow “was a deep black, pressed malevolently against a wall, hints of other colors (mother color eyes, yellowed teeth) that never made it past the fullness of the night” (42). These characters, in all probability twins, remain indeterminate as regards gender and identity. They are the first narrators the readers encounter. As will be seen, not only is blackness suggested by these characters’ names, but also by the different concern and outlook on reality they manifest throughout the narrative. The loam-like temporality they articulate—in some respects mirroring the slow time hinged in *A Small Silence*—is one of the most peculiar and, at the same time, appealing assets of this fiction. The fact that Shade and Shadow are twins seems to be no simple coincidence. Multiple births have been—and still somehow remain—subject to ambiguous Igbo/Yoruba communal demeanour. In the old times, these children were thought to be “demons who suck[ed] their [parents’] blood at night” (Sunday 2007) and were, accordingly, killed at birth. As Ojri Sunday claims, twins are not considered human, and are deemed a threat to the community at large. Native healers and ancestral belief see in twins the meddling of the gods, the intrusion of strange powers and evil brought upon the village. Mothers of twins are even tagged as unclean for begetting “forbidden beings” (Sunday 2007). Similarly, *umu ejime*—or multiple births—were considered abomination against the earth deity Ala (Misty 2001). In clear contrast to this, in recent times this repugnance has turned into joy and hope (Leroy 1995). The erstwhile sacrificed new-borns are nowadays celebrated since they are believed to bequeath happiness, health and abundance to their kindred.

Hence, Shadow and Shade’s account of Ada’s story seems to depict the inaccuracy of their demigod perception of the human world. They appear to be deceitfully sensible compared with subsequent *ogbanje* emergences. However, this plural and non-capitalised “we” does not seem to offer Ada much comfort either. They are held responsible for the sectioning of Ada’s traumatic memories, and require periodic blood offerings to be sated. They provide a rather moderate and reconciling perspective of the events though they remain aloof (or absent) during Ada’s most acute moments of crisis. What is particularly striking in the development of the plot is that no *ogbanje* character seems to accept responsibility for their/Ada’s behaviour. The narrators are, so to

speak, ethically unbounded with a strong attachment to frenzy. Madness began—Ada’s hosts declare—through “blood and belief” (42), which bears echoes of the passion of a Jesus who will soon enter the scene.

### 3. SHADOW, SMOKE, ASUGHARA, SAINT VINCENT AND YSHWA’S INTERPOLATIONS

Chapter Three opens with an epigraph whose ending lines state: “*You are the jewel at the heart of the lotus*” (33). The metaphor seems to be part of a mantra of the Buddha of compassion, which means that beauty can emerge out of the “murkiest of waters to reveal the jewel of the true nature of being” (Emberson 2018). This seems to be the spiritual journey Ada is embarked on. Some events sink her into the muddy oppression of loneliness and cruelty. First, her human mother, Saachi, leaves her when she is about six. Ada’s human parents have a troubled marriage and the family needs the money that Saul—Ada’s father—is gradually dilapidating. As a result, Ada starts conjuring up worlds of her own, sharing private thoughts and conversations with her hosts within. The *ogbanje* cohort from the other side is pleased to have been able to chase Saachi away. Even the malicious Shade and Smoke concede that “this is how you break a child, [...]. Step one, take the mother away” (Emezi, 32). While Ada’s mother is abroad and her father working as a doctor, absent from home, Ada’s eldest brother—Chima—is in charge of her. He is abusive and repeatedly belts her on the grounds of discipline. Almost at the end of the narration (Chapter Twenty), in a rather hasty manner, the reader is told that a neighbour and his son have sexually molested Ada in her infancy. Some years later, a seventeen-year-old Ada flies to America to study in a small town in the Appalachians. After that, she attends college in Virginia where she meets Soren—a man haunted by grief and guilt. They have a tumultuous relationship which ends up in rape. This sexual assault brings another *ogbanje* host into Ada’s marble room. The third birth—the response to utter despair and solitude—materialises in Asughara. “Dagger” in Igbo, she takes on Ada’s body and mind and seems to conquer it for an extended period of time. Apparently, she has arrived to protect Ada. As she defines herself: “I was reckless; I had no conscience, no sympathy, no pity. [Ada] loved me because I was strong and I held her together” (70).

An indigenised Jesus or Yahweh—or simply the way a child would (mis)pronounce it—*Yshwa* hovers over Ada’s life all along. The cruel circumstances impinge the taint of sin, dirt and guilt on the girl’s conscience,

and Yshwa —this is what one is led to believe from the very first chapters— is Ada’s only hope of redemption and companionship. When Saachi leaves, so deep is Ada’s wound that she yearns for him to materialise in the way the *ogbanje* do. She pleads for Yshwa “to come down and hold her, just for a little bit. It would be easy for him because he was the christ and it would mean so much to her, so very much, just this little thing, because no one, you see, no one else was doing it, holding her” (36). Ada’s hopes, however, are not substantiated since, as the twin hosts claim:

It was, we knew, impossible for him not to hear her. He hears every prayer babbled screamed sung at him. He does not, contrary to some belief, often answer them. [...], what we forget is that he loves them as god does, which is to say, with a taste for suffering. [...]. And even if it did not hold, Yshwa had no intentions of manifesting. He had endured abomination of the physical once and it was enough, never again. (37)

The rivalry between western and Igbo deities is witnessed through the lens of the narrators —who most of the time are quite unreliable, especially Asughara. The same feud seems to be established all through the narrative, even though the Igbo cosmivision appears to be given a preeminent place from the very beginning. The *ogbanje* were “older than even Yshwa, old as forever, born of the first mother” (131). To some extent, some syncretism between Christianity and ancient Igbo ontology is suggested. So much so that Shadow and Shade see in Yshwa another brothersister who has already suffered his embodiment. In the light of plural narrators, the Christian holy son is presented as a feeble and selfish character; “[i]t was obvious that Yshwa, like other gods, is not moved in the ways the humans imagine” (194). Sarcastically, Asughara claims that Yshwa stands for repentance and forgiveness; “white as the snow of a bleached lamb, the general gist being that you fuck up and start over” (83). Without any hope in the afterlife but oblivion, Ada believes she needs a moral code to cling to in order to hold in check her multiplying inner godlings. And Yshwa appears to be the only provider of this moral order. While, for the *ogbanje*, humans are cruel as their world is eventually bound to disappear, they see no point in avoiding using them as a source of pleasure; they do not experience remorse.

Yshwa is portrayed by the *ogbanje* as a pure, remote and self-righteous, almost ghostly, entity. On the other hand, Ala’s hatchlings are good and evil, and embody contradiction and cunning. As Hyde argues in *Trickster Makes this World. Mischief, Myth and Art*, the Devil and trickster are not one and the same.



While the Devil is immoral, the trickster is amoral; that is, s/he embodies good and evil simultaneously in a “hopelessly intertwined” way, “creator and destroyer, giver and negator,” s/he “knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. S/he “possesses no values, moral or social... yet through his [her] actions all values come into being” (Radin in Hyde 1998, 10). By the same token, the trickster is in “an eternal state of mind” which seems doubtful of all truths, “dragging them from their heavenly preserves to see how they fare down here in this time-haunted world” (Hyde, 14).

Some behaviours are considered taboo or abomination for the *ogbanje*. Fertility and suicide are among the most prominent. Since they have a special status in the Igbo sacred pantheon, they are demigods, they have no ancestors; thus, they are destined not to have offspring. “We were happy to obey these instructions,” they claim, “we had ferociously protected the Ada from the blasphemy of having another life grow in her” (Emezi, 187). This contention, as it turns out, is very disputable, given the many times they actually *did not* protect Ada sexually. Paradoxically, Asughara is literally forcing Ada to have carefree sex. In addition, even when *ogbanje* are supposed to die repeatedly, suicide is not their avowed death choice. Shadow/Shade blame Asughara for her taboo ways: “Life does not belong to us to take. And on top of that, she should have remembered that we are *ogbanje*; none of us die like this” (184).

After a conversation between Ada, Yshwa and the *ogbanje* demigods in Chapter Eighteen, one seems to be confronted with a rather weak Christian god who flinches from pain and asks Ada to bear the burden of guilt for him. Ada is supposed to handle the situation on her own, with his guidance. The implication is that Yshwa seems evidently lukewarm, unfair and cowardly. He eventually remarks that gods are not supposed to be fair (199). He even seems to be rather self-indulgent when he tells Ada: “I will lead you [...] down the paths of righteousness other than the sake of my name” (199).

Interestingly, even though Yshwa is not shown in the best light by his numinous colleagues, there is another demigod voice who resides in Ada’s marble room, and about whom the reader is told unexpectedly in Chapter Eleven. He has been born together with Asughara. Ada names him Saint Vincent, and one is told that “he remained in the marble of her mind because he couldn’t survive her body” (121). To the other demigods hosting Ada, the saint is strange, not even god-begotten, “he belonged nowhere, except maybe to the Ada. He was gentle, soft as a ghost” (122). Even though his masculinity is

evident—he has erections—he prefers to move in Ada’s marble room. The saint incarnates Ada’s innocence and masculinity within. “Saint Vincent was uncontaminated, quarantined, even. Perhaps in another world, where the Ada was not split and segmented, she and Saint Vincent might have been one thing together” (122). Allegedly, the close and telling resemblance between Yshwa and Saint Vincent seems more than striking. Is Saint Vincent the lost, severed or erased connection to the Christian god? Is he a part of Ada that was always latent and waiting to be born? Or is he merely a convenient authorial resource to swerve the plot line and tackle the genre crossing issue?

Emezi concedes that “Ada is reassessing her relationship to Christianity” (2018h). Moreover, some readers have considered their/her approach to spiritual matters to be blasphemous. However, the writer contends, “Ada is not picking one or the other [side] but dealing with both at the same time; her relationship with Christianity is in flux” (Emezi 2018h). I also contend that the picture of Yshwa is always sifted through the lens of narrators who want to silence him, who are simply jealous of Ada’s connection to him. In Chapter Five, Yshwa retorts to Asughara: “[Ada] talks to me all the time. [...] She’s crying, she’s screaming, the girl is sorry all the time. There’s so much guilt over her eyes, it covers everything else” (Emezi 2018a, 85). There are some other instances through which the reader witnesses an apparently direct dialogue between Asughara and Yshwa, which leave an open question as to what extent one can believe in the protection instincts of the Dagger: “‘You are the thing she’s afraid of,’” Yshwa blames Asughara. “‘And I hear everything anyway’” (86; original emphasis). With a silky caress, Yshwa touches Asughara’s cheek. “‘I’m not ashamed of you,’ he said, as if it was nothing. ‘You know I love you’” (86). To which the ogbanje swiftly retorts: “Fuck you” (86). Quite revealingly, she is being jealous, or acts rather whimsically when she broods: “He gave me that damn look again as he left, the fucking resurrected bastard, but I didn’t care. I was just glad that he was gone. He wasn’t getting her back. Ada was mine, I told myself” (86). Chapter Nine is one of Ada’s scanty, direct narrations. She tiredly yields her existence to her inside demigods’ accounts of herself. She wonders what reality is more tangible, the inner or the external, which suffers more, the body at the expense of the spirit or the other way round, and which story between gods and humans ends well. She also ponders on the fact that humans have an adamant persistence in creating gods and forgiving them for their “cracks” (94).

“The space between the spirits and the alive is death. The space between life and death is resurrection” (Emezi 2018a, 193), Shadow and Smoke proclaim. To what Yshwa could have concluded that the place between death and spirit is resurrection. What seems to preside over the whole plot is the notion that, as the *ogbanje* cohort claim: “The way up is the way down” (135). In Chapter Nineteen, Ada’s letter to Yshwa allows the reader to witness a human being wearied of pain, tired of being lonely and looking for mere antidotes for her inside void (and voices). She seems to have learnt to see love as the only way out, but love conceived in an existentialist, unselfish manner, that is, without forcing a forever on anyone. She also appears to have come to terms with guilt. She has parallel relations—involving sex or without it. She writes that the love she feels for each of her acquaintances “unfurls into a greater love” (201). Love traps her but also sets her free, since she has stopped “being afraid of relocations” (202). Ada has evolved into having the certainty that she “will be loved constantly across all space. And even if [love] fades with [relocations], it will bloom again” (202). Ada believes humans are conduits through which love should move unhindered. Hence, for her an all-encompassing sort of pure affection is the closest state to deliverance. This human-embracing disposition seems to echo the biblical “love each other” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible 2001, Jn 15, 12). All in all, when one is faced with the structure of the novel divided into four parts: the First—without a name— dealing with Ada’s childhood and circumstances of self-recognition and body endurance; the Second Part called *Ashugara* (Dagger); the Third Part, *Ilaghachi*, the Igbo equivalent to “return”; and the Fourth Part, *Nzoputa*, translated as “Salvation,” one can hardly overlook the fact that Ada’s experience curiously resembles that of Yshwa. Like the Christian martyr, Ada is half god and half human, and follows a cycle of suffering, return and resurrection to finally attain redemption.

