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*Generations of Women's Writing:
Nigerian literature on the move*

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*“To girls and women everywhere, I issue a simple
invitation. My sisters, my daughters, my friends;
find your voice”*

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.
First woman president of Liberia,
Nobel Peace Prize 2011

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INTRODUCTION

Nigerian literature may not be that popular in the Western world; however, it offers a great number of works that deserve to be read and widely known. As regards Nigerian female writing especially, in recent years its production has increased, achieving great success after a long journey of exclusion and limitation of female writers from the Nigerian literary tradition. Nowadays in fact, Nigerian female writers located all around the world are spreading the voices of their people and hometowns both following their foremothers and distancing themselves from them with the creation of different worlds and visions. The two contemporary Nigerian female novels that will be examined in this thesis, Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) are representative of the complexities and versatilities that characterise contemporary Nigerian women's writing. Oyeyemi's novel engages with the world of fairy tales where Snow White and the Wicked Stepmother can find new bodies and places. Braithwaite's novel, on the other hand, explores the world of thriller fiction and writes about two sisters who need to live with a dangerous secret, one of them is a serial killer.

Nigerian female writing, however, has come a long way before achieving the inclusion that contemporary women writers are experiencing recently. Nigerian literary production underwent a long process of evolution and change that started between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. With the arrival of British colonialism, Nigerian people had to adapt to new systems of administration, new rules, new moral codes and, among all, a worldview. Colonialism with its Western values also brought writing. Nigeria, however, has always cultivated orature, through which proverbs, memories, folktales and myths passed from generation to generation; thus, the passage to a new language and the adoption of a new system of expression took a long time. Firstly, in the second part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the writing produced in Nigeria was by British people who told their own stories, their experiences which were filtered by Western's eyes and for this reason they conveyed partial representation of Nigeria and its people's history and cultures. Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, under the influence of Christianization and Western education, native

people started to write. With the end of the colonial experience, the literary production developed mainly thanks to male authors, due to their privileged access to education. The predominance of male writers was not only visible in the literary production, but also in literary criticism. Their prevalence also caused the production of a misleading portrayal of both male and female characters.

Here, therefore, starts the exclusion of women from not only the Nigerian literary tradition as writers, but also from a truthful and righteous literary representation as female characters. The rise of feminism and womanism in African literary criticism, however, helped to bring Nigerian female writing into existence. Thanks to their criticism on the misleading depiction of female characters in male literature, women writers found the power and strength to write in their own voices. Since the 1960s, in fact, many Nigerian women writers entered the literary scenario, offering a different representation of African women. They emerged and found their place in the Nigerian literary tradition with the aim of re-giving power, voice and agency to women. The wrong representations expressed by their male counterparts was then replaced by the very protagonists of those representations. In other words, if male writers did not have the knowledge and the lived experiences to represent a truthful depiction of women, female writers on the contrary had the duty and responsibility to portray their own experiences. Female authors, thus, opened a space in history to all those women who lost it with the misleading depiction of male authors under the influence of patriarchy and established a new perspective that gave value to women's feelings, thoughts and concerns.

The first female writer who can be considered the leader of this process of self-assertion is Flora Nwapa. She is the first Nigerian woman to write and publish a novel in English. The novel here mentioned is *Efuru*,¹ published in 1966, and it tells the story of a young woman, Efuru, who has to build her future in the town of Ugwuta, Nigeria, during a period of sociocultural change due to colonial rules. The novel is set in the late 1940s and early 1950s and portrays all the difficulties that a woman must undergo both because of the historical moment and the social expectations of her own culture. Flora Nwapa was most interested in the depiction of a strong and independent

¹ F. Nwapa, *Efuru*, Long Grove, Waveland Press, INC., 2014.

woman who is trying to achieve self-assertion and agency, but she was also intrigued in showcasing the traditions and customs of her hometown, Ugwuta.

Following the lead of Flora Nwapa, many other female writers entered the Nigerian literary scenario. One among all is Buchi Emecheta, who as her predecessor Nwapa tried to subvert the misleading representation of female characters conveyed by male writing. Her fifth novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979),² in particular, seems to share several similarities with *Efuru*. Starting from the feminine perspective of both novels, they also share themes, such as motherhood, wifehood and the difficulties both protagonists have to face in their lives. Nnu Ego, the protagonist of Emecheta's novel, as Efuru, needs to face the social expectations of her people who demand her to be a perfect mother, wife and daughter. Besides, the fact that the novel is set in the first part of the twentieth century – that is a period marked by both colonialism and the imminent outbreak of the Second World War – creates another connection with Nwapa's novel: Nnu Ego, as Efuru, feels the burden to respond to social expectations during a challenging period.

These new female perspectives in Nigerian literature shed light on the beginning of a sort of development and evolution of writing, which will continue for the rest of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Contemporary times have demonstrated a greater increase of female writers in the Nigerian literary scenario who also have opened the boundaries of previous representations and atmospheres. Contemporary Nigerian literature illustrates a wider versatility in genres and themes, giving shape to a multi-layered literary production. Contemporary Nigerian female writers, especially, are playing with new perspectives achieving in this way a greater success and a wider knowledge in the rest of the world.

A very fascinating aspect that was not mentioned before, but that is extremely significant is the connection between the national commitment and the whole Nigerian literary tradition. From the emergence of the first Nigerian writers till the most recent ones, Nigerian history and cultures were predominant elements. Literature in general has always had a strict relation with the concepts of nation and history. Many novels throughout the years are in fact influenced by the events that marked Nigerian history. Three periods among all are the ones that most characterised

² B. Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London, Longman, 1994.

the literary production: the colonial experience that lasted till the end of the Second World War, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), also known as Nigeria-Biafra War, and the long period of military dictatorships that lasted from 1970 till 1999. The first, the colonial experience and the aim of annihilating the culture shaped because of this experience, mainly influenced the emergent writers of the 1950s and 1960s. The Nigerian Civil War, on the contrary, influenced the writers who published in the 1970s and in the middle of the 1980s. This atmosphere and the memories of it led to the production of works characterised by a strong disillusionment and a confusion about the nation. Lastly, the military dictatorships have affected the most recent Nigerian writing, where the depiction of themes such as that of the war, violence, and trauma, and the development of the child-soldier narrative demonstrate the impact of the catastrophic event. Nevertheless, contemporary Nigerian literature, as mentioned before, is not only focused on these aspects, but it is also able to produce different scenarios and bring the reader to new genres. Two main representatives are Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014)³ with her magical yet realistic world, and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018)⁴ with her surprising yet loving reality.

Therefore, the aim of this study is that of tracing the long path of Nigerian literature from its emergence at the beginning of the twentieth century till the most recent years. The journey will be analysed through the examination of four novels that symbolise the different literary moments of Nigerian writing: Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018). In-between the four analysis, the study aims at describing the major events that characterised the formation and the development of Nigerian literature, that is its historical, cultural and social background. Particular attention will be given to the precolonial period, the main social, cultural and political aspects of which will be investigated in order to trace the passage from the indigenous way of living to the colonial one. This is particularly important because Nigerian societies underwent a gradual change in their structures and organization due to the British occupation in

³ H. Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, London, Picador, 2014.

⁴ O. Braithwaite, *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, London, Atlantic Books, 2018.

the colonial period. With the arrival of colonialism, Nigerian people had to adapt to new systems of administration, new rules and new values. European people in fact brought with them an alternative view of the world which influenced the customs and traditions of Nigerian people. They also imported the Christian religion and Western education. Among all these changes, the most significant one is the importation of the gender system which led to the introduction of the association of terms such as 'man' and 'woman' to specific roles in society. This system which in precolonial times did not exist, or not in the same way, created changes in all spheres of society, limiting and, sometimes, excluding women from their social, economic, political and religious roles.

The above-mentioned aspects will shape the present study and will be presented in three different chapters. The first chapter concerns the cultural and social aspects of precolonial West African societies, giving particular consideration to West African women. Attention, thus, is given to their roles in the social organization, namely their relationships with men and how society was organized before colonialism, their roles in the economic aspect of society, their importance in the political sphere and their positions in the religious area, both as regards the religious practices in which they were fundamental and as deities. Furthermore, attention is given to the impact of colonialism on all of these aspects of life and on the organization of society, highlighting how women were negatively affected by the arrival of British occupation.

The second chapter focuses on Nigerian literature and, in particular, on Nigerian women's writing of the 1960s and the 1970s. The chapter opens with the examination of the passage from orality to writing caused by the adoption of the Western system of knowledge and interpretation. The consequences of this adoption and how Nigerian literature emerged will be explored. Soon male dominance on the literary scene and the misleading representations of female characters that these authors expressed becomes evident. The exclusion of women writers from the Nigerian literary scenario will be examined, paying particular attention to the significant role that Flora Nwapa with her novel *Efuru* (1966) had, both as the leading female novelist, who opened the path to other female writers, and as main producer of an alternative depiction of women and Nigerian history. After Nwapa's novel, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of*

Motherhood (1979) will be analysed. The two novel's critical readings will be crucial in order to investigate the major aspects and perspectives that characterised Nigerian female writing of the 1960s and the 1970s.

Lastly, the third chapter undertakes a journey through Nigerian literature, exploring the concept of 'generation' and describing the formation and the characteristics of the three generations of Nigerian writing. Each generation will be considered in its main influences, elements and historical period. Thereafter, the chapter will linger on the rise of contemporary Nigerian women writing. In particular, the works of Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) will be the main objects of enquiry. As in the previous chapter, the analysis will focus on the writers' interest in representing their concerns and thoughts following the lead of their predecessors as regards the female perspective, but also distancing themselves from them by using alternative genres and complex worlds.

Finally yet importantly, the fact that Nigerian literature is still not that known in Italy, and maybe in the rest of Europe, was the main reason for the choice of topic of this dissertation. It was of particular interest to provide a deeper insight into the fascinating world of Nigerian male and female writers. Precisely, the initial focus was that of giving voice and power to African women, who are often excluded and limited by social constrictions. Thus, through this study and Nigerian women's voices, it is possible to be more aware of their experiences, their histories, and their feelings.

CHAPTER I

A socio-cultural viewpoint on the role of West African women in precolonial times

To think of how Western societies have been structured for a long time and how this social organization is still present today, and to juxtapose this model with the system of precolonial African societies means to have an erroneous idea of how African people used to live and work before the arrival of colonialism in the late XIX century.

Many anthropologists, sociologists and historiographers tackled this issue in order to make sense of history and to give the right value to the life of those people, in particular to that of women. In this regard, this chapter aims at giving an explicative viewpoint on how West African societies were structured prior to European occupation. The objective is to present several aspects of African social and cultural life, such as the organization of family hierarchies, traditional ceremonies, economy, religion, and politics, and to place significant attention on the role of the African woman in these instances. Moreover, a portrayal of the most prominent impacts that Europe had on African cultures and societies will be provided.

The insight given in this chapter will help to comprehend and have a full perspective on the analysis of Nigerian women's writing that will be dealt with in the following chapters.

1.1 The organization of West African societies

This section focuses on the sociologic and cultural aspects of West African societies in precolonial times and pays attention to the position of West African women. The fascinating work of the Nigerian gender scholar and sociology professor Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997), will be the main source from which the exploration of the working and organization of West African societies will be done.

In her in-depth study, Oyěwùmí explores a specific Nigerian society, the Yorùbá society. Starting from a linguistic approach on Yorùbá language, the sociologist's aim is that of deconstructing discourses on gender roles in order to demonstrate that the

way of thinking of African cultures and societies is mainly based on Western thinking and understanding. The ‘woman question’ and the binary gender are ideas that derives from the Western world and, on the contrary, Yorùbá language lacks terms and concepts to name and give meaning to the category of gender. With her study, thus, she hopes to give a new approach to understand how African and Western societies and cultures are constructed.

Significant to this is her analysis on the understanding of (non)gender roles in the Yorùbá society. Yorùbá society was not based on gender, and therefore the social categories of ‘men and ‘women’ were non-existent. On the contrary, it was only with colonialism and with the Western vision that this model was imported and ingrained. Sustaining this idea, one can assume that the categories of gender are a construct based on Western assumptions that have been transposed and treated as natural and universal notions.¹

Since the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ did not exist, society was organized according to a different system, that of seniority. It was the order of birth that regulated interpersonal relations.² As Oyěwùmí affirms:

Seniority is the primary social categorization that is immediately apparent in Yorùbá language. Seniority is the social ranking of persons based on their chronological ages. The prevalence of age categorization in Yorùbá language is the first indication that age relativity is the pivotal principle of social organization.³

In her view, the system of seniority as the primary aspect of social categorization is evident in language. Yorùbá language, in fact, is gender-free and many names and pronouns distinguish between younger and older in social relations, rather than between male and female. This distinction is at the basis of Yorùbá society, where social interactions and relations are not determined by biology, as in the Western world, but by social facts.⁴ Biology and the body are not primary aspects for social

¹ O. Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 31-32.

² N. Sudarkasa, “The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies”, *Feminist Studies* 12:1 (1986), p. 95.

³ Oyěwùmí, p. 40.

⁴ Oyěwùmí, p. 12.

classification, neither for what concerns interpersonal relations, nor for what concerns the social hierarchy.

To better understand the dynamics of Yorùbá society, Oyěwùmí presents an explicative example, that of *okunrin* and *obinrin*. These two terms are often misinterpreted and mistranslated respectively into ‘male’ and ‘female’ mainly for two reasons: the first is that they do not express the same position as in the Western world. In fact, while in the West the concepts of male and female are defined in opposition one to the other, where ‘male’ is the norm, and ‘female’ is the Other, in Yorùbá language, *okunrin* is not defined in opposition to *obinrin*. In other words, *okunrin* could not be associated to the ‘male category’ as it means in the Western world because it is not considered as the norm in Yorùbá language; *obinrin*, too, could not be associated to the ‘female category’ as it is understood in the Western vision because in Yorùbá language the term has not the meaning of the ‘Other’ of the norm. The second reason is that these two Yorùbá categories exclusively apply to adults. Therefore, the categories of *okunrin* and *obinrin* are differentiated by anatomy and they do not express the difference between masculinity and femininity or any social hierarchy. Since they essentially refer to the anatomic male and the anatomic female, the sociologist suggests the use of two specific terms for the translation of *okunrin* and *obinrin*: ‘anamale’ for *okunrin*, and ‘anafemale’ for *obinrin*.⁵

It is interesting to notice that, as mentioned before, biology is not a crucial factor for social classification; however, with regards to the distinction between *okunrin* and *obinrin*, anatomy and biology are decisive. As a matter of fact, in Yorùbá society, “biology is limited to issues like pregnancy that directly concern reproduction”⁶ and it does not regulate gender or social differences.

Having said that, it seems clearer that according to the system of seniority in Yorùbá society as in other West African societies, not only men but also women could occupy high positions in lineage hierarchy, political organization, economy, and religion as it will be observed in the following sections.

⁵Oyěwùmí, pp. 33-34.

⁶Oyěwùmí, p. 36.

1.1.1. West African kin groups and the role of women

In precolonial West Africa, both patrilineal and matrilineal hierarchies existed where classification was based on seniority, so that not only men, but also women could have power, authority, and leadership positions.⁷ Matrilineality is a social organization in which inheritance and the determination of identity follow a maternal bloodline, where all children belong to the mother's lineage; basically, it implied a relation by blood or by a social bond to a woman ancestor. Whereas, with patrilineality, inheritance and the formation of identity follow the paternal bloodline, so that all children belong to the father's lineage.⁸ According to what Jumanne Kassim Ngohengo declares in his study, "traditional societies in Africa were largely matrilineal, they loved and protected girls but at the same time gave the defence duties to boys, exposing them to harsh nature environment that dictated the life of precapitalist communities"⁹. The same reasoning is suggested by the anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa, who argues that within a matrilineal hierarchy, women were favourable to access power, responsibilities, and rights, whereas within a patrilineal one, it was the man who held leadership, even though women could also take part in most of the decisions and discussions regarding the lineage; in fact, patrilineality did not mean patriarchy, since several studies have shown that women in precolonial Africa were rarely oppressed.¹⁰

Along with lineages, which are considered by Niara Sudarkasa the first basic kin groups present in West Africa, it is possible to identify other two types of kin groups:

(1) corporate unilineal descent groups, which we term lineages; (2) domiciled extended families made up of certain lineage members and their spouses and dependent children; and (3) conjugally based family units which are subdivisions of the extended family and within which procreation and primary responsibilities for socialization rest.¹¹

⁷ Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women", p. 95.

⁸ C. Saidi, "Women in Precolonial Africa", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, (2020), pp. 5-7.

⁹ J. K. Ngohengo, "Modernism and the Change of African Gender Relations: Historical Discourses", *African Journal of History and Culture* 13:2 (2021), p. 111.

¹⁰ Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women", p. 95; Saidi, p. 7.

¹¹ Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women", p. 95

As far as the extended family is concerned, the position of women was in relation of both consanguinity and conjugality, so that they were recognized both as mothers and daughters and as wives and cowives. It is important to underline this aspect, since several Western assumptions often neglected the consanguineal role of women in kin groups, considering only their status as wives and cowives. In addition, the West completely disregarded the existence of polygamous relationships and woman-to-woman marriage, therefore not contemplating the authoritative role of women in some conjugal relationships. As a matter of fact, as suggested before, in many West African societies, husbands and wives had equivalent control in conjugal relationships, while the consanguineal hierarchies were based on seniority.¹²

1.1.2. Marriage and divorce

Marriage in West African societies is essentially a bond between the lineages, that is between the bride's and the groom's families.¹³ This notion is based on the specific traditional society of Iyede, an upland town in Isoko South Local Government Area in Delta State, in Nigeria. However, Oyěwùmí reemphasises the same idea mentioning Yorùbá society, highlighting that "it formalized the conferral of paternity rights of the lineage of the groom to the children born in the course of the marriage. In exchange for this right, goods and services were transferred from the groom's lineage to that of the bride".¹⁴ This exchange of goods fundamentally was considered the bride-wealth and it conferred sexual rights and paternity to the future husband. As Christine Saidi stresses, the bride-wealth did not mean the purchase of the woman because she remained part of her own community, her own extended family, and therefore still had rights as a daughter of that family.¹⁵ In addition to this reciprocity of goods and services, marriage was a long process characterised by ceremonies and the exchange of gifts. For this reason, it seems proper to borrow from Oyěwùmí the

¹² Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women", pp. 96-98.

¹³ O. W. Ogbomo, Q. O. Ogbomo, "Women and Society in Pre-colonial Iyede", *Anthropos*, 88 (1993), p. 437.

¹⁴ Oyěwùmí, p. 51.

¹⁵ Saidi, p. 7.

term ‘contractual arrangement’ in order to designate this long path of services that is marriage.¹⁶

To have a wider picture of Yorùbá society and marriage, it is important to mention the study of LaRay Denzer, in which she reports the testimony of Reverend Samuel Johnson about the precolonial roles of Yorùbá women. In her investigation, Denzer stresses the existence of four types of marriage:

(1) traditional betrothal, marked by the exchange of dowry and service by the husband; (2) levirate, the inheritance of a widow by a male relative of the deceased husband; (3) mutual consent between a woman and a man in a union that was recognized by the man's family (usually involving widows who refused to remarry a deceased husband's relative, war captives, slaves, or redeemed slaves); and (4) gift marriage, in which neither dowry nor service was exchanged (a common practice among Muslims).¹⁷

Any type of marriage gives numerous opportunities both on the women’s side and on the men’s side. For women, the linkage with their husband’s lineage provided them new access to economic and political power, since they could be a bridge between two communities, their own and that of their husbands.¹⁸

In West African societies, as in many other parts of the continent, polygamy was accepted as a social organization. It was possible for those men who had enough surplus to pay for other wives. Since marriage was based on procreation and the bearing of children, polygamy was essential in Africa. Having more than one wife could give more opportunities to bear children and to extend the community. Marriage was all about procreation and children, it had to be fruitful.¹⁹ It is obvious that motherhood was a great issue for women in precolonial African societies and it will be even more noticeable in the following analysis of Nigerian women’s writing.

In opposition to marriage, divorce could also be possible in West African societies, even though it rarely occurred in precolonial times. As Denzer suggests, divorce was the ultimate step for a couple, and it could be provoked by “insanity, infertility of the wife, chronic illness, laziness of the husband, indebtedness, and

¹⁶ Oyěwùmí, p. 51.

¹⁷ L. Denzer, “Yoruba Women. A Historiographical Study”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 27:1 (1994), pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ S. Barnes, “Ritual, Power, and Outside Knowledge”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 20:3 (1990), pp. 248-68, quoted by Denzer, pp. 4-5.

¹⁹ Oyěwùmí, p. 53.

extreme cruelty”. The historian Denzer also reports the testimony of the American Baptist missionary Bowen, who actually claims that in the late 1850s divorce was a common practice.²⁰ When it occurred after the menopause of the wife, the woman had two possibilities: (1) to return to her home village; (2) to remain and start her own lineage. With the second possibility, the woman would pay a bride-wealth for a younger wife and start a new matrilineal community becoming the head of it and therefore obtaining the leadership. This would be plausible because the younger wife would find a lover and bear children who, as a consequence, belonged to the female husband and became part of the matrilineal community.²¹

Nevertheless, it must be noted that marital customs and divorce laws changed due to the impact of the British occupation and the adoption of Western values. In particular, the role of the Native Courts was significant in initiating transformation in the precolonial organizations of marriage and divorce. These changes lead to the increase of divorce requests by both women and men. By 1920, for instance, the Native Courts was so swamped with divorce cases that a second court had to be set up.²²

1.1.3. Traditional ceremonies and beliefs

Besides the process of marriage, which could be considered a traditional ceremony, West African societies had several other social activities where women had significant roles, for instance circumcision, traditional and religious festivals, and funeral rites.

The practice of circumcision was one of the most important customs in Iyede society and in the entire Isoko area and it was strictly related to the role of procreation and motherhood. The practice was performed on both male and female children and accompanied with numerous ceremonies. In the case of females, it consisted of a clitoridectomy. Even though the practice could be associated with the influence of Islamism in the continent, it is interesting to note that circumcision was not originated by the Islamic religion, rather it was accepted by it. As Leonard J. Kouba and Judith

²⁰ Denzer, p. 4.

²¹ Saidi, p. 8.

²² Denzer, p. 18.

Muasher retrieve from other studies, “clitoridectomy is an original African institution adopted by Islam at the conquest of Egypt in 742”²³ and was then reinforced by Muslims because of their religious sense of virginity and chastity.²⁴

From the point of view of African people, the removal of a portion of clitoris would, on one hand, prevent sexual urges and, on the other, facilitate their role as mother and wife, and thus secure the passage of girls from childhood to womanhood. Immediately after this practice, some ceremonies took place, for instance the arrival of relatives with gifts and the slaughter of a goat, which manifested that the girl was ready to marry.²⁵

Moving to another part of Africa, that of Bantu-speaking communities, it is interesting to notice similar ceremonies for young women. Saidi highlights the presence of female initiation ceremonies, which marked the young girl’s life and, especially, her future. As regards clitoridectomy, the female initiation event was functional to the young woman’s role as mother. The first ceremony took place soon after the girl’s first menstrual period and it was celebrated with music and dances by the whole village. After that, the elderly women started the girl’s education.²⁶

The funeral was another significant ceremony. Taking the Iyede society as a reference, death and funeral were considered fundamental aspects of social life and they were celebrated for several days: whether it was the husband or the wife who died, both men and women were required to mourn the partner for seven days. Besides, in the case of the husband’s death, the woman could either remarry, or be inherited by a husband’s relative, or by the eldest son born from another wife of her deceased husband.²⁷

West African societies had also numerous religious rites and traditional festivals in which women had empowering roles; however, this exact investigation will be provided in a following paragraph where religion will be the main object of enquiry.

²³ L. J. Kouba, J. Muasher, “Female Circumcision in Africa: An Overview”, *African Studies Review*, 28:1 (1985), p. 104.

²⁴ Kouba and Muasher, p. 104.

²⁵ Ogbomo and Ogbomo, p. 437.

²⁶ Saidi, pp. 13-14.

²⁷ See Ogbomo and Ogbomo, *Women and Society in Pre-colonial Iyede*, p. 438, for the exploration of other forms of implications that the widow must face after the death of her husband.

1.2 The economic power of West African women

“I have never heard of an indigenous African society in which differential value was attached to the labor of women and men working at the same tasks or in which women and men were differentially rewarded for the products of their labor”.²⁸ Niara Sudarkasa expresses with these words her judgement on the organization of labour in indigenous African societies. According to her, the African economic sphere was equally divided between men and women. Women’s duties were complementary to those of men and there was no different treatment between the two sexes, as there was reciprocity of effort. Moreover, the anthropologist explains that men and women had distinct activities, such as farming and trading or, if they worked in the same productive activity, they produced different items.²⁹ Labour was always differentiated, but at the same time reciprocal. Both men and women gave support to their communities in an equal way.

In order to comprehend the division of labour in West African societies, and in this particular case that of Yorùbá society, Sudarkasa creates a geography of the population. She retrieves from literature that the settlement of Yorùbá people was essentially urban, even though people were mostly agricultural. In each town, people worked as farmers, traders, food processors and craftsmen. Besides, each town had one marketplace, in some towns even more than one, where producers could exchange their goods. Having said that, the anthropologist distinguishes men’s activities from women’s activities, where men were mainly farmers and craftsmen, and women were mainly traders and food processors.³⁰

Nevertheless, this division of labour by sex made by Sudarkasa is questioned by Oyěwùmí, who demonstrates how labour could not be classified by sex or gender. As a matter of fact, there were not only feminine or masculine tasks, on the contrary the same activity could be carried out by both men and women. Given this circumstance, Oyěwùmí describes the two levels on which the division of labour could occur: the first level corresponds to a spatial level, while the second one corresponds to the

²⁸ Sudarkasa, “The Status of Women”, p. 100.

²⁹ Sudarkasa, “The Status of Women”, p. 100.

³⁰ N. Sudarkasa, *Where Women Work: A study of Yoruba Women in Marketplace and at Home*. Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 1973, pp. 26-29.

workforce level. As far as the spatial level is concerned, the author explains that the primary place where work took place was the farmland, seen in opposition to the town. The indicated farmland was the primary place of work, while in the distant town people mostly rested and enjoyed life, even though other occupations were possible, such as trading. As to the workforce level, the sociologist underlines the fact that farming and trading were feasible for the entire population. Although, with respect to trade, differences were made taking into consideration the type of goods sold, the distance travelled, and the scale of operation. Consequently, it could be affirmed that distinctions were not based on anatomic sex, on the contrary what was important was the cultural-religious aspect. This was particularly evident in specialised activities, where the division of labour was based on the lineage.³¹ Borrowing the words of Cheikh Anta Diop, it could be said that:

A subject from outside a trade, even if he acquired all the skill and science of a calling which was not that of his family, would not be able to practice it efficiently, in the mystical sense, because it was not his ancestors who concluded the initial contract with the spirit who had originally taught it to humanity.³²

1.2.1. Women's economic contribution

As suggested previously, women in precolonial times contributed greatly to the economy of their societies. This is true not only for Yorùbá women, but also for Iyede women, as claimed by O. W. Ogbomo and Q. O. Ogbomo. In Iyede society, farming was the main activity, and it was carried out by both men and women, demonstrating that women supported their husbands in the economy of the family. Besides farming, trading was fundamental too: goods and products of their husband's farms were sold in markets by women. The structure was very similar to that of Yorubaland, in fact every village had its own market where people could exchange their items. What is stressed, is that women dominated markets and trading, therefore they could be considered more economically powerful than their male counterparts. In this sense, it could be argued that by achieving power and control in the economic sphere of their

³¹ Oyěwùmí, pp. 65-68.

³² Oyěwùmí, pp. 68-69: Oyěwùmí took the quote from Cheikh Anta Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1987, p. 8.

family, they acquired equal status with men, and thus they were not in an oppressed or subordinated position.³³

Women's power and status were also related to their involvement in long distance trade. According to Reverend Samuel Johnson's testimony, "female traders traversed Yorubaland and beyond in large caravans, sometimes numbering hundreds of people, trading in foodstuffs, kola nuts, palm oil, cloth, arms, and ammunition".³⁴ Women faced great risks doing so because the road was not safe from kidnappers, but they demonstrated courage and strength. Women's economic and social positions and their attitude were functional for political influence and power.³⁵

Strictly related to the issue of long-distance trade is motherhood. From Sudarkasa's viewpoint, long-distance trade was not carried out by women in their bearing-children age given that, as mothers, they could not stay away from the domestic sphere for too long. For this reason, long-distance trade was dominated by men, while women were domesticated from a young age to be mothers. However, Oyèwùní strongly disagrees with this projection, believing that it is wrongly based on Western norms and that, on the contrary, motherhood in Yorùbá society was constructed in a totally different manner. In her view, motherhood and fatherhood were the fundamental reasons for adults to work and therefore gain money. To have children or to be expecting mothers was the primary incentive that obliged all adults to bring home money. Thus, the fact that only men or old women who were no longer in their bearing-children age were able to work far away from home is inaccurate. On the contrary, it is basically when the woman is in the age of motherhood that she needs to work and provide foods and goods to her children, while a woman in her menopausal age doesn't have the same economic needs and, in addition, she should have her children to take care of her. As a matter of fact, motherhood seems not to be considered a domestic role for women, since one of their duties is to take care of their children materially, and long-distance trade was one of the possibilities to do so.³⁶

As far as household division of labour is concerned, men and women had different but coordinated responsibilities. According to Sudarkasa, the husband was

³³ Ogbomo and Ogbomo, pp. 432-433.

³⁴ Denzer, p. 7.

³⁵ Denzer, p. 7.

³⁶ Oyèwùní, pp. 72-73.

responsible for the upkeep of the house and the provision of staple foods, whereas the wife and cowives were responsible for other type of foods and the needs of their children.³⁷ The woman's income is kept separate from that of her husband, their budgets are used for the upkeep of the house and the children.

A more detailed description of the division of labour in the domestic sphere is offered by the sociologist Oyěwùmí. She explains that the division was based on age relativity: young people and children were responsible for cleaning up after meals, while the wife had to cook.³⁸ The wife had also the responsibility to find food for her husband and to pursue their own livelihood. This last aspect is significant in Yorùbá society:

the need for *aya* [wife] to pursue their own livelihoods was recognized, protected, and promoted. This was no doubt one of the factors that shaped not only the family division of labor and recipes but also the economy. The professionalization of cooking not only provided an occupation for some but also freed many mothers from cooking so that they could go to the local markets or engage in farming and long-distance trade.³⁹

However, it was not only the wife who cooked, but sometimes also her husband, especially when they were on trip to the farm, and they stayed away from home for an extended period.⁴⁰

Thus, with this last example, the idea of a division of labour made by gender and the distinction between feminine and masculine tasks is inappropriate for precolonial Yorùbá society.

1.2.2. System of inheritance

In addition to their economic roles and influence, West African women had also legal rights and their own properties. In Yorubaland, for instance, they had legal rights in their natal home, such as access to land, the use of their father's land, and they could share the profits from their father's farms. They could obtain independent

³⁷ Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women", p. 101.

³⁸ Oyěwùmí, p. 56: the author makes a distinction between *aya* (wife) and *obinrin* (anafemale). It was only the *aya* who had to cook, not the *obinrin* in general. Moreover, if the *aya* had an appropriate seniority, she did not have to cook.

³⁹ Oyěwùmí, p. 58.

⁴⁰ Oyěwùmí, p. 65.

economic influence and get financial assistance in trading from their father's community. Eventually, these rights passed to their children by guaranteeing them protection.⁴¹ Having said that, it might appear evident that the system of inheritance, with respect to Yorùbá society, is related only to consanguineal relations. This means that the wife had her own properties, and her husband had his own, and they could not inherit these properties from one another.⁴²

Nonetheless, the position of the African woman with respect to inheritance changes depending on her age or her marital status. As Sudarkasa claims, a young woman who lived in her father's compound knew her rights on the inheritance of properties, but she would not be involved in discussions regarding these issues. Whether the woman got married, her concerns passed to her husband's lineage and compounds, no more to those of her own lineage. Yet, when a woman got old, she got also more importance in the lineage, and she would be consulted by the other members of the lineage before any decisions would be made. When a woman's father died, as mentioned before, she would get a part of any properties, which were then divided among her children. However, the father's house is inherited by his male children, where sometimes one of the sons would also reside in, while the daughters would reside in their husband's compounds.⁴³

In Iyede society, a slightly different system is established. Here, women did not possess properties and lands, nor could they inherit them from their father because of the patrilineal system of inheritance. In this way, sons were able to inherit their father's properties, whereas daughters would inherit their mother's properties according respectively to the patrilineal or matrilineal lineage. However, as for Yorùbá society, married women had rights on their husband's lands and properties; as a matter of fact, men had limited control over these, they could not deny their wives what they were entitled to.⁴⁴

To reiterate, it is evident that West African women had limited access to properties and land compared to their male counterparts. Anyway, an old woman could have

⁴¹ Denzer, p. 5.