Emezi takes a clearly postcolonial stance when they/she wants their/her fictional voices to be as real as possible, almost everyday-like. But they/she also seeks to emphasise the role of memory. That is probably why they/she willingly wants their/her Igbo voices to take a privileged place in her plot. In a charmingly sublime paragraph, the plural narrators ponder on the resilience of past silenced voices:

anyone who knows anything knows this, knows about the godly stowaways that came along when the corrupters stole out people, what the swollen hulls carried over the bellied seas, the masks, the skin on the inside of the drum, the words under the words, the water in the water. The stories that survived, the new names they took, the temper of old gods sweeping through new land, the music taken

that is the same as the music left behind. And, of course, the humans who survived, those selected among them, the ones in white, the ones shaking shells and mineral deposits [dibias/priests], the ones ridden, the ones chosen, the ones who follow, work, and serve because calls pass through blood no matter how many oceans you drop death into. (88)

As Fetson Kalua claims, Bhabha and Hall have contributed to raising awareness that all cultures ridden by colonialism are destined to be contaminated and dulled by the cultural effects of *transculturation*. In other words, “the colonizer and colonized are so very deeply implicated in one another that any discourse about origins smacks of paradoxes” (Kalua 2009, 25). In *Freshwater*, Igbo voices are the narrators, the ones who are given the Foucauldian power of discourse, the authority which reveals the tale through their particular lenses. However, the fact that these same voices are mischievous and double-edged by means of ambiguity or sheer distortion of reality, blurs the account with alternate versions full of gaps or cracks. Hence, two versions, the westernised Christian and the ancient African Igbo, coexist in such a way that one seeks to obliterate the other without quite successfully achieving it. As Kwame Appiah observes: “none of us creates the world from scratch; none of us crafts our values and communities save in dialogue with the past” (2018, 67). He celebrates creedal identities in terms of mutable practices instead of immutable beliefs, while he concludes: “We do not merely follow traditions; we create them (67). The same notion seems to be implied in *Freshwater* when it comes to considering the discussion of self-identity.

#### **4. IDENTITY: FRAGMENTATION AND LAYERS**

In *The Lies that Bind* (2018), Appiah argues against essentialist stances in connection to identity issues. He agrees with the philosophical contention that “existence precedes essence.” Hence, he goes on to argue, “we *are* before we are anything in particular” (217; emphasis added). In the same line, Waldman highlights that one of the main achievements of *Freshwater* is to offer an open answer in connection to the definition of the individual self. Emezi appears to succeed in posing a “tension between the affirmation of owning a single identity and the freedom and mutability of being multiple” (2018). One can concede that readers may experience difficulty when trying to define Ada’s multiple and paradoxical identity manifestations (or narratorial voices) into clear-cut

categorisations; she appears to epitomise “a self that is defined by indefinability” (Waldman 2018).

The answer to the question “why am I the way I am?” seems to have been — and still remains— a source of much human speculation. George Mead proposed in *Mind, Self and Society* (2015) that the self seems to be the result of an “I” which seeks to respond to the demands of the others. When those demands are internalised, the individual could be self-conceived as such. Most identity theories seem to emphasise the influence exerted by social roles in shaping one’s idea of oneself (Appiah 2018). Those socially constructed labels usually tend to give us appeasing clues as to how we should react under certain circumstances. In other words, people are given labels of recognition, answers on what they are supposed to do —norms— and also on how the others will behave towards them —treatment. This process of labelling precedes a natural consequence, that of essentialising. According to Appiah, one of the most thorny aspects in the discussion of identities lies in the structures of power they usually entail —quite often in opposition to the other, the one that is different (or, in extreme cases, the one deemed inferior). “Dominant identities can mean that people will treat you as a source of authority; subordinate identities can mean your interests will be trampled upon or ignored” (Appiah 2018, 11). Colonial policies were implemented following those premises. By the same token, and in tune with this argumentation, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1994) has coined the term *intersectionality* to account for the fact that our many simultaneous identities, namely, racial, gender-based, national, cultural, religious or class-based may not simply be a juxtaposition of each of them. On the contrary, she points out, such intersections need to be considered as singularly intertwined in the process of boosting political agency. Williams Crenshaw stresses “the need to account *for multiple grounds of identity* when considering how the social world is constructed” (94; emphasis added).

Emezi seems to be intent on suggesting a new agenda in the discussion of self (or selves)-identity, while distancing themselves/herself from the dominant discourse labels. Rejecting essentialist stances, they/she contends that her own identity definition resembles a hodgepodge (Isen 2018). I contend that this self cognisance is, in all likelihood, delineated from a sometimes reluctant negotiation between western and Igbo contours. Ada, the rather obscured and browbeaten protagonist of *Freshwater*, seems to be haunted by privy egos or spiritual voices she clings to in moments of despair. Notwithstanding this, Emezi claims that considering Ada as “being broken by men” is a narrative

they/she would like to be distanced from. “Men are not that important or powerful in my world or in my work,” the writer claims, “[f]or the Ada, the root of her trauma is being a not-human thing existing in a human world” (Emezi 2018c). In addition, they/she further points out: “[e]ven when [Ada] thinks she’s broken or fragmented, she’s not, not really. The fragment is not a fragment—it’s a *layer*. It’s not one reality shattered, it’s multiple realities pressed together” (Emezi 2018c; emphasis added).

The image Emezi prefers to use in connection to Ada’s identity is that of a “boiling cloud” of selves (Isen 2018). She explains that these somehow disparate voices are a rather forced and compartmentalised recourse they/she has made use of, since conveying in writing the simultaneous existence of all of these realities seems a difficult notion to grasp. As they/she reveals:

part of what I learned from writing the book is to accept that even though I made these different, bordered selves to write the book, they’re constructs. They’re things that Ada created to make what was happening in her head make more sense, because at the time, she/I didn’t have the understanding that all of it could exist at once. [...]. It’s simpler when you divide it and when you make the little boxes. Now I’m better at not dividing it and just accepting the mishmash and layers. (Isen 2018)

It should be noted that the boundaries between fiction and real life, between the author and the main character are very subtle, even non-existent. Yet, the reader is always confronted with the artificiality that the writing process suggests when conveying the metaphysical complexity of reality and self. In an interview with Simon for National Public Radio, Emezi emphasises our contemporary inability “to acknowledge multiple realities, and this insistence that there has to be one dominant reality, and everything that falls outside that reality is false and untrue” (Emezi 2018e) Recurrently, Emezi insists upon the necessity of acknowledging the lenses through which predominant discourses shape our realities, those which colonial discourses were adamantly determined to undermine and, eventually, erase. The author stresses that

people came in and enforced a reality and said, “Well, if you believe in anything else, if you believe in your indigenous deities, if you believe in these spiritual entities, then you’re ignorant and you’re backwards, and it’s only because you haven’t been educated by the West.” And you know, there’s this [thought that] everything that is outside the dominant reality becomes something that’s pathological. And with my work, I’m not really interested in trying to convince anyone to shift their center, I’m just refusing to shift mine. (Emezi 2018e)

#### 4.1. Western Labels: Trauma and Dissociative Identity Disorder

The reading dynamics of *Freshwater* is non-linear. The different ogbanje demigods that inhabit Ada offer an account of her life which may simulate the intention of temporal chronology, though they frequently recourse to unexpected births of new voices and focalisation shifts. So much so that Ada's story has to be retrieved by doing an effort of reconstruction. The plot line ploughs forward with difficulty, with many interpolations and analepses. The fragmentation through which one gets a glimpse of Ada may confer the story traits that relate it to trauma fiction.

Trauma theory literature offers well-defined narrative features to account for the representation of such excruciating experiences in works of fiction. The term trauma has been defined by Cathy Caruth as follows:

A response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts and behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (1995, 6-7)

As has been previously pondered in the chapter devoted to Jumoke Verissimo's *A Small Silence*, according to Joshua Pederson (2018), classical trauma literary critics of the "first wave," such as Caruth, La Capra, Hartman and Felman, to name but the most salient, and critics of the so-called second generation of trauma studies, such as Rothberg, Schwab, Saal, Craps and Forter, have tried to pinpoint features which characterise so-called traumatic realism—that is, a less postmodern narratorial technique of trauma processes. Classical trauma narratives have repeatedly deployed some tropes and formal devices to account for psychological unrest and illness. Among the most recurrent, the use of the language of affect through metaphors can be mentioned. The plot relapse into gaps or lacunae—that is, the use of delayed referentiality—is frequently used in order to convey postponed or faltering memory and the indirection or avoidance of the traumatic event. Other literary resources such as repetition of events, unexpected flashbacks—which have the effect of fragmenting the plot—or dreams as intrusions of the repressed are oftentimes brought into play. As Dolores Herrero contends, *traumatic time* "is characterised by ellipses and stasis, but also (in the best cases) by returns and sudden progressions" (2014, 284). The contemporary trauma studies stance, however, seems to have veered towards multidirectional traumatic legacies—or transgenerational trauma—

and the exploration of structural or “insidious trauma” (Forster 2015) mainly prompted by racism and patriarchy constraints.<sup>10</sup>

*Freshwater* may be said to share some of the above mentioned features. Gaps are especially noticeable in connection to the main character Ada —whose voice is seldom heard directly and, if heard at all, she sounds aloof and estranged. Moreover, the narration is fragmented. Time and space have a particularly disruptive structure —which leaves the reader in a contrived limbo of atemporality and spacelessness. There is a recurrence of flashbacks through which the different narrators (Shadow/Shade and Asughara) literally surprise the reader with painful revelations, as if these occurrences were not especially relevant for the plot progression and the understanding of the main character circumstances. This treatment of time may also be in tune with some acknowledged traditional African temporal conceptions. In African languages such as Kikamba (spoken by Bantu people from Kenya) or Kiluba (from southern Zaire) there are two main time conceptions: present and near the present. Yesterday and Tomorrow are considered “the day next to this one” (Booth 1975, 87). Allegedly, the notions of “past and future both have meaning only in relation to the present” (Booth, 87). The past seems to assimilate the present and even the future since the idea of return and repetition of fixed cycles is strongly anchored in the experience of the past. Thus, events such as the seasons, crops and births seem to project or mirror the past onto a potential future. The idea of cyclic temporality is, in general terms, better described in terms of “‘coexistence’ of the past, present and future. There is no need to ‘return’ if one has never really left” (Booth, 87). As the Kenyan theologian John Mbiti contends in *African Religions and Philosophy*:

[o]utside the reckoning of the year, African time concept is silent and indifferent. People expect the years to come and go, in endless rhythm like that of day and night, and like the waning and waxing of the moon. They expect the events of the rain season, planting, harvesting, dry season, rain season again, planting again, and so on to continue for ever. Each year comes and goes, adding to the time dimension of the past. (1975, 21)

Mbiti’s aesthetically elegant hypothesis notwithstanding, this conception of circular time —which has been repeatedly contrasted to the western lineal and tridimensional temporal logic— has been strongly criticised as simplistic in

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<sup>10</sup> Other paths of trauma studies have veered towards cognitive psychology stances and perpetrator trauma studies, as was discussed in Chapters Two and Three.



both intellectual African and western milieus.<sup>11</sup> For all intents and purposes, time is a prominent trope within the novel. In all probability, the fragmentary and fluctuating condition of the narrative could be another hybrid feature straddling African and western time conceptualisations, a pliable confluence of past and present imbricated with the typically splintered time of trauma experience.

However, the novel appears to take some distance from traumatic realism when it comes to considering the centrality of woeful experiences. The narratorial insistence, almost taking delight in suffering, is early foregrounded in the story. Ada's rape is described in Chapter Five and this accounts for the birth of Asughara. Many other circumstances, which must have been utterly distressing for Ada, are recounted, in fact, by her *ogbanje* selves in a sublime poetic and minute style. Hence, Saachi's abandonment, Ada's mutilations, her anorexia and gender discomfort, her suicide attempt and her childhood abuse are by no means avoided. On the contrary, they are depicted in the rather raw, bloodthirsty fashion of god-like beings. Nonetheless, there is a situation which remains a source of repetition throughout the novel —and which was also mentioned by Emezi as the main reason for Ada's suffering— the fact that she is a spiritual being condemned to live in the prison of a human body. "There are a lot of things that happen to the flesh [in the novel] that are considered brutal," Emezi claims, "but for me the main brutality in the book is the existence as flesh in the first place. All the other stuff, as bad as it is, isn't as bad as that" (Isen 2018). They/she also emphasises that the book's depiction of violence does not seem extreme to them/her. Thus, when readers react to her novel by saying that "the sexual violence is extremely traumatic" or "the child abuse is traumatic," they/she refutes by counter-arguing that "the *whole being alive* part is way more traumatic than all of those things" (Bryant 2018; emphasis added).