⁴² Oyěwùmí, p. 56.

⁴³ Sudarkasa, *Where Women Work*, pp. 110-112.

⁴⁴ Ogbomo and Ogbomo, p. 433.

more possibilities and importance than a young or unmarried one, demonstrating that the system of seniority had significance also on inheritance and legal rights.

1.2.3. The Atlantic Slave Trade and the West African woman

A special attention will now be given to the Slave Trade in West Africa, since it considerably affected the economic position of women. African gender studies have generally avoided the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, while economic historians have avoided gender issues. In addition, historians have not considered different sex and age ratios according to various African regions. However, according to G. U. Nwokeji's study⁴⁵, sex and age proportions fluctuated by zones and over time.

Firstly, the Atlantic Slave Trade was the external trade that Europeans dominated in West Africa, but that had an impact on the entire continent. From the 1640s to the mid-1800s, millions of African people were brought to the Americas as slaves to work in plantations and fields. Not only men were required, but also women and children. Westerners believed that men were more competent in agriculture and that they worked harder than women; for this reason, the gender ratio was two men for every one woman. However, they soon realised that women had a higher work rate and that they were more specialised in tropical agriculture, so that from the late 1700s African women began to be demanded as much as men and forced to work with men in the fields. The transatlantic journey to the Americas was atrocious for women, who were then practically sentenced to death by work in the plantations.⁴⁶

Moreover, the Atlantic Slave Trade had a great impact on gender dynamics and the division of labour in West Africa. As Saidi argues:

The slave trade created a great deal of insecurity in most West African societies, and many African societies were traumatized. As a result of the slave trade, many African communities that had been based on varying forms of gender equilibrium transformed into warrior societies. While some women were warriors, mostly men were involved in raiding or repelling raids. There was a new division of labor, men became part of the military force, and women had to do both men and women's agricultural work.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ G. U. Nwokeji, "African Conceptions of Gender and the Slave Traffic", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58:1, 2001.

⁴⁶ Saidi, p. 17; and Nwokeji, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Saidi, p. 18.

The external slave trade was not the exclusive trade dominated by Europeans; they also controlled the internal slave trade, where mostly women and young girls were wanted. The advantages behind this process were that women were sold for a higher price in domestic African slave markets, and they had more productive and reproductive abilities than men. For these reasons, women were purchased or captured in order to become slaves in the internal West African slave trade and to increase the prestige of lineages, whereas men were sold for more in the coast. This system created a new division among West African women: there was the elite, composed by women who could afford to buy slaves and therefore increase their agricultural production, then there were common women who could not afford to buy slaves and therefore with less agricultural production, and lastly there were slave women.⁴⁸

Obviously, among the West African population, women were the most affected. Nevertheless, there were cases of women who benefited from the slave trade. Saidi presents the example of a group of women from the Senegambia region in West Africa who were called *Signares*. These women had control over the commerce and became important entrepreneurs. They were daughters born from the union of African women, who dominated the economic sphere of their societies before the Atlantic Slave Trade, and Europeans men, who married them in order to have access to African commerce. Their marriage was therefore beneficial to trade and gave birth to women who had the knowledge of both the African way of trading and the European one, making them successful intermediaries between the two economic systems.⁴⁹

1.3 The political leadership of women

The economic power, influence, and domination of West African women was translated into political power, influence, and domination. The idea that in precolonial West Africa women had high positions in the governmental structure should not be dismissed, even though many scholars have argued that the public sphere was the

⁴⁸ Saidi, p. 18; and Nwokeji, pp. 48-49.

⁴⁹ Saidi, p. 19: "In the late 1600s, there were three dominant Signares. Senhora Catti was the agent for the slave trade in the Senegalese state of Cayor in 1685. The other two were Bibiana Vaz, who in the 1670s had an extensive trading network between the Gambia and Sierra Leone rivers, and even established her own state for a few years; and Senhora Philippa, who in the 1630s controlled the slave trade in Western Senegal".

place of men and women entered this world just to control other women.⁵⁰ These assumptions have soon been questioned, given the multiple examples of female rulers present in political organizations of West African societies. Taking these facts into consideration, it should be recognized that both men and women could have important roles in political domain, and that not only women were not subordinated to men, but they could also obtain higher or complementary positions in the government. As Tarikhu Farrar suggests, this type of political structure found in many indigenous West African societies is called by Kamene Okonjo a ‘dual-sex political system’.⁵¹ In his viewpoint, both males and females dealt with various issues and problems of the population, but each sex dealt with their own problems and concerns.

Politics is related also to religion and for this reason many West African rulers ruled for divine right, tracing their predecessors in the spiritual world. One example is to be found in Yorubaland, where Oduduwa, the founder of the Yorùbá population was at first a deity and then he became a king, *Ooni* of Ife. This explains the fact that most West African societies believed in two political worlds: the first one is the spiritual political world, where political functionaries gained their role from divine ancestors, the other one is the human world, where functionaries took office as human physical people.⁵²

As regards the human physical world, women controlled their own affairs, for instance they maintained public services, such as markets, roads, and brooks. In these matters, they were well represented in the government, so that they had the possibility to be heard. External affairs, on the contrary, were controlled by men, even though in extreme and important cases women could be involved and take part in discussions.⁵³

Other examples in African history show that women could have power and positions in various ways. Taking the lead of Holly Hanson, she describes how in the family of Dahomey women served the king as “ministers of state and counselors, as soldiers and commanders, as governors of provinces, as trading agents and as favored

⁵⁰ Sudarkasa, “The Status of Women”, p. 98.

⁵¹ T. Farrar, “The Queenmother, Matriarchy, and the Question of Female Political Authority in Precolonial West African Monarchy”, *Journal of Black Studies*, 27:5 (1997), p. 588.

⁵² A. Nwando, “Women and Authority in West African History”, p. 166. In *History Textbook: West African Senior School Certificate Examination*, 2018. Available at: www.wasscehistorytextbook.com/ [Accessed 12 March 2023].

⁵³ Sudarkasa, “The Status of Women”, p. 99.

wives.”⁵⁴ In Iyede society, the political system was different. Here, the first established socio-political organization was based on gerontocracy, but immediately after the arrival of Benin migrants a monarchy was introduced and the Ovie, the king, was named the head of the population. The political functionaries under the Ovie’s power were all males; the only female representative was the Ovie’s mother. Being the mother of the king could also mean a precise role in the government: she in fact could have the power to control a number of issues and affairs; however, this was not the case in Iyede. The Ovie’s mother did not have any political function, but she was treated with great respect by the entire community. Nevertheless, women in Iyede society had their own council, thanks to which they could gather opinions, ideas, and complaints, which were then presented to the clan assembly by the Otota-Eyana, the eldest woman.⁵⁵ Generally, West African societies had both male and female political representatives who served the king. Whenever this was not conceivable, women had the possibility to speak for themselves and to be heard thanks to councils and assemblies. Other cases than these highlight that women were not only dependent on the king, but they could also take office as co-rulers with the king or, especially in matrilineal population of Africa, they could rule their people as queen mothers.

1.3.1. Queen motherships in West African societies

“Autonomous queens and influential queen mothers are the most obvious evidence that women in precolonial Africa had significant political power.”⁵⁶ Even though other scholars debate the existence of a real authoritative role led by a woman, and they suggest that the role of queen mothership was only a ceremonial role, there are solid cases that challenge this assumption.⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, queen mothers were not only rulers next to the king, but they also had the role to defend, support,

⁵⁴ E. G. Bay, *Servitude and Worldly Success in the Palace of Dahomey*, 1983; quoted by H. Hanson, “Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women’s Political Power in Nineteenth-Century East Africa”, p. 220. In J. Allman, *et al.*, *Women in African colonial histories*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

⁵⁵ Ogbomo and Ogbomo, pp. 434-435.

⁵⁶ Hanson, p. 219.

⁵⁷ Farrar, p. 584.

nurture, advise and punish. In other words, they did for the king what mothers do for their children.⁵⁸

Farrar's study shows an accurate exploration of two cases of queen mothers in precolonial West African societies. The author compares two different political systems that could be found in two different precolonial regions of West Africa: on the one hand, the Akan Kingdom, a region of the Republic of Ghana; on the other hand, the Pabir Kingdom, located in North Nigeria. The Akan Kingdom was ruled by a queen mother called *ohemmaa*, whereas the queen mother of the Pabir Kingdom was the *maigira*. These two rulers had diverse functions and they held different positions. The first significant difference is that the Akan Kingdom was based on matrilineality and therefore the queen was the head of the government. On the contrary, the Pabir Kingdom was a patrilineal society, thus the king was the former ruler and the queen mother held power thanks to her connection with the king. This sharp distinction creates in turn differences in the process of succession to become queen mothers: in the Pabir Kingdom, only daughters of the king could become queen mothers, whereas in the Akan Kingdom, the succession of the queen mother was based on seniority, so that the successor should be a senior female who belonged to the royal matrilineage. It must be noted, however, that in the Pabir Kingdom, changes might have occurred in the last century, the XX century, because of the imposed colonial rules.

As far as the political representatives are concerned, the Pabir *maigira* had her own council filled with males who were chosen by the *maigira* herself among the members of her lineage. The Akan *ohemmaa*, in contrast, had her council composed of female stool-holders who gained their role in the same way as she.

The main functions of the Pabir *maigira* were that of serving the king, to be her guardianship, while the functions of the Akan *ohemmaa* were more various. The Akan queen mother was the head of the system of female stool-holders, and in this sense, she controlled and exercised governmental authority over the female part of society. This last detail demonstrates what has already been mentioned before, that the political system employed in most West African societies was the dual-sex system, where males and females represented distinct parts of the population and they held distinct positions in the government. In fact, the Akan *ohemmaa* was the main

⁵⁸ Hanson, p. 220.

representative of the female part in the king's council and thus she was concerned with female's interests.

Lastly, it needs to be highlighted that even though the Pabir *maigira* could not achieve the status of king, it was not the same for the Akan *ohemmaa*. When a suitable successor would not be found, a woman could occasionally replace the king's position, and become the *omanhene*.⁵⁹

It seems evident that women could hold important positions in precolonial West Africa, and the Asante saying "it is a woman who gave birth to a man, it is a woman who gave birth to a chief" confirms their control over the decision on succession, inheritance, obligations, and rights.⁶⁰

1.3.2. The voice and power of peasant women

Power and control were not exercised only by women who held high positions inside society and the political domain, but also by common peasant women. These women, in fact, constituted groups or networks where they could gather opinions and feelings about situations of their interest. Through these networks, women organized tactics and punishments against their male counterparts. Among the tactics there were "the use of strikes, boycotts, force, nudity as protest, and 'making war' or 'sitting on a man'."⁶¹ Usually boycotts and strikes regarded their domestic position, for example they would ignore their household work, they abstained from sexual intercourses with their husbands, or they stopped cooking for them. The 'making war' or 'sitting on a man' protest was basically the heavier protest of women against men. It was a method of public shaming initiated by women against men. Women presented a complaint to other women which then led to offensive and derisive acts against men:

All the village women would gather at a common ground, the market place or the village square. Palm twigs would be passed around from woman to woman a symbol of the war to come. The women would dress in war gear, their heads bound with ferns and their faces smeared with ashes. They would then move with war-like precision, and gather at the offender's compound. Once there, they would dance and sing derisive songs that outlined their grievances. Some of the songs called the manhood of the offender into question. [...] On some occasions the women would destroy the house. They would

⁵⁹ Farrar, pp. 583-589.

⁶⁰ Nwando, p. 167: the Asante population was part of the Akan ethnic group.

⁶¹ Nwando, p. 172.

pull the wrongdoer out and rough him up. They would surround him and then take turns in symbolically “sitting on” him.⁶²

The method of the ‘sitting on a man’ was then employed during the Women’s War in 1929. In this event, women initiated a direct resistance against the imposed colonial rules which lead women to lose the economic and political power they held in precolonial times. The 1929 Women’s War started from the British administration. They attempted to impose taxes on the number of animals and women each family possessed. Women, therefore, started to protest:

The initial contact was with a woman preparing palm oil in her own compound, Nwanyeruwa Ojim; when an official asked her how many people and livestock were in her compound, she responded, “Was your mother counted?” In the scuffle that ensued, she was able to call on neighboring women, who began “sitting on” the official to demonstrate their displeasure with his intrusion into women’s affairs.⁶³

They then attacked the British court buildings and, even though no British official was killed, they opened fire against women, killing fifty of them. After this tumultuous event, the British did make some changes, but any of the women’s demands was welcomed.⁶⁴

In the precolonial Iyede society, women had similar tactics and manner of protest. They had an ‘institution of sitting on a man’ where they gathered complaints about their male counterparts which could regard the customary law with respect to women. The women’s main way of protesting was the dislocation of their social and economic activities, so that men had to negotiate their return. However, the situation was re-established only whether the women’s complaints were resolved.⁶⁵

To reemphasise what was said previously, women could occupy various positions within the political scenario of their society. They not only could take office as queen mothers and therefore be female rulers with or without a king, but they could also

⁶² Nwando, p. 173.

⁶³ K. E. Sheldon, *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Lanham, Toronto & Oxford, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Sheldon, p. 1: “Following an inquiry into the events, the British introduced some changes in colonial policy but did not address any of the women’s demands, which had included requests for no tax on women, the removal of corrupt chiefs, the institution of female judges, and more general complaints about British practices cutting into women’s trading and fears about declining fertility.”

⁶⁵ Ogbomo and Ogbomo, pp. 435-436.

occupy insignificant positions and still be able to speak for themselves and make their voices heard.

1.4 Goddesses and gods in the West African spiritual world

Religion is crucial in determining the role of West African women in society, and to better understand this relation is important to mention the ‘world-sense’ of West African people. As Oyěwùmí suggests, it is preferable to use the term ‘world-sense’ rather than ‘worldview’ since West African people, and in her case Yorùbá people, did not conceptualize their world in a visual way; they privileged other senses, or a combination of them.⁶⁶ They believed in two not-too-distant worlds which communicate with each other and therefore represent the whole system of senses and views. These two non-separate worlds are the physical or visible world and the spiritual or invisible world, that together form a continuous and complete West African world.

Without the comprehension and the representation of both worlds, the status of West African women in precolonial times would be difficult to interpret. The power and authority of West African women in politics, economy and in the nuclear or extended family is strictly connected to their spiritual position and power. The West African world-sense accepted as true several unseen forces:

those unseen forces that are constructed by West Africans as female, such as goddesses, medicines, masked spirits, oracles; as well as women, (read: human beings), who have been endowed with spiritual idiosyncrasies to interpret this unseen spiritual world; and whose authority is personified in the work of priestesses, diviners, spirit mediums, healers, and prophetesses.⁶⁷

Both in the spiritual and in the physical world, women represented significant manifestations of power and authority. In the physical world, there could be found human beings, natural forces, and phenomena, whereas in the spiritual world, there are divine beings, spirits, and ancestors. According to West African people, spirits live with human beings, but they are too many to be known and sensed, therefore

⁶⁶ Oyěwùmí, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁷ Nwando, p. 164.

common people, considered mediums, communicate with them, and help others to comprehend both worlds. This also explains what has been affirmed previously, that these two worlds are continuous and that together they complete one unique world. Consequently, in the West African world, life is perceived as a cycle which starts from the human world and continue in the spiritual world. West African people believe in a never-ending life and in reincarnation, so that the life of a person is constituted by birth, growing, death, and rebirth.

1.4.1. The hierarchical order of the spiritual world

The spiritual world has its own hierarchy, as so does the physical world. At the head of the spiritual hierarchical system there is the Supreme God. This great force is neither male nor female, which explains the gender-free system in West Africa exposed by Oyèwùmí. However, God could have different names according to the customs and traditions of each West African society.⁶⁸ Considering that God is too grand, underneath It (pronoun used in a neutral way given that God has no gender) there are more accessible goddesses and gods who serve it. These goddesses and gods are autonomous, and they personify natural phenomena, in the sense there could be for instance the god of thunder, the goddess of the river, or the goddess of the rain. Underneath them are the oracles. They are both male and female forces, who know the past and predict the future. Lastly, in the hierarchical scale of the West African spiritual world, there are ancestors. They are the deceased beings, and they represent the connection with the living beings, given that life is considered a never-ending cycle where a person who dies will reborn and reincarnate in a different being.⁶⁹

This hierarchical order allows the interconnection between the spiritual and the physical world and permits the divine and supreme beings to manage events of the everyday life. This aspect is evident in the traditional religion of precolonial Akwa

⁶⁸ Nwando, p. 164: “The Asante and Fanti of Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire, call God, *Nyame*. The Bambara of Mali, call God, *Jalang*; the Dogon of Burkina Faso and Mali, call the Great God, *Amma*. The Edo of Nigeria, call God, *Osa*. The Ewe of Benin, Ghana, and Togo, call God, *Mawu*. Among the Fon of Benin, God is called, *Mawu-Lisa*. The Ibibio of Nigeria, call God, *Abassi* and *Chuku*. The Igbo of Nigeria, call God, *Chukwu*, *Chineke*, and *Olisa bi n’igwé*. The Kpelle of Liberia, call God, *Yala*. The Mossi of Burkina Faso, call God, *Winnam*. The Nupe of Nigeria, call God, *Soko* and *Waqqa*. The Vai of Liberia, call God, *Kamba*; and the Yoruba of Nigeria call God, *Olodumare*, *Olorun*, or *Olofin-Orun*.”

⁶⁹ Nwando, p. 165.

Ibom people, one of the thirty-six States of Nigeria. Their traditional religion was founded in oral traditions, where proverbs, myths, songs, legends, stories, folktales, and rituals were passed on from generation to generation. Since their religion was not based on sacred scriptures as Christianity is based on the Bible or Islamism is based on the Koran, the means through which wisdom, knowledge, and beliefs were imparted was the oral tradition. Akwa Ibom people possessed numerous proverbs about ancient wisdom, practices, and customs, and through them beliefs on divinities and spirits were preserved through centuries.

The faith in these spiritual beings allowed Akwa Ibom people to handle their life. In other words, they believed in the presence of these divinities and spirits, who through the worship of people could help them managing some aspects of their life. In fact, these people were convinced that God created a number of divinities as messengers, guardians, or servants. They could be male or female, and they inhabited the land, or other natural phenomena and places. As servants of God, they demanded respect and obedience from people. They were the direct link between the Supreme Being, God, and the living people. For this reason, the community worshipped some of them as they were in fact indirectly worshipping God. People made sacrifices, offered prayers and sometimes even gifts to deities, and they in return regulated their problems, brought wealth and growth to people.⁷⁰

God, placed in the highest rung of the spiritual world hierarchy, could also be worshipped directly. As explained by Dominus Okon Essien:

Before the arrival of European missionaries and introduction of the Christian 'Sabbath' in Akwa Ibom, the people had set aside a day known as God's day for the worship of the Supreme Being, namely, *abasi ibom*. The day was regarded as a sacred day on which all kinds of farm work were prohibited. Sacrifices were offered to God directly on that day by every family head.⁷¹

God could be worshipped also in other ways, especially in two different circumstances. The first one concerned the false accuse of a person in public. In this exact event, the accused person addressed his or her words directly to the sky in order to claim his or her innocence. Doing that, people believed that God was nearby

⁷⁰ D. O. Essien, "The Traditional Religion of Pre-colonial Akwa Ibom and its Impact", *Transafrican Journal of History*, 23 (1994), pp. 32-36.

⁷¹ Essien, p. 39.

anytime and ready to offer help. The second situation in which God could be worshipped directly was visible in the *mmem* rite. The *mmem* was a powder made of a mixture of ingredients made by medicine men for a household use. In particular, it was used by the mother, who spread it on her children's bodies and with a prayer asked to God to protect them.

Akwa Ibom people believed also in spirits, in the idea that life continued after death. As a matter of fact, death was perceived as a progression from the physical world to the spiritual one and, moreover, people were convinced that ancestors still lived among living beings even after their departure to the next world. For this reason, ancestors were called 'living dead' and people who were still alive continued for their whole life to honour and respect the departed.⁷²

1.4.2. Female deities in West African religion

Many of the deities were females, demonstrating the power and the important roles that women held. In many West African societies, women played significant positions in religious rites and ceremonies, honouring, respecting, and worshipping their beloved goddesses. These female deities represented in turn symbolic and powerful figures, who were able to manage and regulate these women's life. Goddesses could be in fact considered guardian angels, who were related to different aspects of life, or different natural phenomena. In history there are several instances that demonstrate the importance and the role of both goddesses and living women, who through ceremonies and rituals worshipped them asking in return for protection or change. Here, only three cases will be highlighted: the first example comes from Iyede society, the second one from Akwa Ibom society, and the third one from Yorùbá society.

In Iyede society, religion determined the status that women held in society, in addition of being one of the main cultural institutions that regulated the needs of people. The community believed in gods and goddesses as safeguards, and among them the goddess of fertility was the main deity to be protected by African women. In fact, anytime an offense was committed against the fertility rite, women initiated

⁷² Essien, pp. 36, 39-40.

cleansing ceremonies in order to regenerate the safety that the goddess offered to the community, and especially to women. In general, women were responsible for other sort of cleansing ceremonies, for example anytime evil foreshadowed, people addressed their danger and concerns to the women's council and they in turn took charge of ritual cleansing ceremonies to, in fact, clean wickedness. The ceremony is described in detail by Ogbomo and Ogbomo:

They started the ceremony by dancing nude from one end of the town to another and then to the Uruobe shrine. Uruobe represents the spirit which saves the people of Iyede from adversity. Thus any evil-minded person was barred from going close to the shrine, for whoever did so was believed never to return. At the shrine, the women offered sacrifices to appease the spirits. Once this had been done, the people believed that the town would be saved from destruction. On their way back from the Uruobe shrine, the women were prohibited from looking backward and talking to one another. As the exercise was in progress, men were forbidden to see the women.⁷³

Therefore, it could be said that women were recognized as leaders in religion rituals. This is evident from the fact that in Iyede society people were persuaded that all the good things came from female spirits, that they dominated the circle of life, and that men on the contrary were almost irrelevant. This, on the one hand, established the power and dominance of women in aspects such as fertility, rains, childbearing, illness, and success;⁷⁴ however, the traditional religion being based on these aspects confined and valued women only in their roles of mothers, wives, and housekeepers.

As far as Akwa Ibom people were concerned, it was documented that they were thoroughly persuaded that the principal divinity was the earth goddess, *abasi isong*, given that she possessed the essential ingredients for their survival: "the earth goddess was described as the source of all food, water, shelter, medical herbs and all other things that sustained life. The goddess was also in charge of fertility, productivity, morality, and was the guardian of human prosperity and progress on earth."⁷⁵ Even in this case, the main deity concerned with the cycle of life was a female deity, which emphasises the crucial position of women in religion, traditions, and society.

The last instance is retrieved from Yorùbá society, where women's agency and power are believed to come from mythical and religious icons. The most important

⁷³ Ogbomo and Ogbomo, p. 439.

⁷⁴ Ogbomo and Ogbomo, p. 440.

⁷⁵ Essien, p. 36.

goddess in Yorùbá religion is Osun, the deity of wealth, fertility, femininity, and power. She is believed to be a wealthy and great businesswoman, known both for her beauty and for her military defence abilities. History and mythical traditions depict Osun as the ruler and deity of several phenomena and aspects of life. Being the wife of different male deities, she has acquired their abilities and, therefore, she has learned the art of divination, she has obtained the rulership of economy and military capital, and she can manifest both positive and negative forces. Lastly, she played an enormous role as a woman and a mother; in fact, Osun could provide children, and she was able to heal women and children from illness.⁷⁶

Given the power and influence of these female deities, women in turn could gain access to great power and important positions in their own communities and societies. In fact, the worship of goddesses allowed women to obtain value and significance among their people. This will be evident thanks to the testimonies of African writers, especially in African women's writing, which is a perfect means to understand the roles of women and female deities in different African societies.

1.5 The impact of colonialism

In the late XIX century, with the arrival of colonial rule, West Africa experienced a consistent change in culture, history, and traditions. Europeans arrived in Africa without even knocking, and they brought with them a new vision of the world, new cultural models, new systems of ruling. Colonialism, in fact, was not only a historical event constituted by the conquest and exploitation of territories; it also meant to acquire political, economic, social, and especially cultural control. In other words, the occupation of West African lands put a partial, if not total, end to the customs, traditions, and culture of those native people and produced a set of new visions and knowledges that still permeate the contemporary experience of West African people. What is under scrutiny here is in fact the coloniality that still exists in West African societies, that means “the fact or state of being a colony; [the] colonial quality or

⁷⁶ D. Badejo, “African feminism: Mythical and social power of Women of African Descent”, *Research in African Literatures*, 29:2 (1998), p. 96.

character”.⁷⁷ The end of the colonial period did not dismantle coloniality, this set of visions, the system of knowledge, and the mindsets produced during the colonial rule.

Moreover, it is important to emphasise that among all the things that Europeans brought and produced, and therefore are still present today, there are also a new tradition and a new history. According to Oyěwùmí, history and tradition were reinvented in Africa. She made a distinction between three types of history, stressing the fact that Africa possessed already its own history, but it was substituted by the Western man’s history: “first, history as lived experience; second, history as a record of lived experience that is coded in the oral traditions; and, third, written history”.⁷⁸ Thus, even though Africa had its history, its lived experience, colonialism arrived and created a new history, based on the record of the experiences produced after the European occupation.

Traditions and culture, as oral and written history, were manipulated and reinvented in European people’s own interests. Together with the invention of traditions, colonialism also affected the structure and the conceptualization of African societies, the economy system, politics, religion, and education.

1.5.1. The reconceptualization of culture and society

The exploration of the social structure of precolonial West African communities was pivotal to understand the changes that occurred with the European occupation. As it was already mentioned, many West African societies were not gender-based, but organized according to seniority. The gender system was in fact imported with colonialism and influenced the already-existent traditional system, creating the two categories of ‘women’ and ‘men’ as known in the Western world. According to philosopher Maria Lugones, the gender system destroyed social relations and social hierarchy, transforming the basic configuration of thinking, decision-making, authority, and economy, and impacting negatively on African women.⁷⁹ Besides, this new system introduced patriarchy, giving to the male figure the hegemonic power and

⁷⁷ ‘Coloniality’ in the Oxford English Dictionary. Available at: www.oed.com/view/Entry/263741?redirectedFrom=coloniality& [Accessed 25 March 2023].

⁷⁸ Oyěwùmí, p. 80.

⁷⁹ M. Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender”, *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, 2(2008), p. 12.

control over women. A process that inferiorized women in general, and African women doubly, was developed. According to Lugones, the gender system has a light and a dark side: “[t]he light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonically. It only orders the lives of white bourgeois men and women, and it constitutes the modern/colonial meaning of “men” and “women”.”⁸⁰ In other words, white women and white men belong to the same colonial and racial class. However, it needs to be remembered that even white women are considered inferior to their male counterparts, and therefore are excluded from many spheres of public life. The dark side of the gender system, on the contrary, is more violent and it regards the subordination and exclusion of African women from the social, political, ritual, and economic life. Besides, it refers to the animalization, sexualization, and exploitation of those women.⁸¹ These two sides reemphasise the double subordination, by race and gender, of African women: they were considered inferior firstly because they were not whites, and secondly because they were women.

This new system was soon adopted by the natives, giving space to a reconceptualization of history, culture and society based on the Eurocentric raced and gendered assumptions. With this new structure, African women could no longer identify with their own history and therefore were put in a place that was not theirs. They came to be considered inferior as soon as the main system of categorization was based on gender and sex, where the female sex was subordinated to the male sex. Men became dominant in society and separate spheres in all domains of life were created, making African women invisible.⁸²

Nevertheless, there are studies that explore not only the negative effects of colonial rules and dominance, but they also show how this process in some circumstances was beneficial. Native people adapted the Western system to their own needs, sometimes transforming it to their advantage. This will be evident for women’s status and roles in society; they for instance used in their favour the new laws on marriage and divorce in order to get more autonomy. As exposed by the historian Denzer, there are three main theses on the impact of colonialism on African women’s status. The first one sees the process as totally beneficial for African women:

⁸⁰ Lugones, p. 15.

⁸¹ Lugones, pp.15-16.

⁸² Oyěwùmí, pp. 153-154.

Colonial laws abolished or partially abolished certain practices and institutions that British administrators regarded as inhumane, “uncivilized,” or exploitative such as involuntary domestic slavery, pawning, forced marriage, child marriage, and woman-to-woman marriage. They strongly believed that the growth of Christianity and Western education promoted progress and enlightened ideas concerning women's status in society.⁸³

The second thesis, on the contrary, proved that the colonial power and authority had extremely negative impacts on African women, who had been obliged to change their customs and traditions in favour of European ones. This thesis reinforces what has been said before by Oyěwù mí, namely the gradual transformation of precolonial African history and the corresponding absence of African women from the reinvented history. The third and last thesis demonstrates that the experience of African women under colonial rule was neither totally negative nor totally positive. Even though they lost power in their politics, they gained authority and power in the modern politics. They had disadvantages in some fields and advantages in others: the main examples are their impossibility to get access to education, although they had new freedom of choice in new marriage and divorce laws.⁸⁴

All these changes in culture, education, economy, politics, and religion will be the objects of enquiry in the following paragraphs.

1.5.2. The impact of Christianity

With colonialism came Christianity and Western beliefs and ideas. From the beginning of the European occupation the main process developed by the colonizers was that of Christianizing and educating African people. This process was set in place through Christian missions and through the building of several churches in what they considered promising sites. Christianity and education were in this sense considered synonyms; school was held in churches, where missionaries could teach African people the Western education. The principal data concerning the process of Christianization and its effect that will be shown are gathered by the two scholars Oyěwù mí and Denzer, who explore the experience of Yorubaland. In this society,

⁸³ Denzer, p. 14.

⁸⁴ Denzer, p. 15.

women were among the first converts in search for help as domestic slaves or against an unhappy marriage, being as a consequence the first supporters of this new faith and ideology.⁸⁵ However, Oyěwùmí stresses the idea that Yorùbá men were the primary target of missionary education. This was due to the aim of spreading the Christian faith and the growing of new catechists, clerks, and missionaries, who could bring to the Christian path their own people. In other words, African men were needed to convert as many Africans as possible. On the contrary, African women were not desired to obtain these professions, since they were considered only as wives and mothers. Having affirmed that, it seems clear that even though education was provided for both boys and girls, it was not offered with the same intents. Boys had privileged access to the missionary education in order to get trained to important professions, such as pastors, missionaries, diplomats, and politicians. Whereas the girls' role was that of becoming great wives and helpmates of their powerful men. This distinction was brought into light with the application of a particular approach: missionaries gave children gifts and objects which could connect them to their future professions. So that, to girls they gave jewellery or objects to learn how to be more attractive, while to boys they gave guns.⁸⁶

Colonizers arrived in the African soil with the Victorian ideology, having in mind that a woman's place was at home. So, they came and attached these prejudices to African women. In this way, according to the missionaries the only skills that women were able to learn were the domestic skills; they were only taught how to sew, to cook, to clean, and to take care of a child.⁸⁷

Notwithstanding the crucial role of boys, girls were as fundamental as them in the construction of a solid Christian community. This was possible only with the help of African families, who on the contrary at the beginning were reluctant to send their children to school. In the traditional construction of a Yorùbá society, children were of great help at home, at the farm and at the market. They needed to bring home money as did their parents in order to help the maintenance of the family and of the house. For this reason, sending them to school meant losing an important hand in the workplace and, as a consequence, a lot of money. Eventually, due to incentives put in

⁸⁵ Denzer, p. 16.

⁸⁶ Oyěwùmí, pp. 129-130.

⁸⁷ Nwando, p. 174.

place by missionaries, the situation changed. Parents understood that the Western education would provide their children more opportunities for a successful professional life. Nevertheless, this was possible for boys, who were taught to obtain great abilities for a future work, while this was not available for girls. The education gap between boys and girls was evident in Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria, where mothers belonging to the *élite* used their positions as wives and daughters of powerful men to found a school for girls.⁸⁸ Parents who were willingly to send their children to school first sent the boys, while girls were still needed at home to help their mothers on domestic necessities, or in the markets. In addition, “many parents feared that education would lead their daughters into immorality or alienate them from their culture, and even possibly make them infertile.”⁸⁹ These details illustrate how there were still many prejudices both on the colonizers part and on the colonized part.