A western medical reading of Ada's multiple selves quandary would label it as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). According to the DSM5 —Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (2013), "Dissociative Disorders are characterized by a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on this, see Bénézet Bujo's *Introduction à la théologie africaine* (2008), 29-32; and Eugenio Nkogo Ondó's essay "El Concepto del Tiempo entre Occidente y África" (2015).

representation, motor control, and behavior” (291). The medical manual also states that these disorders are frequently the consequence of repeated traumatic maltreatment episodes during childhood or adulthood. This self disruption is usually accompanied by dissociative amnesia and a state of depersonalisation or derealisation, that is, experiences which involve detachment from the person’s mind, self and body. “The defining feature of dissociative identity disorder,” the manual describes, is “the presence of two or more distinct personality states or an experience of possession” (292). These possession identities are manifested through the conviction that a ghost, spirit, demon, deity or supernatural being has taken over the individual’s personality, and thus, s/he starts behaving differently. At the same time, many other side effects may accompany this state of self-estrangement, such as “comorbid depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-injury, non-epileptic seizures, or another common symptom” (294).

In Chapter Twenty —two chapters before the end of the novel— the reader is confronted with the fact that there are many hidden things in Ada’s past. The chapter starts with the epigraph: “*Hiding, oh, hiding! The hidden should hide very well, because I am letting go the leopard*” (Emezi 2018a, 207). Shade and Shadow unexpectedly unearth a painful secret. They recount how Ada’s neighbours —a friend of her brother Chima and the boy’s father afterwards— had molested her sexually. “We sectioned well,” the plural narrators go on to explain, “the Ada who was before the sectioning was not the same child after the sectioning. When she reached back for her memory, it would be as if it belonged to someone else, not her” (208). In addition to this, one is also shocked to know perchance that even Ada’s own brother Chima had “beaten her often because he could—he was the first son and the firstborn, and she was his responsibility” (208). No adult was there for twelve year-old lonely Ada. “By the time [Chima] raised a belt to her, the Ada knew no one would stay long enough to protect her” (209). In an attempt to save her, Shadow/Shade “isolated pockets of memory, each containing a different version of her” (209). Predictably, these multiplied versions of herself terrified Ada, since she could not tell which were real and which were conjured up. The godlings inside muse: “[m]any things are better than a complete remembering; many things we do are a mercy” (209).

By contrast, as early as Chapter Five, the reader is warned about the “staggering breath of things this boy would do to the Ada” (46). Soren, a Danish citizen by passport and Eritrean by blood, with melancholic eyes and dark smooth skin distilling anger and some distant childhood scar, was to hurt

Ada so much that a stronger version of her would be molten: Asughara. Paradoxically, the rape(s) are not omitted, but explicitly thrust upon the story line. “[T]his boy with the doe eyes and the sad skin, had released clouds into her. But she couldn’t remember any of it and she couldn’t remember saying yes because she couldn’t remember being asked” (57). Shadow and Shade continue:

There had been so many refusals in the weeks before, piled up like small red bricks, the weight of an apartment building that got torn down, things she thought would be easy enough to hold him away because he knew, he knew, he knew [Ada] didn’t want to. She couldn’t remember anything, like this was the first time, was it the fifth, oh god, how long had he been moving unwanted parts of himself in her? (58)

The rape is described both in realistic and oblique terms. Ada is depicted as moving blindly, trying to escape through the door. Soren shouting in his chase. Ada, also in an effort to scream, contorted in pain as she gave in and “crumpled on the floor and he dropped down with her” (58). Conversely, and in a manner that suggests that Ada was already trying to conceal or erase her pain and shame, this traumatic event is also recounted in a typically indirect trauma style:

She started to scream. She screamed and screamed and screamed. Her vision was numb. There was a window in front of her but it opened into nothingness like the one yawning from her mouth. Somewhere she could hear a building sound, a wind, huge and wide, rushing out of the void, rushing towards her. The walls, the veils in her head, they tore, they ripped, they collapsed. (58)

Before, but mainly after the rape, Ada shows many of the diagnosis features previously listed in the DMS5. Asughara seems to be in charge and engages Ada in a diet as an experiment “to see how close to the bone [she] could get Ada down to” (69), although Ada seems to admit that this habit had started before Ashugara came, “probably to control her body since she couldn’t control her mind” (69). The main protagonist also repeatedly mutilates her body “next to the old scars and watched the thin red lines form, the leaking full drops that suspended from the skin until she flicked them up with her tongue” (170). Increasingly sullen and forlorn, in Chapters Nine, Fifteen and Nineteen, the direct accounts of Ada only serve to further unfocus the edges of her self and those of her inner companions. She seems to surrender to an existence without simple explanations, neighbouring insanity and depression. Ada broods in Chapter Nineteen: “sometimes [loneliness] shows up like a continent shifting onto my chest. I’m so tired of being empty” (202). The words even reverberate

in her marble room “*empty, empty, empty* [...] All I know is that hurts to be in the spaces between freedom” (202-3; original emphasis).

By contrast, and without her hosts’ full awareness, Ada had started looking for rational and medical explanations of what was happening to her. She sought to have therapy and read about symptoms, such as personality disorders, “disruption of identity, self-damaging impulsivity, emotional instability and mood swings, self-mutilating behavior and recurrent suicidal behavior” (140). She was even hospitalised in a psychiatric ward. When existence is unbearable, Ada, with the assistance of Ashugara, tries to kill herself with painkillers and alcohol. This is bound to be Ashugara’s much cherished reunion with her cohort of oĝbanje brothersisters. A drunken and dejected Ada complains that when she needed it, she “didn’t have anyone to hold me and now I don’t have anyone to kill me” (170). To what Ashugara answers: “‘I’ll kill you any day you want’” (171). The Dagger had planned Ada’s final deliverance, even when the former conceded that it “was not easy to persuade a human to end their life. They’re very attached to it, even when it makes them miserable, and Ada was no different” (150).

As regards Ada’s split consciousness, it seems worth pointing out that it was the plural narrators who accompanied her during her childhood abandonment. It was also Ashugara who arrived to protect her and to take revenge on possible destructive influences on her host. To a certain extent, Ada and the Dagger had become indistinct: “She [Ada] was an imposter; she was now me [Ashugara]. I’d contaminated her too much—we had done too much together” (119). In Chapter Nine, the first time a direct, uncontaminated account of the protagonist is given, one is left with the same ambiguous canvas of perceptions knit throughout the novel: “You see, you’ve gone and caught me. I’m talking as if I’m them. It’s all right. In many ways, I am not even real” (94). A western medical diagnosis may have proved efficient in labelling Ada’s troubled predicament. The oĝbanje narrators, however, insist on being “the buffer between [Ada] and madness, we’re not the madness” (159). However feral and capricious the demigods’ ways may be, they nonetheless provide Ada with the company and space for belonging and *sui generis* affection —homeliness— that humans had failed to provide.

A classical trauma theory reading of *Freshwater* reveals another feature for further consideration: the fragmented treatment of time in the development of the plot. All through the narration, there are flashbacks in the seemingly

chronological unfolding of the story. These shifts could have been brought about by such destabilising events as Saachi's departure or Ada's rape. Consequently, the way the protagonist experiences time could be likened to that of people suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. In Chapter Ten the reader is dawned on a love tender story before Asughara was born. One encounters again a naïve Ada who seemed to know nothing about violence and self-harm. Furthermore, in Chapter Eleven, there is another shift back to the times when Asughara was born together with Saint Vincent. Abruptly, the reader travels back to Nigeria, into Ada's childhood, when she experiences her adolescent female blooming body's unease. In Chapter Sixteen, there is another U-turn when Ashughara introduces Uche, Ada's cousin and his homosexual plight: he lived in London because "he dated men" and had been estranged by his Nigerian family (166). Furthermore, in Chapter Twenty, Smoke and Shadow recount the "sectioning off" of memories they have been engaged in since Ada's childhood. Without any warning, one is faced with several other instances of sexual and physical abuse by neighbours and Chima. As the demigods put it: "[w]e did the best we could" (Emezi, 207). So much so that they were intent on providing an altogether African substitute reality.

## 4.2. Unearthing the Igbo Narrative

At the core of African culture, according to Janheinz Jahn (1961), there is a combination of *person, thing, place, time* and *perceived experience* which comprises a universal force. Simply put, and having caveats in relation to sweeping ethnocentric over-generalisations, African pre-colonial cosmovisions tend to integrate *force* and *matter*, that is, "[b]eing and beings coalesce" (197). "At the heart of the African conceptual world, then, was a truth that western rationalists grew estranged from: a profound recognition of the harmony and coherence of all things" (Appiah 2018, 204). In *The Igbo World an Art*, Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor point out:

The Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces. It is a dynamic world of movement and of flux. Igbo art [...] is never tranquil but mobile and active, even aggressive. Ike, energy, is the essence of all things human, spiritual, animate and inanimate. Everything has its own unique energy which must be acknowledged and be given its due. (1984, 63)

In *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (2000), Caroline Rooney claims that animism can be etymologically related to a combination of meanings "concerning what crosses over from life to death to life, and crosses

species” (10). In general terms, the name is derived from *anima* life or soul. In Rooney’s words, it could be regarded as “animal, mind, spirit, breath, life, soul” (10). The Routledge *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* defines animism as follows:

The belief in spirits which inhabit or are identified with parts of the natural world, such as rocks, trees, rivers and mountains. [...]. The term is sometimes used loosely to cover religious beliefs of indigenous population groups, e.g. in Africa and North America, prior to the introduction of Christianity, and is still widely used to describe the religious practice of so-called tribal or indigenous groups in areas like Southeast Asia. (Routledge *ESCA* cited in Rooney, 19)

Rooney suggests that animism could be associated with some particular characteristics which entail the conception of reality in a creative manner or bearing an “empathetic understanding” (14) of it. Thus, this reality construction seems to counteract western intellectual culture, marked by its *adversarial* and *critical* way of reading the world. In other words, western systems of belief are mainly based on oppositional or contrastive stances and a process of objectifying the reality to study. The Zimbabwean critic theorises that animism presupposes several characteristics: it subjectifies the phenomenal world, tends to be accommodative, and rejects binary dualities and a unifying unlocalised consideration.

According to Rooney, while current scientific theory “treats energies and forces as impersonal, from an animistic perspective these are treated in more personal terms, thus as spirits.” (Rooney 2000, 14). Rooney contends that in animist thought the dichotomy subject/object is rejected. In other words, animism subjectifies the perceived reality instead of considering it as object of knowledge. This subjectifying tendency does not presuppose a subjective perception, but rather “perceiving the subjectivity of the so-called object” (19). This perception of the phenomenal world places man in a less transcendental position with respect to other beings —much in tune with the latest Anthropocene cultural approach. Moreover, Rooney attributes animism an accommodative capacity, that is, African world-views have proved to be able to blend sometimes competing belief systems “in a suspension of a criterion of exclusivity” (2000, 15). Multiple discourses such as the Christian, the scientific and the animist have been made to coexist. In addition, in connection to the animist rejection of binaries, Rooney contends that western culture is defined by a double disavowal. On the one hand, it has historically given pre-eminence to an anti-naturalist vision of human beings, that is, it strives to assign human

existence a supremacy in the natural realm. On the other, there is a cultural emphasis on a “hyper-materialism that seeks to deny the vitality and dynamism of matter” (18). This double rejection simply insists on thought categorisations based on dualities such as “spirit/body, mind/matter, energy/mass, man/nature, human/animal” (18). Eventually, Rooney rejects the allegedly western tendency to unify animist world-views or, as she argues, to create “unanimism” (17). This process entails the adamant western construction of Africa, and African people and their beliefs, as a unity, which implies othering a whole continent. Animism, she emphasises, is “cross-cultural, trans-historical and also traverses epistemic boundaries” (19).

In an effort to explain the animist conception of forces or energies in movement, Rooney also claims that the vitality of being—or energies—is not opposed to absence. There is a close interplay of movement “from invisibility to visibility,” in which “absence need not signify non-being so much as invisibility or inaccessibility as well as the actuality of potentiality” (Rooney 2000, 20). She clings onto the notion that all nature is suffused with a spiritual force. Furthermore, she believes that “spirit is considered in terms of movement where this is further a question of being moved. Spirits move us in that they animate and affect us and can captivate and possess us” (20). Even Hegel, the paradigmatic philosopher of history, sought to solve contradictions between the subject and the divine and went as far as to regard some peoples, such as the Africans, as devoid of history and beyond human comprehension. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he claimed that “[i]n contrast to the classic European, the Negro African does not draw a line between himself and the object ... [In a sensory or immediate encounter with the object in a field of forces] he is moved, going centrifugally from subject to object on the waves of the Other” (1977, 72). Contemporary physics, in Rooney’s words, has discovered the universal energy force underlying matter. To put it differently, what the German philosopher deemed as irreconcilable contradictions in his own time could be better understood now in the light of shifting western paradigms. Moreover, in *The Philosophy of Evil*, Paul Siwek contends that western Christianity and rationality tend to draw a clear-cut distinction between good and evil in an uncompromising Manichaeic contradiction. Thus, “‘God’ and ‘Devil,’ heaven and hell, ‘religion’ and ‘superstition,’ the natural and the supernatural, sin and innocence, the sacred and the profane, [...] the chosen and the damned/outcast” are drawn along uncompromising lines or stances (Siwek in Okonkwo 2004, 656). This dichotomy is allegedly at odds with African philosophies, which stress the imbricated, hybrid and dynamic nature of the universe.