In conclusion, one thing seems clear: under colonial rule, African women lost their positions, being excluded from education and employment, and being considered always subalterns, that is subordinated and not able to emancipate from the male figure to whom they belonged.

1.5.3. Changes and continuity on the status of West African women

Colonial rules and control established many changes on the roles of West African women, while maintaining continuity in other aspects of the African life. As affirmed in the previous paragraph, the introduction of Christianity and of Western education brought notable inequalities between sons and daughters which were then visible in the world of work. The education gap developed a psychological effect on both men and women creating the notion that females were mentally incapable, seeing that only sons went to school and could obtain good positions in their professional life. As claimed by Oyěwùmí, this was part of the colonial legacy:

For example, Dr. T. Solarin, one of the most prominent educators in Nigeria, has touched on the problem of sex inequality in education. Mayflower, the high school he founded, became coeducational

⁸⁸ Oyěwùmí, pp. 133-134.

⁸⁹ Denzer, p. 20.

in 1958. Initially, there was a lot of resistance from male students who felt that girls would not perform as well as boys in school because of their mental inferiority.⁹⁰

Despite the gender distinction in education, as far as Yorubaland was concerned, women continued to work as farmers, food processors, and traders, giving a fundamental help in the economy of the society. Especially trading remained the main domain in which African women held high positions. With colonialism, in fact, trade was expanded in Europe and women could obtain new opportunities of work based on their needs. The situation was different in salaried and wage labour, where women had less opportunities because of their lower level of education in comparison with men. The occupations addressed to women in the colonial period were always related to their domestic abilities, so that they simply turned ordinary activities, such as cooking, mending clothes, sewing, and selling clothes into money-earning opportunities. In some cases, educated women could also aspire to have a position as a nurse or teacher. As Denzer claims, teaching and nursing, together with sewing, were the main occupations for educated girls.⁹¹

Other changes for women are related to the new laws on marriage and divorce. With Christianity, polygamy was no longer the desirable form of marriage, and it was substituted with the monogamy form. As stated before, monogamy was seen as an advantage for Yorùbá women, who believed to gain more freedom, autonomy and, hopefully, economic security. Moreover, the British administration established new laws on divorce and abolished woman-to-woman marriage, forced marriage, and child marriage.⁹² It needs to be stressed that, although polygamy was an illegal form of marriage, in monogamous marriage women were subordinated to their husband in all situations. They were now totally dependent on their men and considered only as wives. This is evident in the transformation of the traditional family, which passed from being an extended family composed by the nuclear family and relatives, to the only nuclear family, composed by the man and his dependents, wife, and children.⁹³ Despite the subordination of African women in marriage, they continued to hold

⁹⁰ Oyěwùmí, p. 135.

⁹¹ Denzer, pp. 23-27.

⁹² Denzer, pp. 17-18.

⁹³ Oyěwùmí, pp. 151-152.

leadership in society, for example in the economy and in decision-making. Especially in local communities and small realities, women still held power as political leaders and chiefs. One example among all is the development of anticolonial politics conducted by educated Nigerian women:

They took part in the activities of the Nigerian National Democratic Party, the Nigerian Youth Movement, the Omo Egbe Oduduwa, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, and the Action Group. At first, they confined their roles to fringe activities such as organizing entertainment and raising funds. Meanwhile they carved out their own arenas for leadership by creating modern pressure groups. One of the first was the Lagos Women's League led by Charlotte Obasa, which promoted health education, more employment opportunities for educated girls, better conditions for female nurses and government workers, more girls' schools, and a better standard of living for Africans in general.⁹⁴

This is a perfect instance that demonstrates the strength and courage of African women even in unbearable situations.

Lastly, even religion was reinterpreted according to the Western ideology. The gender system was introduced in the religious sphere, and it transformed the identity of their gods. As stated in a previous paragraph, God, the Supreme Being was at the head of the hierarchy of the spiritual world, and was a neutral being, neither male nor female. However, with the introduction of a gender-based language, God acquired the male gender. This same reasoning was applied to all the other gods positioned underneath the Supreme Being in the hierarchy, having as a result a masculinization of the whole spiritual hierarchy in the Yorùbá religion, in this case.⁹⁵

The domination of the male gender even in religion seems to highlight the total subordination of West African women in all domains of life. Without exception, colonialism affected the whole population of West Africa; however, as noted, women were the most impacted, being subjugated both by the white man and the black man.

From all the instances illustrated in this last paragraph, it seems appropriate to note that the colonial administration brought many changes and transformations in the already-existent traditions of West Africa. Colonialism has touched all spheres of life, from the structure of the traditional African society to the economy, from

⁹⁴ Denzer, p. 32.

⁹⁵ Oyěwùmí, pp. 140-141.

language to politics, from religion to traditional beliefs. These are all aspects that will remain rooted in the history of African people and that will not disappear with the end of this tremendous experience; in fact, colonialism will end, but coloniality will permeate the story and the history of these people for a long time yet.

Nevertheless, it seems more precise to remember that many customs and traditional ceremonies and rites were able to survive under colonial occupation. As a matter of fact, the fundamental facts about the African society prior to colonialism gathered in this first chapter will be of extreme help for the analysis of the two Nigerian novels written by two women writers and set in Nigeria during the colonial period. Thanks to the detailed study that will be carried out in the following chapter, it will be evident how some customs and traditions of the African society survived under colonial rule.

CHAPTER II

Voices of women in Nigerian writing (1960s and 1970s): Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta

With the advent of colonialism, a new language and a new education system were introduced. These changes deeply affected Nigerian culture and history. In particular, Nigerian societies had to experience the passage from orality to writing, which also implicated a change in their usual system of knowledge and interpretation.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is that of exploring the transit from the oral tradition of African societies to the introduction and development of writing in the colonial period. Then, the appropriation of writing by African authors, who with the end of colonialism and the beginning of new-born independent States, started to give new voice to their role, their power, and their own memories will be emphasised. In this section, importance is given to the misleading representations of African history, and especially to that of female characters, which could be found in African male writing. Finally, the chapter focuses on Nigerian women's writing, and the novels *Efuru* (1966) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), respectively written by Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, will be analysed. Thanks to the female perspective offered by these two novels, the portrayal of Nigerian women, the description of traditional practices and customs of Nigerian societies, and the impact of the colonial occupation in the Nigerian social structure will be the main objects of study.

2.1 The passage from orality to written literature

Precolonial West African societies were based mainly on oral forms of expression: folktales, myths, proverbs, and songs passed on from generation to generation, from mouth to mouth, from ear to ear, without losing or forgetting the traditional stories and tales of their territories. Listening to oral tales was a tradition for African people, and telling stories was an art. Women dominated the oral tradition, they were custodians of orality, both as performers and as producers of knowledge, given the fact that oral literatures had also didactic and pedagogical functions. There were many

forms of oral performances and in all of those, women played a fundamental role. Their position was recognised in panegyric poetry, a form of oral text pronounced in public in praise of something or someone, in elegiac poetry, but also in lullabies, dirges, songs, and love poems. Since oral performances were central in moments of passage from life to death, the visible presence of women in these ceremonies seems to connect their importance between the physical and the spiritual world, namely the two not-too-distant worlds that communicating together form a unique cycle of life from birth to death.¹

The presence of women was not only significant as storytellers, but also as subjects. As mentioned, oral performances had a pedagogical function, and in fact, many stories, myth, and proverbs were told to children in order to make them learn the appropriate behaviour to maintain as adults. In many stories, the role of women as mothers was taken as an example and was treated in a positive way, in contrast to the creation of negative stereotypes on the role of women as wives. In those oral tales, one could take ‘poetic licence’ and rules could be broken, but always with the aim of restoring order at the end. The aim was that of teaching to young girls and boys how to behave and how things should go in real life. To obtain this, at the end of the stories the transgressor was punished, and order and respect of rules were restored. The same procedure was applied in the creation of myths; in fact, “the community involved will have to believe and internalize [the] explanation, which begins to lead a life of its own as a self-evident given fact”.²

Lastly, women were also composers who used the power of oral tales in their favour, creating or transforming beliefs, myths, and oral traditions in stories which offered a female perspective. It is no coincidence that many African writers stated that their first sources were their mothers and grandmothers, who in fact inspired them to write and tell stories.³

From the mid to late XIX century, colonial rules occupied every aspect of the social, cultural, political, economic, and religious domain of West Africa, and among all the changes that occurred in these areas, orality was one of the most affected. The

¹ O. Nnaemeka, “From orality to writing: African women writers and the (re)inscription of womanhood”, *Research in African Literatures*, 25: 4 (1994), pp. 1-2.

² M. Schipper, “Emerging from the Shadows: Changing patterns in gender matters”, *Research in African Literatures*, 27:1 (1996), p. 5.

³ Schipper, pp. 3-4; and Nnaemeka, “From Orality to Writing”, p. 2.

importation of a new ideology, of new values, of new administrative rules, and especially of a new language changed forever the traditional values and worldviews of West African people.

2.1.1. Colonialist literature

Colonialism not only meant the occupation of a territory by foreign people, but it was especially the creation of a new cultural location. This place, where the colonial experience is underway, can be called the 'location of culture'. Borrowing the term from the title of one of Homi Bhabha's books, *The Location of Culture* (1994), 'location' represents the place in which colonial power and local people meet, and therefore the exact position in which culture is produced. In this case, the culture produced is the product of the encounter of British culture and West African cultures. According to Bhabha, the 'clash' between these two different realities creates in turn a hybrid place. Hybridity is crucial to understand the transformation occurred in West Africa after the arrival of colonial rule. In other words, when colonial power and native people met, different cultures, languages, customs, traditions, values, ideologies, worldviews met too, crafting hybridity. This phenomenon was likely to happen because British values were exported in a territory that already had a culture, that already had a history.⁴

Nevertheless, the encounter between two distant worlds and especially the encounter between two languages transformed not only the traditional practice of oral performances and literature, but also the whole system of knowledge and perception of the world. As stated in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin,

[t]he 'intersection' of language which occurs in the literatures of formerly oral societies does not take place simply between two different languages but between two different ways of conceiving the practice and substance of language. One characteristic of the world-views of oral cultures is the assumption that words, uttered under appropriate circumstances have the power to bring into being the events or states they stand for, to embody rather than represent reality. This conviction that the word can create its object leads to a sense that language possesses power over truth and reality.⁵

⁴ H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.

⁵ B. Ashcroft, et al., *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and practice in postcolonial literatures*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 80.

The importation of a new worldview in precolonial West African oral cultures devastated the whole system of beliefs and customs of West African people, and led to the formation of new beliefs and stereotypes which were created also with the help of literature. In the second part of the 1800 and first part of the 1900, with the literature produced in colonial times by European people a new vision of the world, new conceptions, and new values spread. History was reinvented, recreated with the hands and eyes of European people. The literary practice in which colonial ideology and fantasies were placed is called by Susan Arndt 'colonialist literature'. The term differs from 'colonial literature' which, on the contrary, is a broad term to identify the general production of literature in colonial times. Colonialist literature was supported by colonial power and encouraged colonialist authors to write about Eurocentric conceptions. The main ideology born from this phenomenon regards the creation of the binary opposition between Europe and Africa, where Europe had the hegemonic supremacy over Africa. This idea was produced in order to convey the message that Europe possessed the power and control, while Africa was inferior. Europe was conceived as the norm, and Africa as the Other. In colonialist literature, these assumptions were constructed with the strategy of exoticism, where the dichotomy of 'good' and 'evil' was possible. Texts in which Europe's occupation meant to save Africa from their impossibility to govern themselves started to be written and to create a new African history. This new history talked about white supremacy, their great help in saving native people from their inability to live and rule their own lands and communities;⁶ it created new social categories and helped to develop the idea that women were inferior to men.

2.1.2. Postcolonial writing

The passage from the oral culture to the written culture of African societies deeply changed the production of knowledge and the system of interpretation of native people. All the literary texts written with a European mentality produced a negative

⁶ S. Arndt, "Paradigms of an Intertextual Dialogue. 'Race' and 'Gender' in Nigerian Literature", in *Of Minstrelsy and Masks: The Legacy of Ezenwa-Ohaeto in Nigerian Writing*, ed. Matzke, C., Raji-Oyelade, A., Davis G. V., Amsterdam & New York, Editions Rodopi, 2006, p. 201.

psychological effect on African people. Being subjugated to the colonial power, they interiorised the European ideology, which deformed their mental state and made them believe in their inferiority and subalternity.⁷ The impact of the literature produced during the colonial period lasted even after the end of this experience, having repercussions also in postcolonial writing.

Postcolonial literatures were born from the process of writing during the colonial period by native people. While, on the one hand, there was the colonialist literature produced mainly by the colonial regime with the aim of spreading the idea of their supremacy; on the other hand, around the turn of the twentieth century, also native people started to produce their own literature. The works largely produced by educated African people in this period and all the works produced after 1945, with the end of the colonial experience, collaborated to give life to what can be called postcolonial literatures. The term 'postcolonial literatures' includes the effects of colonialism between the writing in English and other indigenous languages. Other terms were used before this one, suggesting the complexity in finding the appropriate one, but none of them seemed to be fully suitable. In the 1960s, the name 'Commonwealth literatures' emerged, but it had geographical and political limitations, so it was replaced by other terms such as 'third-world literatures' or 'new literatures in English'. Both names seemed not appropriate: the first one conveyed a pejorative idea of those literatures, while the second one was misleading and too distant from the colonial event. All these attempts led to the privileged use of the term 'postcolonial literatures', which seemed to provide an appropriate explanation of the relationship between the historical experience of colonialism and the experience of writing in the involved territories.⁸

As mentioned before, the end of colonialism left native people with a damaged mentality and a distorted understanding on their own history, which according to postcolonial writers need to be changed. This is the aim of postcolonial literatures: to subvert and change the mentality of inferiority and the lack of dignity created and internalised during the colonial period. In other words, if written words were weapons in the hand of the colonial power, with the end of the European control of any means

⁷ Arndt, p. 203.

⁸ Ashcroft, *et al.*, pp. 22-23.

of communication, the same written words became the weapons of native people with the intention of reinventing their own history and constructing a process of self-assertion.

It needs to be stated, however, that the concepts and facts questioned and analysed in these sections are extremely complicated and multifaceted. They try to narrow and emphasise a very long and difficult history, that here can only be mentioned in its most significant phases.

2.2 The strategy of 'writing back'

The psychological effects fixed in the minds of African people needed to be demolished. Western conceptions and ideologies needed to be subverted and African people needed to regain their history, their traditions, and their values. It was of extreme urgency for those people to regain authority and control over their own lives. According to Chinua Achebe, writers have the greatest responsibility to start a process of self-assertion and of re-establishment of the African traditions, allowing their people to reclaim their own culture and history and to heal from the trauma of the colonial experience. The mentality of inferiority and of all the dichotomies created by European people needed to be cancelled and be replaced with the national identity existed in precolonial times. Achebe reinforces the idea that his community, his people had a history, had a culture, had a dignity before the arrival of colonial rule, so "[t]he writer's duty is to help them regain [them] by showing them in human terms what happened to them [...]. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them".⁹ The use of a proverb by the author could already give a hint about the importance of going back to the past to find a way to fight the present. Traditions and oral literature are in fact one of the means to subvert Western conventions. However, as Achebe suggests, the main method to fight back is through literature; it is with the utilization of the same weapon as the Europeans did that African people could regain control over their lives. This

⁹ A. Chinua, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation", *Nigeria Magazine*, 81(1964), p. 157; quoted by Arndt, p. 203.

methodology has been recognised as the poetic of ‘writing back’ by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), who theorised the employment of the term and its strategies. According to them, the methodology of ‘writing back’ and postcolonial writing can be interchangeable; in both, writers use the language of the centre, in this case the English language, and they adapt it in a new context of writing.¹⁰ Borrowing the words of Peter Barry, to write back means to ‘adopt, adapt and adept’. According to him, the ‘adopt’ phase

bears close resemblance to the “mimic” phase, where the postcolonial intellectuals, owed strict allegiance to the western way of writing - they thought, wrote like a western poet/author and used even the imagery of the West [...]. In the “adapt” phase, which can be likened to a kind of hybridization, the postcolonial writer makes a “partial intervention in the genre” by adapting the European form to the African/Indian subject matter, as a licensee; and lastly, in the adept phase, the writer breaks free and in a bout of absolute independence, remakes or recreates the form to their own specification and [brings] into play a variety of registers, styles, voices and tones with least effort.¹¹

Adopting the Western way of writing, adapting it to African specific subjects and themes, and recreating a new kind of literature for African writers meant to resist and to fight back against the internalisation of European standards, and to regain a national identity. This was all part of a counter-discourse in which African people, writers and critics found themselves in order to deconstruct and negate the imperial discourse created during the colonial experience. It was a great form of strength and energy on the part of ex-colonized people, who through creativity tried and still are trying to change the process of imperialism and start a new process of decolonization.¹²

2.2.1. Practicing decolonization

The ‘writing back’ of African writers has developed in different ways and with different strategies. The main processes adopted regarded the use of the English

¹⁰ Ashcroft, *et al.*, p. 37.

¹¹ P. Barry, *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 196; R. Kalpana, “The “Writing Back Paradigm” and the Relevance of Postcolonial Stylistics”, *Studies in Literature and Language*, 14:1 (2017), p. 14.

¹² S. Burney, “CHAPTER FOUR: Resistance and Counter-Discourse: Writing Back to the Empire”, *Counterpoints*, 417(2012), pp. 106-107: “Said makes a crucial distinction between colonialism and imperialism. Imperialism is the ‘practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory,’ while colonialism is ‘the implanting of settlements on a distant territory. Imperialism lingers after colonization is over’”.

language, of the genre and of the style of a literary text. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin have identified two strategies: abrogation and appropriation.

The strategy of abrogation concerns the refusal of the imperial power over the means of communication, of the standards, and of the norms of the imperial culture. The rejection of the imposed imperial culture and norms cannot be used in a thorough way whether it is not accompanied with the strategy of appropriation. Appropriation means to take the language of the centre and reconstituting it with new usages in order to mark a profound separation from the colonial standards. In the ‘writing back’ approach of West African writers, the English language was applied as a weapon against the very owners of that language and used as a tool to reconstruct different cultural experiences. This was possible thanks to the varieties of language that were born from the hybrid experience of colonialism, where in fact vernacular tongue, varieties of Standard English, native local languages, and dialects coexisted.¹³

These two processes can be implemented by the specific application of two textual approaches. The first one is the integration of the native language in the English language. In other words, with the introduction of words from native local languages, the culture of the given text could be better represented. This will be evident from Flora Nwapa’s and Buchi Emecheta’s novels, where several Igbo words and expression can be identified. The second process is that of relexification, namely the process in which “the European language of the text is changed such that a characteristic language-style emerges that is strongly reminiscent of the native language of the author and of the cultural heritage which it transports”.¹⁴ With this technique, the writer does not simply introduce a word from another language or he/she translates it; the writer creates a new register from an alien vocabulary. There are in fact grammatical and morphological consequences which can be evident from some instances of Nwapa’s *Efuru* that Arndt presents in her essay. With regards to grammatical consequences, the scholar identifies a specific example in which the writer omits the article in the use of the English language because her native language, the Igbo language, does not possess articles. On the contrary, a morphological consequence of the application of relexification is emphasised by Arndt in the

¹³ Ashcroft, *et al.*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁴ Arndt, p. 206.

incorrect use of singulars and plurals. For instance, in translating an Igbo expression into English, Nwapa had to find a way to ensure that the meaning of that expression was not lost, but also that the translation was as understandable as possible, so she decided both to remain faithful to her native language and to approach English language conventions.¹⁵

Through these strategies, it is possible for African writers to reinforce the power of their languages and their traditions. They are able to let myths, proverbs, songs, oral tales, and legends survive in postcolonial literatures.

2.2.2. 'Writing back' literature and the question of gender

The colonization era left educated people and the Western way of writing as its legacy, which had its positive and negative consequences. As it was shown, the written literature was internalised by African educated people and used in their favour in order to reinvent and reimagine the colonial experience and the African history and culture through the method of the 'writing back'. Several emergent writers, in fact, made into practice what missionaries have taught them and used their abilities and competences to create new stories and worlds. However, one of the negative consequences concerns the fact that colonialism also brought the gender system which was applied even in education. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, there was an education gap between boys and girls during the colonial period. This gap caused the domination of male writers in the emergent postcolonial literatures since males were privileged to obtain the Western education. The mastery of men over women in literature might have produced negative effects on what those writers have tried to convey through their writing.

¹⁵ Arndt, pp. 206-207: as regards grammatical consequences, the author presents the following example, "Nwapa omits the article when translating the set Igbo expression *Onwere aru oma* into English. Thus it appears as: 'Has it healed?' 'Yes, it has healed. *She had good body*'.". As regards morphological consequences, the author said: «in Efurū one of the characters says: "So *this is your eyes*." Though this strikes the reader as incorrect, it is actually a relexification of the Igbo phrase *Ya bu na nke a bu anya gi*, meaning "Is that you? I haven't seen you in a long time!". There is no distinction between singular and plural in Igbo. But in order to convey the idiom of the Igbo expression, Nwapa has to make use of the English plural: here, "the eyes" is a synecdoche for a person, imagery that would be destroyed if an 'eye' were spoken of. However, to remain true to the Igbo grammar and therewith to the character of this expression, she leaves 'this' and 'is' in the singular."

One aspect among all regards the portrayal of men and women in literature. As colonialist literature has produced a totally erroneous idea of the relationship between Europeans and African people, also the ‘writing back’ of emergent male authors was influenced by wrong beliefs and values.¹⁶ It seems that their ‘writing back’ had the aim to subvert only the portrayal of African men, while African women remained mute and absent. Moreover, if a woman character was described, she was presented as a marginalised and a stereotyped character. It seems that the process started by colonialism in excluding women from history, making them subalterns and sometimes even absent continued by these emergent male authors in postcolonial literatures. Nevertheless, the surprising aspect is that the ‘writing back’ approach is precisely where these types of descriptions of women are commonly found, when actually it should be a literature that exposes the deformed mentality created by European people and that reimagine and re-establish the real social and cultural aspects of African history. The scholar Arndt in her exploration of the question of gender in the ‘writing back’ literature focuses her attention on the analysis of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where she finds the supremacy of patriarchy over gender equality. However, since Achebe’s novel is not an object of enquiry in this thesis, it will not be given a detailed analysis on the representation of women.¹⁷ Notwithstanding this, it is interesting to notice that many scholars argued that his representation of gender and the oppressed positions of women was retrieved from the precolonial African social reality, even though many African feminist scholars disagreed on this.¹⁸ As stated in the previous chapter, women in precolonial times could have great power among their people, they could hold high positions in the economic, political, and religious spheres and for this reason they were treated with great respect by their communities. To better understand the position of women before and during the colonial experience, it helps to mention the important work of the literary and postcolonial theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak. In her text *Can*

¹⁶ Schipper, p. 7.

¹⁷ If interested in the analysis of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and his portrayal of African women’s conditions, refer to Arndt, S., “Paradigms of an Intertextual Dialogue. ‘Race’ and ‘Gender’ in Nigerian Literature”, in *Of Minstrelsy and Masks: The Legacy of Ezenwa–Ohaeto in Nigerian Writing*, ed. Matzke, C., Raji–Oyelade, A., Davis G. V., Amsterdam & New York, Editions Rodopi, 2006, pp. 199-221.

¹⁸ Arndt, pp. 208-210.

the Subaltern Speak? (1994), Spivak criticised the works of Western scholars and used a deconstructive approach in order to invert the binary oppositions between subject and object, self and other, West and East, Europe and non-Europe. Her aim was that of demonstrating that subaltern classes in history did not have the possibility to speak up for themselves. The same reasoning could be done for women, who being oppressed by male supremacy had not the access to their own representation and history. Moreover, whether the subaltern in the colonial experience had no history and could not speak, a female who belonged to a subaltern class was doubly affected and oppressed.¹⁹ Then, the status of African women during the colonial period was equal to that of other women in other moments of oppression. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that their position was not the same in other moments in history, for instance in precolonial times, as it was claimed previously and wrongly supposed by scholars who thought that male writers were describing the real precolonial social status of African women.

Since African women, as their male counterparts, had their history, their power, and their agency, it seems more appropriate to let women writers speak for themselves. In other words, it seems there was a need for women writers in the 'writing back' literature, so that they could tell and write their own history, which was different from either the one conveyed by Western literary conventions or the one drawn by emergent male writers.

2.3 The emergent position of African women writers

With the development of African literature, male authors dominated the literary scene, while female writers were in the minority. This scenario lasted for many years, even bringing one to wonder if African women writing existed. The quasi-total exclusion of women writers from the literary sphere was also evident from their absence from literary criticism. In a conference of African writers in Stockholm in 1986, the writer Ama Ata Aidoo commented on her condition and that of her

¹⁹ G. C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory. A Reader*, ed. Williams, P., Chrisman L., New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 66-111.

colleagues with a lecture entitled *To be an African Woman Writer*. The writer paid attention to the Western critics' indifference towards African women writers and to the growing negligence of African critics too. In telling this, Aidoo showed a heart-breaking feeling, considering that also her compatriots pretended that African women writers did not exist.²⁰

As regards literary criticism in Africa, it seems important to delineate how and when it was born in order to pay attention to its treatment towards male and female African authors. The criticism of African literature emerged when some writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and others began to achieve success and their talent began to be widely recognised. Their success was incremented by the establishment of the *African Writers Series*, which published their works and allowed them to be known. In addition, the following emerging of journals as the *African Literature Today* (ALT) or the *Research in African Literatures* (RAL) gave the opportunity to critics to be aware of published works. The literary criticism in Africa was influenced by the practice adopted in Europe and America; this is not surprising given that the emergent African critics in the 1960s were the product of the European education adopted during the colonial period, and therefore they used tools and standards that were Europeans.

Focusing on the *African Literature Today* journal (ALT), it is interesting to notice how African women writers were treated along the years and along the different volumes published by the journal. As stressed before, African male writers dominated literary criticism, giving little space, sometimes no space at all, to African women writers. The same situation was evident in the ALT journal, where, especially in the 1970s, male writers such as Achebe, Ekwensi, and Soyinka had the total support of male critics, journalists, and publishers, who emphasised patriarchal values and demolished women's works and talent.

The ALT journal was first published in 1968, in a time where African female writers had already entered the scene of African literature. However, their presence in the literary criticism was actually an absence. This picture lasted for several other volumes of the journal; in the firsts four volumes of ALT, only one review, moreover a negative one, of a female writer's work was present, this work was *Efuru* (1966) by

²⁰ Schipper, p. 8.

Flora Nwapa. In the following volume, ALT 5, published in 1971 for the first time a female critic appeared and had her space with a full article on the analysis of *Idu* (1970) by Flora Nwapa.²¹ After this volume, one must wait till ALT 15, published in 1987, to find a volume almost entirely devoted to African female writing:

Women in African Literature Today, as it was entitled, was published by James Currey Publishers and Africa World Press: they took over from Heinemann Educational Books which had published ALT 1-14. The issue features essays that explore the thematic and stylistic preoccupations of different African women writers. It celebrates the achievements of women writers and critics. For the first time, women writers receive the focused attention they deserve as creators of cultural productions that have contributed to the growth and development of African literature.²²

From this moment, women began to have their deserved place in the journal. The situation improved even more thanks to Ernest Emenyonu, who in 2004 took over the editorship of the journal. With him, the presence of women grew; more female writers and critics found their place in the journal and more women took part as members of the editorial team. Moreover, the increase of African female literary criticism had without doubt a strict relationship with the development of African feminist theories, which gave to critics the means and tools to interpret and analyse from different perspectives the works of these women writers.²³

2.3.1. Feminism(s) in Africa

The term ‘feminism’ is not simple to define. In time it has received major attention and an extensive theoretical treatment. In trying to find a definition for the term, the issue of borders seems crucial. For instance, Western feminism can be divided into radical, Marxist, liberal, and social feminism, but it is treated by theorists as if it were monolithic and universal. Moreover, the use of the term ‘Western feminism’ already suggests the existence of other types of feminism. In fact, in the last decades, there was the need to create a new category for those who have been marginalized and misrepresented by ‘mainstream feminism’. In this sense, there are other forms of feminism who are trying to separate themselves from the feminism of the ‘First

²¹ A. Ezeigbo, “Women & ALT. Balancing the Gender Equation in the Criticism of African Literature”, in *ALT 37: African Literature Today*, E. Emenyonu, 2020, pp. 88-89, 92-94.

²² Ezeigbo, p. 97.

²³ Ezeigbo, pp. 98, 100.

World', or Western feminism. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Western feminism cannot be applied to the experiences of women from other parts of the world, thus she focuses her attention on the problem of the universalisation of feminist experiences.²⁴ Since the experience of Western women is different from that of African women, it seems not appropriate to use the term 'feminism' with the same connotation assumed in the Western world. Western feminism "is part and parcel of Western cultural imperialism! In that regard, the fight for "female equality" assumes a different meaning for African women".²⁵

The same problem concerns the term 'sisterhood', which according to Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí is used inappropriately by feminist theorists. She interrogates the application of the term asking: "What meaning does it carry as it crosses boundaries, if indeed it ever does cross boundaries? Should it carry the same meaning? Can it carry the same meaning, given that words are informed by specific cultural assumptions and histories?"²⁶. In her view, the primary problem is that of borders: as the term 'feminism' itself cannot be applied to every culture of the world, also the term 'sisterhood' requires a different interpretation according to the culture to which it refers. The notion of 'sisterhood' refers essentially to the Western culture, and it cannot be applied to other cultures, even though friendship relations are extremely important also in African cultures.²⁷

The complex debate on the definition of the term 'feminism' and on the interpretation of what could be an African feminism led many African women writers to not identify themselves as feminists. Many of them indeed associated the term with Western feminism, and therefore they did not feel identified by that interpretation. For instance, during a keynote speech held by the writer Ama Ata Aidoo in Nsukka (Nigeria) in 1992, the issue of feminism was evoked and among participants suddenly started a debate on the terminology. Nnaemeka reports in her essay a brief transcript

²⁴ P. Mekgwe, "Theorizing African Feminism(s). The 'Colonial' Question", in *Texts, Tasks, and Theories: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures*, ed. T. Robert Klein, T., Auga, U., Prüschenk, V., Amsterdam & New York, Editions Rodopi, 2007, pp. 166-167.

²⁵ O. Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and Her Compatriots", *Research in African Literatures*, 26:2 (1995), p. 84.

²⁶ O. Oyèwùmí, "Ties that (Un)Bind," p. 3, quoted by Mekgwe, p. 167.

²⁷ Mekgwe, p. 168.

of the recording of that debate in which it is interesting to notice the rejection of the use of the term:

Clenora Hudson-Weems (U.S.A.): [...] You [Ama Ata Aidoo] made the statement that long before the advent of feminism, that your mother and grandmother were feminists. That's where I disagree. I think that to talk of the terminology, feminism, we have to deal with the inception of the term itself and what its original design was. [...] It was a term created, designed and defined by white women.... It was exclusionary. Black women were not accepted; they were not invited to be a part of it.... [...].²⁸

In the same debate, the writer Flora Nwapa made an intervention emphasising her view on the terminology:

Flora Nwapa: [...] I'm usually asked, "Are you a feminist?" I deny that I am a feminist. Please I am not a feminist, oh, please. But they say, all your works, everything is about feminism. And I say, "No, I am not a feminist." Buchi Emecheta is another one that said: "I am a feminist with a small 'f'" (whatever Buchi means). [...] I think that I will go all out and say that I am a feminist with a big 'F' because Obioma said on Monday that feminism is about possibilities; there are possibilities, there are choices. Let us not be afraid to say that we are feminists. We need one another, we really need one another. Globally, we need one another.²⁹

Nwapa's comment reinforces the idea of friendship, the idea that women should cooperate and support one another. According to her, this is what feminism is about and African feminism corresponds perfectly to this view. Her intervention seems central also because she mentioned her colleague Buchi Emecheta, who in fact refuses as well to be labelled as a 'feminist':

I will not be called feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that... I don't like being defined by them... It is just that it comes from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land, and I say, 'Okay, I can't build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting.' That is my brand of feminism.³⁰

Emecheta's view on feminism stressed the issue of borders exposed before. She categorically refused to be called a feminist since the term is strictly related to European culture. Instead, she preferred to use the term 'womanism', which is a term

²⁸ Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries", p. 82.