Admittedly, the circumstances of the protagonist of *Freshwater* do not seem alien to these conceptions and connections between being and the dynamics of existence. Ada's many spirit voices seem to stand for the many manifestations of entity. Thus, what for western thought is labelled as dissociative identity disorder, for Igbo narratives are instances of multiple spiritual selves and/or realities. What in the West is interpreted as self-injuries are, for Igbo ontology, scarification marks; what is diagnosed as suicidal compulsion could thus be understood as deliverance towards the *ogbanje* numinous cohort; what is absence of being or death is morphed into mutable spiritual existence—not defined by visibility or absence. What is regarded as a fragmented self afflicted by trauma, according to medical or psychological theories, could be acknowledged as multiple shedding layers of different versions of oneself. By the end of *Freshwater*, Ada's realisation and acceptance of her *ogbanje* nature, together with Ala's motherhood, brings her serenity. As Shadow and Shade consider: "The Ada was living in multiple realities at once, floating loosely between them, forgetting what each one felt like as soon as she moved to a new one" (209). In Chapter Twenty-Two, the main character has made a journey of self recognition to Nigeria, also intended as a journey towards her inner home. Readers are in contact for the first time with Ada's newly reconciled voice, which concedes: "how useless it had been to try and become a singular entity" (219). Ada's was a different path, one that could be misunderstood by many, though the only possible world-view fine-tuned with her inside voices and spiritual nature. As she concludes almost at the end of the novel:

No matter how mad it sounded, the things that were happening in my head were real and had been happening for a very long time. After all the doctors and the diagnoses and the hospitals, this thing of being *ogbanje*, a child of Ala—that was the only path that brought me some peace. (218)

Chapter Fifteen starts with the epigraph "*Nwa anwuna, Nwa anwuna': nwa nwuọ ka anyi mara chi agachi efo*" (162), which in Igbo could be translated as follows: "Dear son, son of the deceased, let us die so we can know the dawn." Through the different narrators' accounts, it becomes quite clear that death is not a synonym for non-existence, but rather the possibility of a different layer of existence. The *ogbanje* hatchlings perceive their entity inside Ada as a punishment, since the logical fate for them is to return to their communal limbo. Hence, their embodiment and living for such a long time in a human shell is endured until the dawn or home could be reached. After Asughara is visited by her Masquerade brothersisters in a dream, she relishes the moment of reuniting



with them: “[Ada] was me and I was her,” the Dagger broods, “so by returning to the other side, I would be taking her away from this useless human realm, and what better protection could I offer her, really? [...]. I could change Ada’s world. We could all go home” (136). Asughara repeatedly complains about her corporeal confinement: “The flesh was flesh, and for a little while, we could forget all the hurt, all the weight of over two decades of embodiment destroying us” (185). No sooner does she have the chance, she tries to show Ada that death could be seen as a way out.

For Igbo ontology—as is the case of other African cosmologies—death is a passage to another realm of existence, rather than yielding to a state of non-being. Life continues and the dead “whilst losing their own breath, live on as part of the on-going stronger forces of life to which they have capitulated” (Rooney 2000, 22). Simply put, the dead continue living as spiritual forces bound to nature and other humans. Another issue tackled in the novel is the experience of spirit possession—which in the DMS5 is referred to as consciousness delusions or fabrications. For Rooney, “spirit could be considered as an animating creative force, whilst possession and death could be seen in terms of being overcome by stronger forces” (22). Thus, the emphasis shifts from being/non-being towards *other forms of being* and on-going being. Rooney claims that different organisms and forces alien to our own being—such as viruses, bacteria, foreign bodies, weather conditions and the like—can cause trouble and illness. She goes on to describe other noxious interactions with our self as follows:

In addition, there are the psychological effects of the interaction of beings. This issue of being afflicted by spirits could be considered in terms of other forms of being having a bad affect on your being, hence it being seen as a matter for doctors, with special knowledge of the environment and psychic skills, capable of diagnosing certain physical and psychological conditions with remedies appropriate to these. (2000, 137)

Rooney deploys some psychoanalysis terms and processes when she relates a theory of trauma with a theory of spirit possession. Since “human beings possess the capacity to introject and project,” Ferenczi—a contemporary of Freud—maintained, “we oscillate between negotiating the relationship between the inner and the outer and reckoning with the forces in our environment” (Ferenczi in Rooney, 148). Rooney claims that there is a general animistic principle in exchanges or processes such as *introjection* and *mimetic identification* with other beings or forces—though she hastens to explain that

they are not the same. Introjection is defined as a period of life during which each subject could undergo a certain “partial destruction of the self from the external environment” as “a way towards a creative construction” (Rooney, 141). On the other hand, she describes the process of identification as “a receptivity to the other not as an object but as a subject: a sort of displacement of a personal narcissism by that of the other” (143). Irrespective of the different empathetic capacities of each subject, Rooney eventually concludes, “[t]he philosophical concept of the ‘one-and-only-subject’ is a denial of the fact that there is also a creative subject: that is, a subject capable of accommodating to the other or others” (149). To wit, the western medical diagnosis reveals multiple split personalities, while Emezi and Rooney offer alternative explanations by recourse to African ontologies. It seems pertinent to stress that, although *Freshwater* evinces a spiritual rewriting of the protagonist’s experience, Rooney appears to maintain a borderline position. On the one hand, she resorts to the analysis of animist notions but, on the other, she eventually complements her argumentation using psychoanalysis.

In relation to what he deems as a current ontological trend in philosophy, Achille Mbembe claims that a growing field of knowledge is upholding the idea of a more hospitable planetary cohabitation. The Cameroonian theorist believes that African systems of thought or what he calls “alternative archives” propound the view of imbricated evolution of natural and human worlds. In other words, these alternative stances do not centre the human and ontology as the key element in the debate. Much in line with Rooney, he purports that African systems of thought rely on *relations, composition*—multiple forces, being and entities—and *agency*, either material or immaterial. The African archive prioritises the idea that to be human is to be “in search of a supplement of who one is” (2017, *youtube.com*). Mbembe goes on to argue that becoming entails the possibility of becoming *other*. Simply put, “[b]uilding oneself is a composition that is constantly metamorphosing” (2017). For this reason, he advocates a methodology of epistemological research that “takes into consideration all the archives of the world” (2017). Mbembe claims that the question of being has been superseded by other questions such as: “What is real? What it is to perceive? What lies behind what we see?” (2017). In this sense, he dares to challenge the whole question of the visible and difference in the light of African systems of thought. As an example, he mentions the Dogon cosmology. In Dogon worldview—and in this respect Mbembe shares Rooney’s interpretation—individuality is resolved on account of the concept of “twinning.” “The conjoining of two entities that look opposite is the normal

way in which we think being,” he points out. “Being is fundamentally, by definition, the coming together and the structuring of poles that apparently look entirely opposite” (2017). In line with this argumentation, Philip Peek observes that in most Western Africa —among the Ashanti, the Dan, the Dogon, the Edo, the Ijo and the Igbo— the notion of the individual is traversed by the idea of having one’s spirit double —the *oma* or *chi*— whose main role is to guide the individual on the right path. Moreover, spirits have a duality of female-male existence. In other words, life forces comprise, on the one hand, a double soul while, on the other, this soul is also female *and* male (2008). Eventually, in her memoir novel *Dear Senthuran* (2021), Akwaeke Emezi explains her own metaphysical dual spirit/human condition. She emphatically argues that

I kept thinking of spirit and human as a binary, either one or the other, even though the whole point of an ogbanje is that it’s both. An ogbanje is only an ogbanje when it is in a human body. It’s not a spirit possessing a human; there is no demarcation between the two—there is no two in the first place. I didn’t need to do anything to move as an ogbanje. I was already doing it, by existing, by breathing. (56-57)

The implications and derivations that these alternative systems of thought may have on binary western givens, such as gender, are no less than exciting.

In consequence, Ada’s situation seems more likened to a spirit coexistence imbricated with stronger versions of her childhood self, other consciousness cohabitations which provide her with the means to survive an otherwise solitary and excruciating existence. Malena, a Dominican friend of Ada’s, is a medium. She also knows about gods and spirits talking through her: “it was normal for her, to be mounted and then left by saints, gods, spirits.” Shade/Shadow consider: “[t]he Ada was amazed but we were respectful. We loved Malena because she smelled like us” (Emezi 2018a, 89). The plural narrators summarise the complexity of living in a boiling cloud of selves by acknowledging that Ada’s body belongs to her as much as it belongs to them. They also claim that they “were more than [Asughara] and [they] were more than the saint [Saint Vincent]. We were a fine balance, bigger than whatever the namings had made, and we wanted to reflect that, to change the Ada into us” (187). Ada can only feel at peace when her inner companions agree on halting the births, when Ada “was ready to take her front” (216), when the plural consciences yield to the fact that Ada was not theirs, but that they were Ada’s.

The same fluidity is shown in the treatment of the tropes of time and place. *Freshwater* is told polyphonically by demigods. The readers are, then, faced with their estranged (or rather unfocused) time and place perception. Thus, one is oftentimes travelling back and forth from Ada's childhood to her adulthood, from Nigeria to America into an ethereal locus such as Ala's womb, experiencing a living in a no man's land of liminality. In addition, most characters in *Freshwater* are cosmopolitans. Saachi's life lingers between Umuahia (Nigeria), London, Riyadh, Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) and the United States. Ada wanders back and forth between Nigeria, Johannesburg, Cape Town and the US —where she meets people from Denmark, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Uganda, Kenya, Dominican Republic, Panama, Colombia, Trinidad, Serbia, Iceland, and Slovakia. The plural narrators feel they do not belong to the new spaces Ada inhabits: "We raged at the displacement of a new country," (Emezi 2018a, 47), and complain and yearn for the time when they can return home "back across the ocean, where we belonged" (51). The idea of home, however, is elusive and shares the multiplicity and indefiniteness of Ada's self quest. The question, then, lingers on: Is home located in Nigeria? is it some place in Ala's underworld? Is it some locus of peace and plural coexistence? or is it the main character's inner journey of discovery and acceptance?

*Freshwater* is, all things considered, a complex interweaving of trauma fragmentation and Igbo layers that refuses to offer any single and conclusive interpretation. The fictional negotiations of core and peripheral discourses could be likened to the dynamics of a volcano. The main Igbo ontology message surges with violence and strength in an overwhelming outpour. Conversely, lateral chimneys from other possible interpretations coexist, some times solidifying into a hardened strata, some other times expelling a gas purge of remaining awareness. Interestingly, when considering what they/she has said in their/her interviews, Emezi's own psychological condition after writing the novel remains unstable and ambiguous. On the one hand, they/she explains that writing the book has given them/her the necessary clarity to change their/her life. The author emphatically declared:

I'm very clear that making work [writing, expressing themselves/herself through art] is the crux of my wellbeing, and I'm basically a bit cutthroat about removing anything that impedes my ability to do that. I stitch together a world with peace and quiet, and I make work within it. (2018c)

On the other hand, in one of their/her interviews, Emezi describes the serious difficulties they/she has been undergoing. When asked what their/her post-debut

novel experience had been like, they/she answers: “I did not know how stressful it would be. No one talks about how brutal and exhausting it is.” And they/she continues: “I ended up in the emergency room a few months after *Freshwater* came out because I was having severe muscle spasms. I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t swallow. It was horrific.” Paradoxically, part of the recovery they/she has found entails “not writing any more books” (Emezi 2019b). Their/her work of fiction—as much as Emezi’s own life predicament—remains a palimpsest. Is *Freshwater* about illness and trauma, or is it about Igbo (or art) reality?

## 5. ON GENDER DYSPHORIA, LEOPARD MARKS AND PYTHON MOLTINGS

The dialectic meanderings in *Freshwater* also flow in connection to gender issues. “The possibility that I was an oḡbanje occurred to me around the same time I realized I was trans, but it took me a while to collide the two worlds” Emezi declares in an extensive essay in *The Cut* (2018k). The debut novel is not the first instance in which Emezi minutely describes their/her intimate process of gender transitioning. They/she eventually accepts their/her spiritual circumstance and starts to reflect upon the consequences that this realisation could have on their/her gender condition. “Did oḡbanje even have a gender to begin with? Gender is, after all, such a human thing,” they/she speculates. In fact, Emezi ponders that being an oḡbanje is to be doubly categorised as other. Not only do/does they/she experience the alterity of being transgender, but they/she also bears the burden of belonging to a divergent category of existence, namely, that of being a spirit with a human appearance (Emezi 2018k). Many of the reviews on *Freshwater* appear to be readily willing to label the novel according to gender transitioning classifications. To give but two examples, Emezi has been awarded the *Lambda Literary Award* for Transgender Fiction (Isama 2019), and *Freshwater* has been labelled as Transgender Literature (Halderman 2018).