²⁹ Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries", p. 83.

³⁰ Buchi Emecheta, in a 1989 interview quoted by Mekgwe, p. 169.

coined by the African American writer and feminist activist Alice Walker. Walker's idea is that of a type of feminism which is more inclusive. It is in fact adopted to represent the wholeness of people. It does not refer only to the participation of women, but it refers more generally to the inclusiveness of both males and females in a mutual acceptance and fight for equality. Since Western feminism addresses to a sort of separatism among men and women, womanism on the contrary claims for a cooperation among them, recognising a male-female solidarity.

However, this viewpoint is rejected by the critic Clenora Hudson-Weems, who in turn coined the term 'Africana womanism'. As her intervention during the conference in Nsukka suggested, her concerns regard the redefinition of the terminology and the need to find the right notion based on the experiences of African women. Africanans, according to her, are Africans in the continent and in the diaspora, therefore the previous notions, 'womanism' or 'feminism' fail to fully represent women of African descent. In her view,

Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana womanist. The conclusion is that Africana womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both white feminism and Black feminism; moreover to the extent of naming in particular, Africana womanism differs from African feminism.³¹

The discussion on the multiplicity of terms to identify feminism in Africa and the consequently failure on the identification of a single suitable term leads to the recognition of multiple African feminism(s), a variety of forms, identities and positions that makes women unable to subscribe to a single label.

2.3.2. A feminist perspective on the representation of women in African literature

The variety of interpretations on the nature and character of feminism in Africa ensures that the interpretations on the analysis of gender in African literature are varied too. Feminism becomes a lens to analyse the multiple depictions of female characters in male and female African writing, sometimes finding discrepancies on

³¹ Hudson-Weems, "Africana Womanism, Black Feminism, African Feminism, Womanism," pp. 154–55, quoted by Mekgwe, p. 172.

the treatment of those characters. Over the years, the feminist gaze on African literature became of extreme interest in order to expose the androcentric representation of women. This perspective was mainly adopted in the analysis of male writing, where most of the times the depiction of women did not correspond to the real nature of African women. Nevertheless, not all male authors should be ascribed to this category; in fact, it is erroneous to state that the wholeness of African male writers convey an androcentric representation of the woman. Through the years, many of them have tried to represent positive, strong women with their agency, yet the limits of personal experience could not communicate the whole truth. In other words, to represent and depict a woman in her actual nature and position in society, an inside knowledge is fundamental. Men without the experiences of women could not express the reality of their experiences. Notwithstanding this, the portrayal of women in African male writing have changed and transformed through time, demonstrating that not all of them transmitted an androcentric representation.

Kenneth Little, in *The Sociology of Urban African Women's Image in African Literature* (1980), redacted a survey on several novels written by African male authors and came to the conclusion that “female characters are portrayed as girlfriends, good-time girls, wives, free-women, mothers, workers, political women, courtesans, and prostitutes”.³² Female characters are placed in the periphery, while male characters are presented as central characters. According to Little, the misrepresentation of women in literature cannot be subverted until women writers take the power and change the situation. It is their duty to challenge the androcentric representation of women. Before him, the female critic Eleonor Watchel stressed the same idea emphasising how male writing manipulated female stereotypes. Literature in fact is the place in which stereotypes and misleading representations are immortalised or created because social, economic, and historical realities are mirrored. In African literature this is evident because of the representation of Western patriarchal values which were adopted in African societies during the colonial period; therefore, the African reality of that period is expressed in African literature giving to the reader a misleading portrayal of the authenticity of African history and culture.³³

³² O. Sougou, “Rethinking Androcentric Representations of Women in African Literature”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 32:2 (2010), p. 88.

³³ Sougou, p. 88.

An interesting study on the representation of women in African literature is provided by Emmanuel Ngara. The author starts by saying that the portrayal of women offered by male writers need to be analysed according to three basic assumptions: (1) sometimes the representation of women corresponds to the actual position of women in society; (2) the works done by an author mirror the class interest of that author; (3) a writer who is highly ideologized tends to perceive the problem of women in society much more intensely than one who is not. Given these three suppositions, it seems obvious for the scholar that many male authors wrote following a political consciousness and their writing could change depending on the period in which their works were written and published. For this reason, Ngara claims that novels written in the early period of African literature, for instance before 1970, would inevitably position male characters at the centre, and female characters at the margins. Women are placed in the novel as means through which the male hero is able to arise and develop. This process is evident in writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka, where female characters' role is a subordinate one.³⁴

Another process created in male writing and related to the depiction of women concerns the partial adoption of colonial and patriarchal expressions. One example is the comparison of the image of Africa with a woman and, especially, with a mother. The figure of the Mother Africa is very present in the works of male writers and used as a trope in order to convey nationalistic ideals. Here male writers gave attention to women describing them in comparison to the nation. The symbolism nation-mother is expressed in two ways:

first, there is the strand of idealized, romanticized precolonial culture; second, there is the more politically loaded nationalist line of the recapture of Mother Africa: the new nation. In both cases the relationship is based on possession. He is the active subject, the new citizen, while she is the passive object, the nation. In the positive sense, there is the metaphorical potential of her physical ability to reproduce. When the nation is doing badly, the metaphor of prostitution may be employed, not to refer to the deplorable fate of women, but to the degradation of men.³⁵

The trope of 'Mother Africa' is thus employed in literature to represent the colonial image of an enslaved and exploited Africa, a vivid theme of the anti-colonial

³⁴ E. Ngara, "The Portrayal of Women in African Literature", *Kunapipi*, 11:3 (1989), pp. 34-35.

³⁵ Schipper, p. 9.

struggle in the 1950s and 1960s which accompanied many African people along the fight for independence and liberation.³⁶ In this sense, the colonial mentality of the conquest and of the enslavement was internalised and used in literature to express the opposite concept of that mentality, namely the empowerment of the nation and the independence of African people. However, female theorists argued and rejected this image because the use of colonial mindset suggested a comparison between the oppression of the nation and the oppression of the woman under colonial rule.

Contrary to male writing in which female characters are positioned at the margins or in which women are compared to the motherland, female writing is much more focused on female characters as human beings with power and agency. In this regard, an interview of the literary magazine *Quality* with the writer Flora Nwapa explains her view about the depiction of women in male writing:

Nwapa: We have [also] suffered in the hands of male writers. From Chinua Achebe, to Wole Soyinka, to Cyprian Ekwensi [...] Read Things Fall Apart. Look at the male characters; the women were just... Quality: Are you saying that there's a kind of literary chauvinism?

Nwapa: 'Sure. Because we used to wonder, don't male writers have sisters and mothers in their own society? Why don't they write something positive about women in their novels? [...]

Quality: Would you blame the male writers, after all our traditional society really doesn't look up to women but we keep blaming them for their representation of women? They are only representing societal norms.

Nwapa: And so am I.

Quality: You sound more like a revolutionary. You want to change the traditional perception of women.

Nwapa: I'm not changing anything, I'm not writing about what ought to be. I'm saying that this is what it is – as I see it. Take it or leave it.³⁷

The intervention of Nwapa gives a clear explanation of the importance of women writers in African literature. Female authors and their literature were needed in order to subvert the stereotypes and the negative assumptions that male writers transmitted with their writing. As Nwapa claimed, it is not that she wanted to change the traditional perception of women, she only wanted to write about reality, about the real positions and roles of women from an insider perspective, that of a woman. In other words, there was the need of women writers to tell their own history, their own

³⁶ Akujobi, R., "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture", *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 13:1 (2011). Available at: www.docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss1/2/ [Accessed 19 February 2023].

³⁷ Segun Adeleke, Bose Adeogun & Ben Nanne, "Some ANA Members are Crazy. Q-Interview with Flora Nwapa," *Quality* (23 August 1990), pp. 28–31, quoted by Arndt, p. 212.

experiences. In fact, African women writers' duty was that of challenging the presence/absence of African women in history.

Since 1960, African women writers have entered the world of literature offering a different representation of African women. Flora Nwapa, the first female novelist, and her colleagues re-gave women their deserved place into history, culture, and society. They re-gave space to their feelings, thoughts and, especially, to a whole new feminine perspective. In their writing, patriarchal values are challenged, and the woman is located at the centre.³⁸ Therefore, to read African women literature means to read the self-inscription of women into African history, and to question the process of subordination and oppression put into effect firstly by colonial power and secondly by male writing.

The following sections of the chapter will centralise the attention on Nigerian women writing with the aim of exposing the female perspective on the representation of African female character and African history and culture. This will be possible through the exploration of two novels, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*.

2.4 The independence of Nigerian women: Efuru

Efuru is the protagonist of Flora Nwapa's first novel *Efuru* which takes therefore its title from her. The novel was published in 1966 making Flora Nwapa the first Nigerian female novelist to write and publish a novel in English. The period of the publication was a difficult one because of the sudden civil war, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), that was about to explode the year after 1966. Nwapa herself expressed her ups and downs of the period in an interview with Marie Umeh in Scarsdale, New York, in 1992 during the author's tour in the United States:

I've had my ups and downs. In 1966, when Heinemann published *Efuru*, I did not receive much publicity because Nigeria was in a turmoil. There was a *coup d'état* in 1966 and the whole system had broken down. And in 1967, I had to go back to Eastern Nigeria, where all the Igbos returned from all

³⁸ Arndt, pp. 212-213.

over Nigeria. The war was fought for thirty months and when we came back we had to start all over again.³⁹

The tragedy of war was not the only difficulty confronted by the author in that period. As stated before, the literary scenario was not in favour of female writers. On the contrary, it was dominated by male authors. This caused some problems with the publication and in particular with her publisher. When she began to write *Efuru*, she sent her manuscript to Chinua Achebe, who recommended her to Heinemann publisher in London. Thanks to the help of Achebe, she was able to publish her novel. However, her Western publisher considered her a 'Third World writer' and for this reason he was not inclined to distribute her work locally and internationally when it was demanded, causing, according to her, the silencing of her voice. If on one hand the help of the renowned Nigerian writer opened her the doors to the publishing world; on the other hand, her position as a woman and as an African to the eye of a European publisher placed limits to her immediate success.⁴⁰

Flora Nwapa-Nwakuche was born in Ugwuta, Nigeria, in 1931 from a middle-class family. The belonging to a family who believed in the education of girls was extremely helpful for Nwapa, who in fact was fortunate to be sent to school in a period where boys had the primary access. Her education, her love for reading and the importance of oral tales that she listened to when she was little made grow her love for writing:

As a child I would call on anybody who promised to tell me a story. I would sit down and listen. And when I went to high school, I had read practically everything that I could find, so that contributed again to my writing. After graduating from Ibadan University in Nigeria and Edinburgh University in London, I came home to Nigeria and I taught at a girls' secondary school. While I was teaching, I discovered I had plenty of time on my hands. I didn't know what to do with it. So, I began to write stories about my schooldays. It was in this process that I began the story of *Efuru*.⁴¹

Efuru is the story of a young independent and strong woman who tries to build her life in Ugwuta during a period of sociocultural change due to colonial rule in the

³⁹ M. Umeh, F. Nwapa, "The Poetics of Economic Independence for Female Empowerment: An Interview with Flora Nwapa", *Research in African Literatures*, 26:2 (1995), p. 24.

⁴⁰ B. F. Berrian, "In Memoriam: Flora Nwapa (1931-1993)", *Signs*, 20:4 (1995), pp. 998-999.

⁴¹ Umeh, Nwapa, p. 25.

late 1940s and the early 1950s. Even though the story is set in the colonial period, Nwapa decided to include many elements of the precolonial culture of her hometown, Ugwuta, that the writer shared with her protagonist Efurū. The reimagining of African traditions and history, together with the self-assertion of African women are the main themes that the writer wanted to express. In particular, the position of women in society and their inscription in African history were at the core of Nwapa's interests.

In the interview with Marie Umeh, the writer stressed her aim to convey a different idea of African women from that expressed by male authors:

[w]hen I do write about women in Nigeria, in Africa, I try to paint a positive picture about women because there are many women who are very, very positive in their thinking, who are very, very independent, and very, very industrious. [...] The male writers have disappointed us a great deal by not painting the female character as they should paint them. I have to say that there's been a kind of an ideological change. I think male writers are now presenting women as they are. They are not only mothers; they are not only palm collectors; they are not only traders; but they are also wealthy people. Women can stand on their own.⁴²

Nwapa is very attentive in subverting the male representation of female characters, representing in turn her own perspective on African women; a perspective that corresponds with her personal thoughts, namely that every woman in life should be economically independent, that she should not rely on inheritance or in men to survive. That is the message that she wants to convey to women both by reading her novels and personally, from woman to woman.⁴³

In *Efurū*, this message is well exposed by the story of the protagonist. Thanks to the experiences of this young woman, Nwapa was able to break the silence constructed by the imperialist ideology and by male writing. She was able to speak for herself and for all the other women who saw their history being put in the corner or misrepresented. She made herself heard and gave hope to other women who wanted to express themselves through writing. Besides, she was able to portray her own reality, even questioning traditions and cultural beliefs that marginalized women.

⁴² Umeh, Nwapa, p. 27.

⁴³ Umeh, Nwapa, p. 28.

2.4.1. The woman, the wife, the mother

Flora Nwapa with her first novel wanted to depict a female-dominant world, composed of independent, self-reliable, generous, and active women. The protagonist, Efurū, possesses all these characteristics. She presents herself as a good and charming woman, always ready to help her community with great respect and love, and at the same time as an independent and open-minded woman who is able to challenge social expectations. Besides, through the novel, one can follow the growth of the protagonist, from an unexperienced girl into a wise woman. This evolution sees the character change in her attitude and in her decisions in all spheres of her life. She changes as a woman, as a mother, and as a wife. Given this process, the critic Stratton describes the novel as a 'female *Bildungsroman*', where Efurū learns, develops, and matures.⁴⁴

Despite her early entrance in the adult world, the beginning of the novel shows an already agent woman with her thoughts and ideas. The novel in fact opens with the decision on the part of Efurū of marrying Adizua, her future first husband. What seems unusual here, according to the Igbo customs, is not the marriage itself, but rather the decision of marrying a man without the payment of the bride price first. Because of her controversial attitude towards Igbo's social rules, many feminist critics depicted the protagonist as a rebellious woman. Marriage, in fact, was an important ceremony in West African traditions that involved the two families. The payment of the dowry was mandatory before the marriage in order to acknowledge respect for the bride's family and their reputation. However, as Nnaemeka showed, Efurū and Adizua were not actually married before the bride price payment, they were just living together. The focus should be on 'when' the payment will be done, rather than on 'if' the payment will ever be done. Efurū accepts to marry Adizua even before the payment, yet she is convinced that he must pay the bride price. So, according to Nnaemeka, the protagonist acts more as a reformer, than as a rebel. She knows that the payment must be done and wants this to happen, otherwise her father will burn bridges with her; but at the same time, she loves Adizua and she wants to stay with him. In this sense, she acts as a reformer because she makes her decisions depending

⁴⁴ N. Lu, "Between Tradition and Modernity: Practical Resistance and Reform of Culture in Flora Nwapa's Efurū", *Research in African Literatures*, 50:2 (2019), p. 131.

on her own purposes, even transgressing the rules and traditions of her own community.⁴⁵ This episode is exemplary in demonstrating the unique nature of the protagonist, a nature that is evident also in the eyes of her people, who in fact cannot comprehend how she can marry a farmer boy as Adizua: “She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself. Her husband was not known and people wondered why she married him”.⁴⁶

Together with her reformer side, Efuru’s singularity was portrayed also by her good, kind, loving, and charming side. According to Chimalum Nwankwo, Nwapa offered this type of woman in order to match the best woman with the best man. With goodness and kindness, Efuru is able to confront her male counterparts. In other words, the writer wanted to expose the irrational behaviour of men, who in front of giving women, willingly to do anything for them, still treat them badly. Nwankwo clearly stated that,

the typical female protagonist from *Efuru* [...] is saying the following: I will be chaste and demure. I will even accept the brutality of circumcision: I will even allow you, man, to have more women or wives as long as you are gracious enough not to lie about it. I will cook and clean. I will obey all the unequal and baseless idiocies of all patriarchal structures. What do I get from you, man, in return? It is easy for the reader to see the indicting inescapable answer. Nothing. It is easy to see, too, that to give nothing for all this complex of sacrificial giving is fraudulent and irrational.⁴⁷

Efuru, as a woman, a mother, and a wife, positions herself against the patriarchal structures imported with the colonial model, but at the same time she experiences and challenges the existing social pressure of her local culture. The portrayal of women that Nwapa offered to her readers is the portrayal of ordinary women, who can be at the same time strong, independent, agent, and good, caring, kind.