Chapter Eleven opens with the plural narrators’s anticipation: “*You will always be in the process of change because every time you get born into a basilisk, that basilisk consumes itself so you can be born into another basilisk*” (Emezi 2018a, 121). The capricious and shapeshifting nature of the oḡbanje, and Ada by extension, is clearly prompted. Interestingly, a basilisk—a figure taken from medieval Christian mythology—is said to be a hybrid creature: half bird, half snake, and born from a serpent’s hatched egg (Fast, *vtropes.org*). In tune with the basilisk’s interstitial locus, the delayed introduction of Saint

Vincent serves to signal the beginning of Ada's journey towards transsexuality. For the first time, one is told about Asughara's arguably twin birth brother, his daydreaming nature, his unpolluted demeanour and his gentle but veritable masculinity. Before Ada reached puberty —so the reader is told— she “had liked being seen as a boy” (Emezi, 123). She was comfortable with the fact that her chest was flat, her hips narrow and her facial features rather brawny. In addition, she enjoyed having the freedom of movement in both boy and girl spaces. She even secretly savoured being taken for a boy at the swimming pool.

Regrettably, when she was about twelve “[t]he hormones redid her body.” She could not stop the “blackish blood, a swelling chest, hair sprouting like an evil forest” (123). Shade and Shadow were disgusted at the way they were being pushed into a space they hated, “a marked plane that was too clear and too wrong” (123). They refer to their vessel as the “meatbody” or “abomination” (123). Ada dressed in her father's clothes in an effort to hide her contours, and pretended to ignore her schoolmates's remarks on her busty silhouette. In a rather too hasty proleptic move, the reader is once again pushed (and puzzled) by the emergence of a Saint Vincent who, unexpectedly, steers Ada into love involvements with girls. Thus, one is faced with a humiliated Ada rejected by a college friend. Ada's feelings could be described, according to the medical manual DSM5, as Gender Dysphoria, which is defined as:

the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender. Although not all individuals will experience distress as a result of such incongruence, many are distressed if the desired physical interventions by means of hormones and/or surgery are not available. (2013, 451)

Ada's adolescent body changes and her same-sex crushes, allegedly exerted by Saint Vincent, prompt a new stage in the main character's tortuous journey home. A path which will entail changing her body, or transitioning.

Ada's initial discomfort with her female morphing leads her —mainly pushed by the sexually vigorous Asughara— to a loop of free sex: “[Ada] was more isolated than ever and we were chafing at still being flesh, so the only thing left to do was hunt. If we were trapped in a body, then we would do bodily things” (Emezi 2018a, 185). Afterwards, Ada decides to bind her bust and starts dating a woman, Donyen. Saachi and her family do not seem to accept Ada's condition. Uche, Ada's gay cousin living in London, is the only person who understands her situation. Ada's uneasiness with her body, together with the

world's equating her *ogbanje* condition to madness, sink her into a depression and an attempt to kill herself. Eventually —and once again abruptly for the reader— she decides that “[r]emoving her breasts was only the first step” (187). The *ogbanje* within wanted to revert things to a time when they “were not capable of biological things, when [they] were neutral” (190). Ada’s multiple selves were determined to “become what [they] wanted, now that the reconfiguration was done” (192). As Shadow and Shade proclaim, they were intent on reshaping their exterior to match their inner self: a fluid river between male and female. Ironically, the plural demigods discover that western therapy has labels for what they thought of as carvings. These terms are “gender reassignment, transitioning” (189). At the end of Chapter Seventeen, after a breast-reduction operation, it is suggested that Ada and her multiple beings inside have found the road to resurrection.

Leaving the protagonists’s discomfort with gender aside, the novel brings to the fore the detrimental effects that many men have on Ada’s life. From her absent and selfish father Saul, her machista and domineering brother Chima, her ambivalent and flimsy husband Ewan, abusive Soren and lusty Itohan’s younger brother to lukewarm Yshwa, Ada suffered, both in Nigeria and in America, the scathing consequences of patriarchal asymmetries. Saul was a Nigerian physician trained in the Soviet Union, who had returned to his country “where he was hailed as a big man, coming from abroad with his Benz with the customized plates.” (29). He is described as a distant and selfish man, too dependent on social acceptance and admiration. “When Saul got his chieftaincy title, it was like he’d been dipped in silver, like he was finally as shiny as he wanted to be. He spent a lot of money on new things for himself, money that he refused to spend in other ways, like on his family” (29). His marriage with Saachi readily deteriorated and he grew progressively aloof, absent and unconcerned with his wife and children. Because of him and his spendthrift habits, Saachi was compelled to seek a job abroad and leave her family.

Ewan was “easy, charming, comfortable” (95), a green-eyed Irish boy who was the star of the tennis team. His relationship with Ada is described as tender and fulfilling, even slightly sentimental (which for a narrator such as Asughara seems rather awkward). However, Ewan also tasted like a drug, very much like madness. His Catholic upbringing tore him between his love to Ada and his loyalty to his Irish girlfriend. Asughara could readily see his dark side, his increasingly ruthless sexual behaviour. He honestly loved Ada, and married her eventually. However, since Ada could not give herself entirely to him, their

relation eventually withered away and came to an end. On the contrary, Soren seemed a needy man with a past wound and a sad countenance. He proved to be possessive, jealous and sexually unsparing. He obliged Ada to have sex repeatedly without her consent, without taking precautions against pregnancy. Ada's brother Chima is mentioned almost incidentally, probably only to underline his birth and gender right to punish her sister as the one in charge of the family during his parents's prolonged absences. Ada's friend Itohan has two brothers, and while the protagonist is spending some holiday time in their house, she—or rather Asughara—has casual sex with the younger brother. Guilt consumes Ada, who has to surrender to her strong female guardian's flesh cravings. It is clear that Ada's childhood discomfort with her gender seems to have been further fuelled by troubled attachments to men who had left many invisible scars in her all too gentle character. The birth of the Dagger is a veritable defence movement to counteract masculine maltreatment and give agency and protection to a girl/woman who, in all likelihood, was to find it difficult to survive the madness of her circumstances.

Another possible reading in connection with the existence of Asughara is to consider Ada's female body, and the sexual attraction it provokes, as a weapon in a heavily patriarchal context. Ada's body (before transitioning) is used by both men and the Dagger as a source of domination. Soren, Ewan—and most of the occasional sexual partners Ada/Asughara has—seem to regard Ada's body as an instrument of male power to subdue. On the other hand, Asughara's reckless sexual enjoyment is depicted as a means to punish men, but also as a channel to express female unrestrained desire. Paraphrasing Luce Irigaray, Samuel Kamara argues in his essay "Mirror and Sexuality" that

at the center of the gender struggle between women and men is the sexuality of women and, we cannot shy away from the fact that one fundamental objective of patriarchy is to colonise women's bodies and control their sexuality through ideology and cultural discourses that legitimise male authority to the disadvantage of women. (2018, 103)

However, Irigaray also contends that female bodies and sexuality can give immense pleasure to women (Irigaray 2001). Be that as it may, Ada does not seem to enjoy her bodily sexual gratifications, at least not frequently. She, instead, appears to be haunted by guilty feelings, by the fear of hurting her loved ones. Her oqbanje hosts, on the contrary, are immune to any sort of moral responsibility for their behaviour. Ambiguity, all things considered, seems to remain. The reader is confronted with a shy Ada who requires a Christian moral



code to counteract her avowed misbehaviour. Conversely, the Ada of the last chapters seems to embrace a free emotional (and sexual) bond with many men and women devoid of moral restrictions. Has Ada evolved by probing and defying patriarchal boundaries? Or have her *ogbanje* selves gained agency and erased the chaste Nigerian girl?

In order to understand Ada's evolution in Igbo ontological terms, it is necessary to examine how the divinity pantheon is structured. Even though Igbo numina are dominated by male gods, of which *Chukwu Okike* or *Chineke* is the highest deity, there are many intermediary gods and goddesses with a secondary status, which are nonetheless object of much communal devotion (Kanu 2018). Moreover, as John Mbiti observes:

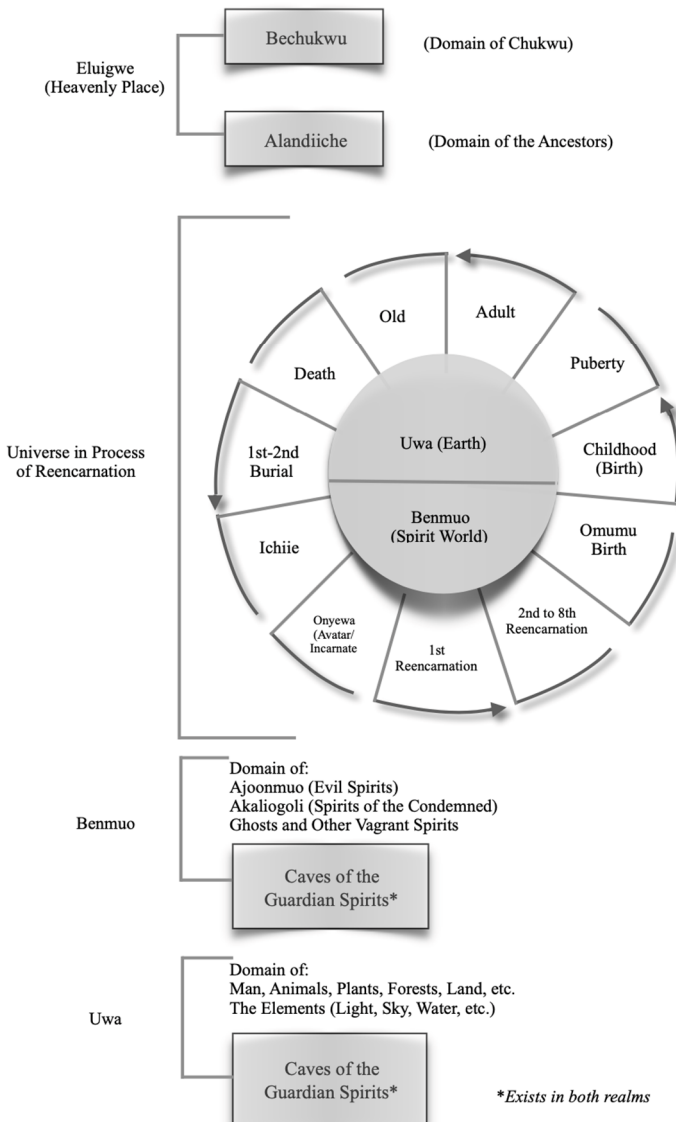
It is sometimes also believed that between God and human beings, there are other beings that populate the universe. These are the spirits. There are many types of spirits. God is their creator first as he is the creator of all human beings. The spirits have a status between God and man, and are not identical with either and some of them may be used to do certain things. (1975, 65)

Among female deities Ala is the sole daughter of Chukwu. She is publicly and privately venerated as the earth, goddess of fertility and guardian of the community moral integrity. She controls other gods and is usually invoked so that she can bring fortune and economic abundance (Kanu 2018). The *ogbanje*, as was mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, have an in-between status, since they are considered to be capricious demigods with no ancestors. They are damned in a circle of birth-death-re-birth without descendants, which is not the usual condition of the other Igbo deities. The personal *chi* is a reincarnation of another dead human or ancestor whose role is to protect his/her human host. The Igbo universe is divided into three places. One is the Heavenly Place or *Eluigwe* —which is the domain of Chukwu and the Ancestors (or *Alandiichie*). Then, the Universe gets divided into the Earth or *Uwa* and the Spirit World or *Benmuo*. Uwa is the domain of man, animals, plants and the like, and home of elements such as light, water and sky. Benmuo is the cave of the Guardian Spirits, but also the cave of Evil Spirits —*Ajoonmuo*— and the Spirits of the Condemned —*Akaliogoli*— as well as Ghost and other Vagrant Spirits (such as *ogbanje*) (See fig.3). When it comes to considering the layers within each human being, Igbo cosmology determines three: the first layer is the domain of *Arummadu* or the Body, the second is the layer of the *Chi* or the Guardian Spirit, and the third is the realm of the Mind or *Onyeuwa* or Avatar/Incarnate Spirit. In other words, a person who comes back to the world

after death in order to fulfil his/her destiny or for a special mission (Obioma 2019; Osewa 2019, see fig. 4). Admittedly, the Igbo ontology shows a rich interplay of spirit and matter in continuous flux and liminality. In consequence, it seems quite coherent that Ada could find a more suitable explanation for her predicament by plunging herself into the vital consciousness and comprehension of her otherwise off-kilter condition for western standards.

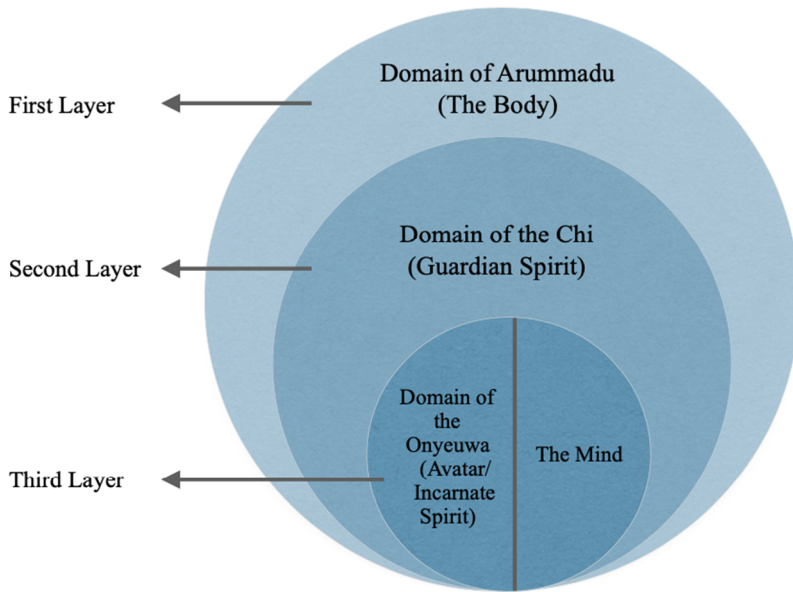
**Figure 3:**

**Chart of Igbo Cosmology** (Diagram reproduced from *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019) by Chigozie Obioma. New York, Boston, London. Little, Brown and Company.



**Figure 4:** Diagram reproduced from *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019) by Chigozie Obioma. New York, Boston, London. Little, Brown and Company.

### Composition of Man in Igbo Cosmology



Therefore, what for westerners is diagnosed as gender dysphoria, followed by reassignment and transitioning, for her *ogbanje* companions is simply an instance of Ala’s child shedding. What for medical purposes are self-injuries, for Igbo ontology are offerings, “carvings,” “shiftings,” the “reshapings,” “the sacrifices a snake must go through to continue its timeline, the necessity of molting, the graves built of skins” (Emezi 2018a, 189). To put it simply, Ada’s body should morph so that her inner *ogbanje* spiritual nature—and, apparently, neutral gender—could be in harmony, at home. Ada’s first move when trying to make her new external image mirror her inner self was to cut her beautiful long hair right to the roots of her scalp and wax her eyebrows. In addition, the surgical operation to remove her breasts—to appease her gender unrest—meant for her and her inner demigods an identity carving. They narrate in an

exalted manner that all the sexual lack of restraint that they and Ada have been involved in

was nothing compared to the best thing we'd accomplished, when we laid out the Ada's body on a surgical table and let the masked man take a knife lavishly to the flesh of her chest, mutilating her better and deeper than we ever could, all the way to righteousness. After such carvings, how could one human matter? (186)

In addition, the self-mutilations Ada inflicted upon her body to placate her inner bloodthirsty spirits were changed by tattoos. The leopard was freed. Ada started marking her skin to remind herself of her past companions, to pay homage to the selves that had kept her alive. Ada's new bodily harmony smelled "like broken mango leaf, sharp, sticking to the inner rind of our skin" (193). The boiling cloud of identities felt like "the falling and revival of the scales" (193). They were overwhelmed by the joy of having attained a home-like place:

It was too late for the Ada to do anything except try to keep up with us, try not to be drowned in the liminal fluid we swam in. It tasted sharp as gin, metallic as blood, was soaked in both, down past red into the deep loam. Ogbanje space. We could rest in it like the inside curb of a calabash; we could turn in on ourself, wind back to our beginning, make those final folds. Sometimes they call this the crossroads, the message point, the hinge. It is also called flux space, the line, or the edge—like we said, resurrection. (193)

When Asughara failed to kill Ada, she retreated and Saint Vincent stepped forward; more accurately, they felt "[t]hey were balanced now—the Ada, her little beast, and her saint—the three of them locked in marbled flesh, burning through the world" (126). In fact, this alignment also included Shadow and Shade, since in the last chapter of the novel, for the first time, Ada's polyphonic voice has acquired a new string of confidence. "Ogbanje," she acknowledges, "are as liminal as possible—spirit and human, both and neither. I am here and not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone. I am my others; we are one and we are many. Everything gets clearer with each day, as long as I listen. With each morning, I am less afraid" (226). In an interview with Sophia Richards for *MYTHOS*, when being questioned on her misuse of the word "mutilation" in the novel, Emezi responded in a rather exalted tone:

do you understand what being trans means? Do you understand how people view gender-confirmation surgeries? Do you understand that there are still millions of people who see this as mutilation, and who will approach me and treat me like I've mutilated my body? So why not lean into that wrongness? Ok, I'm

abnormal. And then what? What happens now? What if I'm a mutilated thing?  
Fine. I'm ok with that. (2018d)

Although Ada's (and Emezi's) journey to Nigeria was necessary to find the answer to their metaphysical dilemma, both —character and author— seem well aware of the contemporary transphobic reality of Nigeria (a reality akin to that of many other global geographies). In 2014, the Nigerian government passed the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which expands the extant colonial sodomy laws. Up to fourteen years of prison can be mandated for same-sex couples cohabitating, and up to ten years of prison to people supporting gay organisations or displaying same-sex public behaviour (Green-Simms 2016). It is not difficult to hypothesise what the social and legal response to transsexual people could be in the country. Thus, it becomes self-evident that many diaspora writers, such as Emezi, seem to be deeply conscious of the new strategy of cultural change they are enmeshed in. As Dussel (2012) claims, not only is a new decolonized mindset necessary in today's global world, but an entirely creative dialogue between the past and the present deadlocks should be established. *Freshwater* is, avowedly, a start.

## **6. MANY MOTHERS OR MOTHERLESS?**

The trope of motherhood has been repeatedly used in Nigerian literary masterpieces. The metaphor has frequently been related to the continent as mother Africa. This fact has undoubtedly helped, up to recent times, to perpetuate a patriarchal status quo for women. Mothers usually are revered “as providers, cradle rockers, nurturers, and goddesses, [that] inspire awe and reverence” (Begum 2016, 16). In spite of this, their central role in many African contexts has been limited to that of being child-bearers. What is more, mothering has been directly interwoven with female identity. Notwithstanding this, African Womanism and Motherism movements have contended that far from being a role or institution that enslaves women, motherhood is, many a time, the only source of social empowerment African women can have access to. Recent literature —from writers in the diaspora and those living in Nigeria (or Africa)— seems to have opened up a new road for women to claim emancipation and agency. A new generation of Nigerian women writers — among whom Emezi can be counted— are writing as a source of resistance in order to attain mobility and equality. These contemporary writers are unlocking a space to acknowledge and discuss female independence, voice and expression of sexuality. They are also seeking to redefine and liberate men from patriarchal

masculinity and homophobia. Although the trope of motherhood may seem, at first sight, ancillary to *Freshwater*, my contention is that not only is it a powerful trope in connection to Ada's dilemmas, but the novel also introduces new instances and models in connection to it: the absent mother, the cruel one, and the rejection of such condition.

"The Ada belonged to us and Ala and Saachi" (Emezi 2018a, 10), the duet Shadow/Shade nonchalantly announce in the first chapter, as if this condition of tripartite motherhood was unoriginal. As is well-known, African women are — or at least used to be— expected to be in charge of the upbringing of their own children, and nurturing the whole extended family, even the community (Ogunyemi 1996). From the very beginning of the story, it becomes clear that motherhood will be —yet again— a matter of hybridity. On the one hand, Ada's human mother, Saachi, plays a crucial role in shaping the events of her daughter's life. Her abandonment creates a shallow place in Ada's mind and heart that is to be hosted by some surrogate mother/companions. On the other extreme, Ala is the detached divinity who, rather capriciously, satisfies Saul's wish to have a daughter. Thus, Ada also happens to be the earth goddess' offspring. Inevitably, the existence of a human —or, so to say, *external*— mother; a mother *within* —or surrogate mother— and a *spiritual* one seems to be a matter for further consideration.

### 6.1. Saachi

Ada's human mother is portrayed as a very small, thin woman, "with dark eyes and hair, light brown skin, [...] born on the eleventh of the sixth month, in Melaka, on the other side of the Indian Ocean" (Emezi 2018a, 2). She is a nurse, a practical and responsible woman chosen by Ala to be the conduit of her progeny so that the little hatchling has more chances of survival. Baby Ada is a difficult child, always screaming and weeping and, strangely enough, writhing and zigzagging on her stomach instead of crawling on her fours. The girl spends her childhood mostly in Aba, Nigeria. Presumably, an episode in Ada's childhood proved to be crucial in unfolding future events in her life. When she was alone in the bathroom, a python appeared. After staring at the animal hypnotised by fear, Ada screamed her loudest bawl, thus prompting her father to cut the python into bits with a machete. "He had no idea what he had done" (13), the plural narrators explain with concern. Since the killing of pythons has for long been considered in Igbo culture an abomination on the grounds that they are associated to the earth goddess, one is bound to believe that some ill

omen is cast on the child. As the narrators mourn: “Ala (our mother) dissolved amid broken scales and pieces of flesh; she went back, she would not return” (13). The reader is told that Saachi starts having panic attacks after Ada’s young sister had an accident on the street. Saul, always an impatient and unconcerned husband, leaves his wife to her own devices. Saachi departs for the first time when she has to fly to Malaysia with Añuli so that some medical advice could be given on the girl’s leg injury. When Saachi and Añuli return to Nigeria, Ada cannot recognise her. As the reader will soon realise, “forgetting could be protection” (30). Saachi had been offered a job in Saudi Arabia, her marriage was falling apart, and her husband was distant and dilapidating the family wherewithal. “Saachi looked at [her husband’s] prideful back, then she looked at their bank accounts and at their family and she made a choice. It was easier to get free for the sake of her children than for the sake of herself” (30-31). Ada’s human mother probably wanted to get away from a life that was no longer satisfactory, so taking the job with the excuse of her children’s needs seemed to be for her the most reasonable decision. However, even the cruel and mischievous demigods understood this as hard enough to break the child. The *ogbanje* brothersisters had succeeded in scaring the human mother off. Saachi would soon realise, though, that she would be punished because the godlings would take her daughter, they would “fill her mouth with sand” (31). As the newly-born Shadow and Shade ponder “it is only a fool who does not know that freedom is paid for in old clotted blood” (31). So by the time Saachi’s contract in Saudi Arabia ended, she had been separated from her children for ten years. She returned to Nigeria “only once or twice each year with suitcases that smelled cool and foreign. She left behind the sacrifice of three children fastened to an altar with thin sinews, and she would pay the costs of that for the rest of her life” (32).

Ada was to develop a yearning for hugs and affection. In return, she would only get an elusive Yshwa, an abusive brother, a non-existent father, some school friends and coexistence with some callous inner voices. Moreover, the persistent watching eye of Ala seemed to be scrutinising, “[a]fter all, the Ada was her hatchling, her bloodthirsty little sun, covered in translucent scales” (38). From this moment of departure and acute pain for both mother and child, the figure of the chosen human progenitor begins to be blurred or, more accurately, willingly erased from the narrators’ account. She reappears into the scene to make matter-of-fact decisions, or at critical moments in which Ada’s life is in danger. Hence, Saachi returns when Ada attempts to kill herself or when she is having a panic attack —as an efficient nurse, she calmly gives instructions on

the phone. “Saachi finally realized, in her panic over the Ada’s suicide attempt, exactly how much of her daughter belonged to her, which was to say, not much at all” (188).

It is through the cracks in the narration of the ogbanje voices that readers gather that the human mother lives in America but not with Ada, that she is in Virginia for Ada’s graduation, that she gets into debt after lending Ewan — Ada’s husband— money for his studies. When Ada wanted to have her breast surgery, Saachi did not agree with her. So Ada blocked her from her telephone emergency contacts. “For a woman who looked to drown her loneliness in her children, it was a brutal thing to do, to push her out” (190). Ada and her inner companions seem to desert her this time, throw her to the periphery of their life, “Ada was slipping from the human mother to us” Shadow and Shade concede, “to a freedom Saachi didn’t trust” (188). As they muse: “We do not return your children until it suits us, if ever” (190).

What seems worth noticing when discussing motherhood is that Saachi bears the burden of guilt for having left her children behind. Although it is clear that she was fleeing from despair and anxiety, it is also plain that Saachi felt obliged to be the support and provider of her children. Her husband, on the contrary, was never shown to have been judged for shunning himself from the family, affectively and economically; he is perceived as a want on their lives. Interestingly, Chapter Three is heralded as follows: “*What is a child who does not have a mother?*” (21). This question echoes repeatedly in the novel. The fact that Ada has three mothers seems only an excuse for her having none. The human mother precipitated a void that had to be filled with other presences, no less real for being invisible.

## 6.2. Asughara

Although she seems to be an abusive, feral surrogate mother (or sister), Asughara is the only comforting presence Ada can cling to in moments of desperation. After describing with minute resentment how Soren had “fucked her body again, that day and every day afterward, over and over [...] never bothering with a condom, always coming inside her” (63), the Dagger had promised herself that he would never get his hands on the sobbing young woman again. “[Asughara] had arrived, flesh from flesh, true blood from true blood. I was the wildness under the skin, the skin into a weapon, the weapon



over the flesh. I was here. No one would ever touch her again” (65-66). Thereby, the wild female *ogbanje* becomes Ada’s shield against violence.

By recourse to oftentimes questionable means, she becomes not only Ada’s ambiguous individualistic sex thirsty identity, but also a watchful mother. Even though Asughara’s accounts are charged with jealousy, vengeful feelings and casual sex, she has very tender responses towards Ada. To give an example, she cannot understand Yshwa’s weak disposition. She is enraged by the Christian god’s adamant begrudging his physical presence to the child. She complains as a mother would: “he was never there for her, not like me, not even close. He couldn’t be bothered to materialize when she was just a little girl, when she really, really needed him. How can you leave a child alone like that?” (83). In fact, Asughara is such an ambiguous character that, one moment, she is an overprotecting mother and, the next, she is only concerned with her selfish sexual drives. She is a bumper against harm but also possessive and manipulative. However, many a time, she makes it plain that she loves Ada (even in her own demigod manner):

I loved her because me, I had known her since I was nothing, since I was everything, since the shell-blue house in Umuahia. I loved her because I watched her grow up, because she gave offerings since I started awakening, feeding me from the crook of her arm and the skin of her thighs. Let me tell you now, I loved her because in the moment of her devastation, the moment she lost her mind, that girl reached for me so hard that she went completely mad, and I loved her because when I flooded through, she spread herself open and took me in without hesitation, bawling and broken, she absorbed me fiercely, all the way; she denied nothing. I loved her because she gave me a name. (70-71)

Admittedly, the Dagger was an exceptional *ogbanje* who had learned to enjoy the individualistic feeling of owning a separate entity in a body. As she became more attached to the Ada and the bodily possibilities she provided her with, the hatchling disorients readers by showing that she is also capable of generosity. When Ada meets Ewan, Asughara retreats to the point of restraining her flesh urges, she even erases her presence, just to let her host enjoy her new relation. “Everything with Ewan was moving at a different pace,” she gathers, “one I wasn’t interfering with, one that no one had given Ada before. I wasn’t going to fuck that up for her” (103). When Ewan and Ada have their first sexual encounter, Asughara is not there. In an unexpected way, Ada ends up crying and suffering for her inside companion’s desertion. Had she become so attached to her shielding presence that she could not be alone with the man she loved? So

much anguish does Ada feel that even the carnal Asughara is nearly broken-hearted. Inexplicably, the Dagger pleads for forgiveness and promises never to leave her alone again with her “throat [...] too tight for words” (157). However, her altogether strung-out nature, readily predisposed not to harm Ada, prompts the oġbanje mother within to meddle with Ewan too. In a very telling paragraph, one can perceive the ambiguous and cyclothymic behaviour of the Dagger:

I took her away, because their marriage was burning and I was trying to protect her. It took Ada and I years to realize that I fucked it up. [...]. The only thing that could've saved them was if I had never existed, if Ada was not divided up the way she was, if she had been able to control me. We can stand here and list impossible things all day long. (161)

Yet in another unforeseen twist of the plot, Asughara is visited by a pair of oġbanje brothersisters. Peremptorily, she is reminded of her covenant with her communal cohort, of the obedience due to her kin. They urge her to free herself from her human carcass as her destiny prescribes. From that moment on, the mother inside is intent on helping (or rather on convincing) Ada to overcome her futile and painful existence. Ada had broken up with her husband and was suffering a period of depression, she had returned to Yshwa for comfort, and seemed to be slipping away from her strong twin companion. In Chapter Thirteen, one can get a glimpse of Ada's struggle through Asughara's narration. The protagonist seemed intent on taking a distance, even to save herself from the female oġbanje. Meanwhile, the Dagger appears to be caught up in a loop of filthy and violent sex. Ada tries to kill herself (with the willing help of Asughara) as a way of protecting her and the ones upon whom she thinks she is inflicting pain. While Ada and Asughara are taking pills and gulping alcohol to release themselves from the world, they have a long exchange in which even the strong demigod shows, probably for the first time, signs of being deeply scarred—a dagger slashed. Soren's deep wound has proved to have defiled both of them: “*Were we not innocent?*.” A tearful Asughara says to Ada, “*Were we not innocent enough to be spared?!*” (144-5; original emphasis). Nonetheless, the suicide attempt fails and, after that, the nuanced Amazon-like companion decides that she has been defeated. She “left Ada to her new family. [...], as if we'd never planned to kill each other” (158). Once again, some traces of a selfless instinct seem to resonate in the words of the mother within.

### 6.3. Ala

“Our mother was the world,” the plural narrators announce in Chapter Four (35). Ala is the earth, the powerful Igbo female deity close to the supreme Chineke, the source of water and fertility. She loves as gods do, in some sort of distanced and withdrawn manner. The “we” narrators wonder why Ala bothered to answer Saul’s plea for a daughter. They hypothesise that she may have “picked it on a whim, just to remind the world that she was still there, the owner of men. Since the corrupters broke her shrines and converted her children, how many of them were calling her name anymore?” (35). Presumably, Ala’s intention could have been to show the world her still potent creative power. “Otu nne na-amụ, mana ọ bughị otu chi na-eke” (126) runs an Igbo proverb in the words of Shade and Shadow. This adage means approximately: A mother gives birth, though she creates more than one god. In all probability, this was her intention with Ada and her ọgbanje companions. From the distant first encounter of the goddess with Ada in a bathroom in Nigeria, Ala’s instant recognition is sealed: “The python raised its head and a length of its body, the rest coiled up, scales gliding gently over themselves. It did not blink. Through its eyes Ala looked at us, and through the Ada’s eyes we looked at her—all of us looking upon each other for the first time” (11). One mother, many gods hatched.

Ala is portrayed throughout the novel as having a dual demeanour. On the one hand, she seems to be a cruel, distant creator, a deity to be venerated and feared, one nobody would attempt to disobey. On the other hand, she is the only lasting peace Ada can manage. Since belief and gods seem to be tinged with blood, the narrators claim, to placate her divine mother, Ada has to offer her cuts and injuries. The Ada’s regular moltings or “shrugging off of skin” as a sign of her being Ala’s daughter was the reason for her regular self-inflicted wounds. In Ashugara’s words: “This is what happens when you act as if a human can hold godmatter without it curdling” (70). Ala is also pictured as a rather whimsical deity since she seems to have forgotten to close the gates for the ọgbanje’s return home. She is rather unconcerned with the suffering of her hatchlings. “The thing about Ala is that you don’t move against her,” Ashugara ponders, “[i]f she turned me back from the gates and told me to live, then I would have to live, ọgbanje or not. Even the brothersisters weren’t reckless enough to try and disobey her” (222).

At the same time, Ala seems to be equated with wholeness, with the cycle of life and death, with the eventual comeback to her womb. Thus, in their keen impulse to return to a communal existence, Ada's inner demigods finally conclude that "when a thing [Ada] has been created with deformations and mismatched edges, sometimes you have to break it some more before you can start putting it back together" (210). The steady interplay between energies and matter in a frolic, aggressive way—as described by Cole and Aniakor<sup>12</sup>—is clearly evident in *Freshwater*. Ada's encounter with Lęshi—a Yoruba priest—helps her to put the pieces of her self puzzle together. Her physical unease and spiritual predicament dovetail in harmonious serenity. "Lęshi pushed himself into her terrible loneliness, called her by all our names, then left, because some gates do close" (215). He helped Ada ask the appropriate questions to find the answers to her complex existence. He seemed to provide her with the tools to fend for herself. A different Ada is speaking in the last chapter. Having returned to Nigeria, she can finally speak with her spiritual mother:

So that night, I prayed to Ala. [...]. 'Nne,' I said, and the word was double-jointed. Mother. I felt her immediately and the brothersisters lifted off my mind in a hurried cloud. I was cast into a vast, empty space and everything around me was peaceful. It felt like the otherworld—that's how I knew that I was inside her, suspended and rocked. (224)

Since for Ada it had been necessary to be born in Umuahia, "where Saul [...] was born, and his father before him, and his before that. The blood following paths into the soil, oiling the gates, calling the prayer into flesh" (1), it was also natural for her to return to Nigeria to find the answers to her existential plight. A Nigerian historian had told Ada that a journey was paramount for her to understand the connections, her place on earth. Even Ada's Dominican spirit-ridden friend, Malena, had sentenced:

You need to know your roots, mi amor, [...]. It's a long journey, but once you get started, you'll feel much better. It's difficult because you don't really know what you're getting yourself into when you make your commitment with them, and it's difficult because they're overprotective of us. But you'll have a better sense of self. [...] Spiritually, you're older than me. You're sixteen thousand years old. Because of who you are, because of who you're born into. You have a different name. (223)

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<sup>12</sup> See the previous title "Unearthing the Igbo Narrative" (35).

Eventually, Ada meets her first mother in Umuahia. The open gates do not seem to be any burden this time, as she could perceive that she had turned into a bridge between humanity and the divinity. In her native land, Ada listened to Ala asking her to “*Find your tail*” (224), like the ouroboros; the end was the beginning, the creative genesis. “The meaning was clear. Curve in on yourself. Touch your tongue to your tail so you know where it is. You will form the inevitable circle, the beginning that is the end,” Ada divine mother says (224). In a metonymic trope, Ada becomes the earth and the fountain of all freshwater, the flowing connection coming from the mouth of the python. Ada had found the way home.

Readers can have limited access to the direct voice of Ada. Only in the last chapter, her account has gained agency and self-confidence. The others are, curiously, the blurred account of a confused girl hearing too many voices in her head (Chapter Nine), a bittersweet letter to Yshwa (Chapter Nineteen) and a poem dedicated to a mother (Chapter Fifteen). The poem is, all things considered, dedicated to Saachi and her human impotence when confronted with other-worldly forces. The lyrics is full of repetitions: “My mother does not sleep at night.” “my mother couldn’t keep me safe.” She repeats, “when cold gods give you a child,” “she worries,” “now clawed shadows follow her/They slaver at the foot of her bed” (162-3). The aforementioned epigraph to Chapter Nineteen —“Dear son, son of the deceased, let us die so we can know the dawn” (162)— stresses the fictional ambiguity in connection to motherhood. A mother, or so it seems, can offer life or death, which in Igbo word-view is a synonym for deliverance.

Furthermore, Ada rejects the possibility of being a mother, as her ogbanje nature turns the possibility of having progeny into abomination. Consequently, the trope of motherhood seems —like most other issues tackled in the novel— subject to multiple interpretations. One can discern a western patriarchal narrative of motherhood imposed on Saachi. As a mother, she is expected to be supportive, protective, and carry the guilt of being away from her children. On the contrary, another conception of motherhood emerges, communal and detached, aggressive, sexually active and absent, ogbanje-like and divine. Both seem intertwined. However, even when the joyful and emboldened Ada concludes: “I am the brothersister who remained. I am a village full of faces and a compound full of bones, translucent thousands. Why should I be afraid? I am the source of the spring” (226), one can hardly forget that this spiritual bond was triggered by a human one that was broken. Or, conversely, the spiritual had

to break the human tie. In other words, the palimpsest emerges once again since the trilogy of mothers —like the ouroboros— seem to be one and the same or, at least, overlapping with one another.

To conclude, the process of getting immersed into Igbo ontology is, all things considered, an act of remembering.<sup>13</sup> This undertaking involves reclaiming a reality which is part and parcel of the everyday life of a particular group. It requires the acknowledgment and actualisation of a repeated and *revisited* past cultural heritage in a given context. The emergence of these revisited histories and backgrounds hopefully results in global alternative narratives coupled with agency for the disadvantaged. As Emezi has claimed, “Igbo ontology is about more than ‘folklore and superstition.’ It is a way through which one can interpret physics, science or spirituality” (Emezi 2018g). The artistic process the author is engaged in could be equated to a journey of self-discovery with other lenses to understand reality. This peripheral cosmology is reconstructed, thus bringing to the fore discourses and literary tropes related to issues in dire need of discussion in our contemporary world. The rethinking of a new spirituality or ethical stance, the necessity to ask questions in relation to our metaphysical identities and our freedom (utterly personal and private) as regards gender choice, or the renegotiation of historically patriarchal roles imposed on women through motherhood are some of the issues proposed by *Freshwater*. The great accomplishment the novel seems to have achieved is a peculiar blending of both western and Igbo narratives, without suggesting any single (and simple) interpretation. Is the main character of the book an example of someone in need of medical care, or is she in search of a new spiritual awareness? Or, either, is she perhaps experiencing a mystical stage? Has she got personality disorders derived from past traumas, or is she allowing for a multiplicity of selves to be liberated? Is she really answering the question who I am? Is she embarked on a gender transitioning process? Or is she flowing into a labile space where both could coexist? Alternatively, is she contemplating the possibility of having no gender at all? Is she experiencing the world from a human or a spiritual perspective? Or, perhaps, she is plainly a mishmash of both. Eventually, do we need to have an available maternal figure we can rely on in moments of weakness and crisis? Is that figure supposed to renounce individuality (or weaknesses)? Is it

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<sup>13</sup> This term has been previously mentioned in Chapter 2. See Ogunyemi’s *Africa Wo/Man Palava The Nigerian Novel by Women*, 64; and Ato Quayson’s *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature*, 199.

necessary for that person to be real? The answers are, predictably, unpredictable. As Dolores Herrero (2019) has claimed, the process of reading *Freshwater* can be likened to a polyhedral dynamic. The actualisation of a voice permeates the latent possibility of many others coexisting alternatively and simultaneously.

The different Igbo narrators in *Freshwater* nonchalantly pose readers all those enduring human interrogations. Today more than ever, in the face of a shrivelling planetary horizon, it seems vital for everyone to engage in divergent, alternative, outside-the-box speculation which could offer a more ethical global coexistence —human or otherwise. Today more than ever, emerging new narratives should gain authority and seek to mobilise people in search of a more just system. The not for so long established western truths —the ones which were thought to be stable enough— are disintegrating and showing their shallow (or flawed) side. The novel provides a new landscape of sharp and sometimes blood clotted contours. In addition, it is suggested that the postcolonial condition of the diaspora writer is bound to be in constant flux, subject to hybrid circumstances. Hence, the palimpsestic process of negotiating the worn-out and re-emerging hues of past narratives with the ever-shifting present *palaver* —to use a typically African term— should be sustained and encouraged with a view to enhancing of our self-annihilating limitations. The vision emerging in *Freshwater* is, clearly, not an orthodox one. Moreover, it could be rather chaotic and encumbered at times. It may be even shocking for some, though it certainly provides a rich soil for speculation, debate and unearthed spiritual assumptions. It undeniably provides moments of pure lyrical relish. The novel could be understood, eventually, as a bridge towards some notion of home (or homeliness space). A locus that, in our global present migrant and fickle condition, is not a stable notion any longer. A destination which, Emezi has claimed, is not a place or a group, but something one carries inside (Emezi 2016). Home, the novel suggests, is in fact seldom a destination, but the journey itself.





## CONCLUSION

Elechi Amadi, a renowned Nigerian Second-Generation essayist, poet, playwright and prose writer is said to have remarked an oft quoted dictum: “An African writer who really wants to interpret the African scene has to write in three dimensions at once. There is the private life, the social life, and what you may call the supernatural” (accessed 23 Jun 2021). Further qualifying this assertion, the contemporary author Chris Abani has suggested that there are two aesthetic and formal tendencies—or schools—in Nigerian letters. One that harkens back to the magical worlds variegated with pre-colonial cosmogonies, such as the works of Daniel Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Helen Oyeyemi—and I would add Irenosen Okojie, Leslie Nneka Arimah and TJ Benson. The other school is more attuned to the social realism of Chinua Achebe, T. M. Aluko, Isidore Okpewho, Festus Iyayi, Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—to whom I would also suggest the fictional works of Sarah Ladipo Manyika, Chibundu Onuzo, Olumide Popoola or Tola Rotimi Abraham, to name but just a brief sample of contemporary Nigerian prose writing (Abani 2014b). Abani places his oeuvre in an in-between position. He considers his literary universe as traversing “the exploration of gothic cultural traditions and dreamworlds that are at once reminiscent of modernism and psychoanalysis and distinctly Afro-diasporic or black Atlantic like Santeria and Yoruba lore about twinning” (Abani, 233-4). Moreover, he argues that it is difficult to regard Adichie—and the so-called social realist school—“outside the intertextual relationship with Achebe—the concern with the domestic, the need to write a history of a people, and to correct distorted representations of Africa” (233-4).

The novels I have singled out for discussion and analysed so far, I claim, also share that liminal position. As has been hopefully demonstrated, they evince genre intersections and thematic innovations which render them hybrid. However, should any further refined analysis be required, I would emphasise that *Freshwater* is highly experimental and it evidently deviates from the two-path schools previously mentioned. Emezi re-connects and artistically re-defines the Igbo cosmology and propounds a very peculiarly original plot where traumatic realism, auto-fiction, animist realism, gothic elements, the sublime and Igbo worldview engage in conversation in such a fashion that this novel resembles no previous literary work. In addition, at first sight, *A Small Silence* could be said to adhere more to the aforementioned social realism circle. On second thoughts, however, the ingenious and captivating manner in which

Verissimo morphs the tropes of darkness and silence and conjures up liquified, even viscous, fictional time —pregnant with memories, dreams, witty and poetic musings— positions the novel at a decidedly forking path. Needless to say, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* is also an amalgamation of a supposedly crime read which turns into a gothic, darkly psychological thriller which, to cap it all, allows the reader to close ranks with a serial killer and her accomplice with a piquant grin. In all likelihood, a new open-ended literary school is on the making. One that mixes social and ideological variables with individual and inner rumination, alternative archives and... beyond. Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism or African “jujuism” (Okorafor 2020b), memoir mixed with disability and humour, erotica blended with crime and romance, queer experience peppered with humour or environmental dystopia allied with queer activism and social denouncement in fictions also peopled with aliens and jelly technology. This is the exciting landscape of Nigerian literature today. During approximately seven decades, social realism has been the defining trait of the Nigerian novel, coexisting with instances of pre-colonial magical (animist) realism-oriented narratives. New winds are blowing, however. And they are no breeze but rather a gale. The Me-Generation is boldly exploring other territories, although the social commitment and ideological struggle —either at the collective or individual level— is still very much present. New constellations and peculiar ingredients are galvanising in an uncharted map that appears to stay and thrive. They are narratives of the limit, the ones engaged in new aesthetics and, at times, challenging western ethical stances; fictions engaged in pluriversal dialogues. Not only are these narratives from the fringes, but they also make the fringe a centrifugal locus. While being peripheral, they bring to the fore alternative genres, characterisations, and thematic choices. They internalise the fringe and open up to *limitless* materialisations.

Of the three novels I have focused on, *Freshwater* and *My Sister, the Serial Killer* are the most massively read in the West. *A Small Silence* is taking by far a more modest route. However, as I have already claimed in the Introduction, I believe Verissimo’s fictional work will resist the erosion of fads and market trends, leaving a more lasting legacy, in African as well as western literature. Some recurrences are present in the three novels: damaging parental figures, unreliable narrators, alternative spaces for human encounter and healing, genre-crossbreeds, explicit feminist and transgender activism, vicarious aesthetics, and social critique intimately knit with the inner individual experience. In addition, the three of them have many secrets —or rather a single robust enigma— at

heart which spills out and implodes, generating other unexpected worlds and psychological reactions in characters and readers alike. Likewise, the three novels seem to blur western binaries in connection to mental illness and health. Death is regarded as a way to freedom for a number of protagonists. In *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and in *A Small Silence*, killing and erasing proofs become a source of empowerment, as well as rejection of domestic and systemic trauma. In *Freshwater*, death is decidedly a road to spiritual deliverance and communal reunion. The reason why the three novels may oftentimes shake—and shock—the reader may lie in the fact that the open discussion of death still remains for westerners a traditionally avoided issue, regardless of the fact that the trope has been the main concern in literature of all geographies and times. Furthermore, popular wisdom has it that women relationships are never easy. The three analysed novels reinforce this premise. Their female protagonists are jealous, competitive and more often than not plainly dislike each other. However, they react viscerally when the other is at stake. Korede chooses family over love—and even freedom. Mama T and Remilekun offer substitute homeliness, thus providing leeway for Desire to grow. While Asūghara selfishly uses Ada body to quench her bodily desires, she erases herself when her host is happily in love with Ewan. Additionally, the three novels are entropic in nature, that is, they are like bayous snaking out of landscapes of domestic desolation, and are teemed with social and collective absences and human (and humane) engagements, dark and satirical vignettes, lyrical and feral eruptions and a prevailing lack of closure. Furthermore, the three novels deal with taboo topics. They push ethical boundaries and oblige the reader to witness—and sympathise with—characters who are morally compromised. Ayoola kills her boyfriends; Korede covers up her dealings; Desire, Ayoola and Korede have been compelled to exercise fatal violence against their fathers; and Asūghara—inside Ada—gloats in a sexual delight akin to physical punishment to her male partners and even to her host Ada.

Some considerations could have been tackled—or analysed in more depth. I could have extended Jane Alison’s narrative patterns to the three fictions (2019). Thus, I could have considered the possible “meandering” and “cellular” narrative structure in *A Small Silence* and *Freshwater*, respectively. I could have further refined the alternative archives suggested in the Yoruba *oriki* chant that Maami sings to Prof, or more extensively regarded the Igbo worldview as way of being, doing, knowing and sensing the world (Mignolo 2020). By the same token, I could have also broadened the traditional African conceptions of time as deployed by John Mbiti, which I barely—and briefly—mentioned in the

analysis of *Freshwater*. More could have been included on the important role of *space* in the configurations and exertions on the plot structures. Likewise, *intersectionality* could have been addressed to and evinced in the three fictions. Class, gender and tribal/cultural identities are undeniably interweaving the lives of the main and secondary characters —and especially the female protagonists— within the three novels. These and many other variables and nuances that I have been unable to notice, pinpoint or consider, I will gladly hope to analyse in further research.

As far as future lines of investigation are concerned, they are as varied and all-encompassing as contemporary fledgling and effervescent Nigerian literature. I am especially interested in pursuing fictions related to black humour and social satire, not only in the Nigerian context, but also in other African geographies. Furthermore, I am particularly drawn to worlds and plots told by unreliable narrators. I would like to explore their quirky plights and deepen into the special relation of trust/scepticism established between the implied author, the narrator and the reader. I would very much like to delve into African futurism and African-rooted fictions which deal with the planetary environmental crisis. Likewise, I would be on the lookout for novels which incorporate new masculinities —not necessarily queer— in the African and, more particularly, Nigerian context. Eventually, I plan to extend my future focus onto some new female African authors who are creating a style of their own in the global scene: the Ugandan Jennifer Nabunsugaba Makumbi, the Cameroonians Imbolo Mbue and Nana Nkweti, the Ghanaian Ayesha Harruna Attah, the Ethiopian-American Maaza Mengiste and the Sudanese Leila Aboulela. Excitedly, I will celebrate the day when Nigerian-American Leslie Nneka Arimah can move from the short story collection format to a full-blown novel. As far as other artistic genres are concerned, I would be especially curious to expand my knowledge on Nigerian and African cinema, especially on the sub-genre of African futurism which has a long history —though for the most part ignored in the West. I leave for curious readers to rediscover whole new universes in Nigerian poetry and theatre, which are as rich and myriad as its prose.

What started as an exploratory reading of *Welcome to Lagos* by Chibundu Onuzo (2017) in a crammed, nondescript library in Buenos Aires has opened up to a whole universe of élan-minded female authors. Onuzo's prose interspersed with Pidgin English dialogues —which I could barely understand at that time— led me by the hand to reach out the mighty Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the

ironic dialogue in Sefi Atta's novels and plays, the pliable universes of Nnedi Okorafor, the calm force of Chika Unigwe, the unputdownable characters of Sarah Ladipo Manyika, and the decidedly untamed loops of Irenosen Okojie's concoctions. These women also led me to a number of the likewise talented male authors, such as the erudite and cosmopolitan Teju Cole, the almost biblical destinies of Chigozie Obioma's characters, the city chronicles of Toni Kan, the deep social conjuncture in Helon Habila's prose, the dark excess of Chris Abani's writing, the Rumi-like lyricism of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim and the sardonic reversals in Igoni Barret's plots, to mention but only the ones which have left a lingering trace. A whole contemporary community of writers seemed to suggest that I should take some steps back so that I could engage in conversation with their ancestors: the candid and wise prose of Chinua Achebe, the calm dissent of Flora Nwapa, the rigmarole of Wole Soyinka's mythical irony and pathos, the oneiric cosmos of Ben Okri, the fun-loving characters of Simi Bedford, the strange happenings in Adaora Lily Ulasi's detective-like environs, the cheeky Muslim characters of Zaynab Alkali, the struggling-to-survive protagonists in Buchi Emecheta's novels. In short, a vast galaxy of yarns I had never dreamed of and I intend to never abandon. Nigerian female writers, in particular, were my interlocutors well before and during the Covid-19 lockdown crises; during some rough patches and dry spells while writing this thesis, they offered me videos of protean interviews but, above all, these authors have provoked eddies in my memory and mind. They have spoken to me in the language of resistance and forthright emotion, coupled with a whimsical and entrenched will—as Desire would have put it—to re-write narratives of defeat and victimhood. Let us wish for the world to eventually witness the emergence of African literature in all its plenitude. Happily, the chapter has just started.



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