Moving forward with the novel, one can see Efuru in her role as a wife. The novel opens with her unconditional love for her first husband Adizua; however, marriage is not limiting for the protagonist. On the contrary, the writer in creating a self-reliable and a trading expert woman questioned the limiting role of women as wives. The

⁴⁵ Nnaemeka, “Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries”, pp. 105, 107.

⁴⁶ F. Nwapa, *Efuru*, Long Grove, Waveland Press, INC., 2014, p. 7.

⁴⁷ C. Nwankwo, “African Literature and the Woman: The Imagined Reality as a Strategy of Dissidence”, *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 6:2 (2006), p. 205.

author writes: “Efuru refused to go to the farm with her husband. ‘If you like,’ she said to her husband, ‘go to the farm. I am not cut out for farm work. I am going to trade’”.⁴⁸ Efuru knew her abilities as a trader and from the start she wanted to contribute to the welfare of her family. The same situation is visible in her second marriage with Gilbert: “Efuru [...] knew the duties of a wife. She did not for one moment slack in her duties. [...] since her son had married Efuru things had moved well for him. Any trade she put her hand to was profitable”.⁴⁹ Her positions both as an independent woman and a wife are important for Efuru; however, she does not put in the first place her role as a wife. This is evident in her decision of leaving her first husband Adizua after he left her for years without saying nothing, and of remarrying another man. Nwapa seems to create new frontiers for women, who can be free and independent without being tied to a man. Marriage seems not to be the sole ambition of the protagonist, contrary to the social expectations of that period: “You are spoiling Ogea. You just leave her to do what she likes. Remember she is a girl and she will marry one day. If you don't bring her up well, nobody will marry her.”⁵⁰ For Igbo people, a young girl should learn how to take care of the household and of her family, this is a prerequisite to find a husband and carry on a good marriage.

In portraying a woman whose ambitions go beyond marriage, Nwapa questioned her hometown’s social beliefs and expectations. These conventions are not only challenged with regard to marriage, but also, and most importantly, as regards motherhood. Motherhood is a vivid theme in the novel. Alongside the manifestation of women’s independence and their economic success, there is also a not so veiled criticism of the happiness of motherhood. According to the scholar Susan Z. Andrade, the novel seems an instruction manual on how to conceive, how to behave during a pregnancy, and how to raise a child.⁵¹ Despite this, the writer seems to question the importance of motherhood given her protagonist’s inability to conceive. The social expectation for girls to be mother is a constant burden that accompanies the reader throughout the whole novel. Childlessness and infertility are in fact seen as a failure in Efuru’s society. The protagonist from the beginning feels the necessity to bear a

⁴⁸ Nwapa, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Nwapa, p. 136.

⁵⁰ Nwapa, p. 45.

⁵¹ S. Z. Andrade, “Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion: Naming an African Women's Literary Tradition”, *Research in African Literatures*, 21:1(1990), p. 100.

child as a mission and she is willing to do anything to achieve it. The unsuccess of it will make people gossip about her and speculate bad things. After a year of marriage with Adizua she was still not pregnant and people in her community started to talk badly about her condition: “They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman since, according to them, two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce.”⁵² This social belief comes from the vital role of motherhood in African philosophy and spirituality. Motherhood for African people is the central aim of the woman, it is her primary function and therefore it is considered sacred. On the contrary, a woman who is barren is considered as incomplete.⁵³

Notwithstanding the firsts obstacles to become a mother, Efuru is able to get pregnant and gives life to a beautiful girl, Ogonim. However, the author does not seem to let her protagonist live with joy, and lets her only daughter die after a strong fever. Doing so, the criticism that Nwapa is trying to move against the African beliefs according to which motherhood and procreation are the most important things in the life of a woman seems clearer. She sustains, on the contrary, that there are other factors to happiness. In the novel, the happiness that Efuru eventually can reach is given by the worship to the goddess of the lake, who is a fundamental character who makes the protagonist understand her worth.

2.4.2. The goddess of the lake

One of the main spheres where women could express their autonomy and power is religion. As stated in the previous chapter, women dominate religious practices and beliefs. Their significant role is evident also in the novel with the figure of Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake. This female deity is part of the religious traditions of the Igbo society. She can have different names depending on where and who uses them: Mammywater, Ogbuide, or Uhamiri. Mammywater is her pidgin English name and can be spelled in multiple ways; it is the name by which the goddess is recognised outside of Africa. The other two names are the names by which local people refers to water goddesses. In general, the concept of ‘water goddess’ is more than just a

⁵² Nwapa, p. 24.

⁵³ Akujobi, pp. 2-3.

divinity; she represents and embodies fundamental aspects of womanhood in Igbo culture and society. Her significant role in the novel thus comes from Igbo traditions. In *Ugwuta* in fact men and women are likely to pray to a divine pair of water deities, Uhamiri and Urashi. Their story is well known to Igbo people thanks to the transmission of oral tales. However, if the goddess of the lake in oral histories could give both wealth and children, in the novel Nwapa made reference only on one of the two aspects. From the text, one can see that the protagonist does not lack economic well-being. In fact, Efurū starts to have several dreams about the deity and soon after she is rewarded with remarkable success at trade. According to Efurū's people, this meant only one thing: "The woman of the lake, our Uhamiri, has chosen you to be one of her worshippers."⁵⁴ Notwithstanding the significant role of the goddess in the story, Nwapa seems to question the traditional belief that the woman of the lake could give children to women, she even seems to suggest that the goddess herself is barren: "Then suddenly it struck her that since she started to worship Uhamiri, she had never seen babies in her abode. 'Can she give me children?' she said aloud [...]. 'She cannot give me children, because she has not got children herself'."⁵⁵

Despite the bareness, Efurū, and every woman who worships the goddess of the lake, becomes a remarkable woman. Efurū is indeed a beautiful, charming, and good woman, with a strong and independent character. To have the goddess at her side makes her persist any suffering and obstacle.⁵⁶ Besides, thanks to her, Efurū is able to accept her fate and to live happily:

Efurū slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?⁵⁷

If before, infertility was the cause of her preoccupations and sorrows, now she accepts her condition and she is willing to give importance to other aspects of life than motherhood.

⁵⁴ Nwapa, p. 147.

⁵⁵ Nwapa, p. 165.

⁵⁶ S. Jell-Bahlsen, "The Concept of Mammywater in Flora Nwapa's Novels", *Research in African Literatures*, 26:2(1995), pp. 30, 32-33.

⁵⁷ Nwapa, p. 221.

With regards to the importance of the woman of the lake, it is worth to notice her connection with women's solidarity and women's traditions. In Patrick C. Hogan's view, the point of Uhamiri in giving economic success to women has to do with their responsibility to cooperate one with another. He emphasised this concept analysing a particular passage in the novel. Efuru is returning from a friend's home after having paid her surgery, she meets a woman who greets her, but she did not know her. This woman thanks her: "Thank you for what you did for your sister, Nnona. Thank you, my daughter. That's how sisters should behave to sisters. Thank you".⁵⁸ According to the scholar, "[t]he unknown woman is almost certainly to be understood as Uhamiri. She is the only one who can truly be called 'Mother' of both Efuru and Nnona; she is the only one for whom these two women, one young, one 'aged', could truly be considered sisters".⁵⁹

This passage is emblematic in exposing the importance of the goddess of the lake within women's community and her anchorage in traditions. The woman of the lake, teaching women how to treat one another and how to share their prosperity with someone who is in need, is suggesting that women's solidarity and peace are at the basis of traditions. Nwapa in turn seems to highlight the importance of women's cooperation and wealth to promote traditions.

2.4.3. Women's role in Igbo traditions

Women's friendship and strong female cooperation are embodied in Igbo traditions. Through the novel, women's traditions can be found and can serve to expose the structural patriarchal domination of all cultures, thus also in the Igbo culture. Hogan in his essay wonders if the presence of patriarchy in Igbo societies depends on tradition or whether it came only with colonialism. The problem of patriarchy, in Nwapa's view, goes beyond both local traditions and the acceptance of European ideas. To demonstrate this, she portrays diverse types of men. Adizua, Efuru's first husband, is an example of a transitional man, one who is grown up in a traditional society but currently living in a colonial context. His traditional values

⁵⁸ Nwapa, p. 134: Nnona is an old woman.

⁵⁹ P. C. Hogan, "'How Sisters Should Behave to Sisters': Women's Culture and Igbo Society in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, *English in Africa*, 26:1 (1999), p. 56.

therefore are mixed with imported colonial ideas. However, his cruel behaviour toward his wife seems not the result of colonial contact, rather it is more general. This can be stated also because of the similarities with his father, who is actually a 'product' of Igbo traditions. His abandonment and his mistreatments towards Efurū seem related to traditions, but to contradict this theory, Nwapa includes a third man, Gilbert, Efurū's second husband. Gilbert is a totally different man. He was raised with English education and Christianization; however, he too abandons Efurū. This confirms that the mistreatment of women can be found in all types of men, traditional men, transitional men, and Europeanized men. Nwapa seems to suggest that men are by nature bad and lead to mistreat women.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that Nwapa does not want to convey the idea that all men are bad and all women are good. To support this, she also includes in the novel good men and bad women. The only just man in the novel is Efurū's father. He is depicted as the perfect traditional man:

'Is the woman from a very good family?'

'The daughter of Nwashike Ogene, the mighty man of valour. Ogene who, single handed, fought against the Aros when they came to molest us. Nwashike himself proved himself the son of his father. He was a great fisherman. When he went fishing, he caught only *asa* and *aja*. His yams were the fattest in the whole town. And what is more, no man has ever seen his back on the ground.'⁶¹

The characteristics listed in the passage demonstrate the recognised ideal nature of an Igbo man: he is skilled in war, in fishing, and in yam farming. Moreover, the phrase "no man has ever seen his back on the ground" means that he is also skilled in wrestling. All these features define the ideal Igbo masculine nature.⁶²

In the same way as men are not all bad, also women are not all good. This is evident in the portrayal of some women who are only capable to gossip and talk badly of other women. One example among all is Omirima, the woman who accused Efurū of adultery:

Then one day Omirima came. 'Amede, your daughter-in-law will die. She is guilty of adultery. Let her confess and the sickness will leave her. She has wronged the goddess of the land and she is being

⁶⁰ Hogan, pp. 50-51.

⁶¹ Nwapa, p. 11.

⁶² Hogan, p. 52-53.

punished accordingly. She must confess otherwise our ancestors will kill her. I am warning you. It is better for her to confess than to die'.⁶³

In Hogan's view, the mistreatment among women contributes to the strengthening of patriarchy. Women on the contrary should cooperate and behave like sisters. According to Nwapa, women's solidarity is the main agent against patriarchal oppression. In the novel, the minor character of Ajanupu is the primary representative of this supportive behaviour and therefore she appears as the opposite of Omirima.⁶⁴

Ajanupu, Efuru aunt-in-law, is an important character and the very expression of female solidarity. Her bond with Efuru is visible in several passages, where she "serves as a pillar of strength".⁶⁵ In particular, Ajanupu comes in Efuru's defence when she is accused of adultery by her husband. In this episode she shows all her strength and courage, even going physically against Gilbert,

'Ajanupu, this is what I am hearing. I don't know whether you have heard. My wife is guilty of adultery. The gods are angry with her and will kill her if she does not confess. So...' [...] You don't know that we know that you were jailed. And here you are accusing Efuru, the daughter of Nwashike Ogene of adultery. You...' Gilbert gave Ajanupu a slap which made her fall down. She got up quickly for she was a strong woman, got hold of a mortar pestle and broke it on Gilbert's head. Blood filled Gilbert's eyes.⁶⁶

As noticed by Andrade, Ajanupu's physical response evokes the traditional power of Igbo women, and, especially, it refers to the 'sitting on a man' protests. As stated in the previous chapter, in precolonial times women made their voices heard and had the courage to fight against men. They did so through domestic strikes, such as the denial of cooking for their husbands or the sexual abstinence, or they organised real protests that ended with the humiliation of the man. In those protests the pestle was used to punish the male counterparts, therefore the mentioning of that tool in this passage seems to make a clear reference to Igbo women's 'sitting on a man' protests. Moreover, the allusion to those protests makes even clearer the climate of solidarity that Nwapa tried to convey through Ajanupu's act of defending Efuru.⁶⁷

⁶³ Nwapa, p. 215-216.

⁶⁴ Hogan, p. 53.

⁶⁵ Nnaemeka, "From Orality to Writing", p. 6.

⁶⁶ Nwapa, p. 217.

⁶⁷ Andrade, pp. 99-100.

The character of Ajanupu is not only significant in her strength, but she is also the embodiment of women's traditional knowledge. She serves to Efurū as a nurse, a confidante, and a mentor. She is there for Efurū every time she is in crisis, and she is able to comfort her and give her useful advice. For instance, her knowledge about women's medical traditions will be helpful for Efurū's pregnancy and childbirth.

Ajanupu seems to be informed on how to behave during a pregnancy, on how to be a co-wife and on how to take care of a child.⁶⁸ She is in fact the one who helps Efurū deliver her baby,

'Now you are to do exactly as I tell you. If you are afraid, you will have a weak and sickly baby. If you do exactly as I tell you, you will have a strong and healthy baby'. [...]
She did as she was told. In about half an hour she delivered her baby - a baby girl. Single handed, Ajanupu attended to both mother and child. It was so easy for her. One would think that she was a trained midwife. She had eight children. One had died of convulsion. It was only the first and the second that she was helped to deliver. All the others she delivered herself. There was usually nobody around when she had her babies. She would have her baby all alone, wash it and wash herself before anybody knew what was happening. Neighbours only knew when a newly born baby began to cry.⁶⁹

Ajanupu, helping her friend, also transmits her individual experiences which will then allow Efurū to learn and mature. Female solidarity therefore also concerns women's traditions and the importance of the passage of these knowledges from woman to woman.

Having said that, one can affirm that *Efurū* is a long journey through Igbo customs and women's traditions which are described through the individual experiences and feelings of a young woman. Women appear as custodians of those traditions and therefore are fundamental in the text; however, at the same time they are questioned by the author, who argues the desire of women to walk towards cultural changes and modernity. Besides the episode that opens the novel, that is, Efurū's decision of marrying Adizua without the payment of the bride price first, there is another example that exposes the ambivalence of traditions. The episode in which Efurū must undergo a clitoridectomy and the following social expectations illustrates the necessity for women, especially for Efurū, to experience cultural values differently. In fact, if Nwapa 'allows' her protagonist to have the circumcision, soon after she made her

⁶⁸ Hogan, pp. 54-55.

⁶⁹ Nwapa, p. 31.

reject the traditional rules that follow the practice. According to social expectations, women “are sequestered at home or in a special house called a ‘fattening room’. For durations of one month to six or twelve months, they are fed fat like animals for slaughter, as they are readied for life with their future husbands”.⁷⁰ After these months, women make their appearance publicly in order to show their beauty. However, Efurū seems to disagree with this custom and decides to reduce the period in which she should feasting,

Efurū feasted for one month. Her mother-in-law wanted her to continue feasting for two months, but she refused saying that the life was a dull one. [...] ‘Since you won’t continue feasting, we shall talk about going to the market,’ her mother-in-law told her one day. ‘But if I were you, Efurū, I should continue for another one month. [...]’ ‘No, mother. One month of confinement is enough. We have not got much money, and I want to start trading. Again we have not paid the dowry yet. I shall go to the market on Nkwo day’. ‘You are right, my daughter. I was only thinking of what people would say’. ‘Never mind what people would say’.⁷¹

From this passage, it seems that Nwapa is criticising the Igbo practice concerning the feasting of girls, and she is opening the way towards cultural changes.

Nevertheless, both examples did not demonstrate a complete rejection of cultural traditions. This, according to Nick T. C. Lu, has to do with the fact that Efurū is dealing with existing values that are still in the process of being practiced and lived, therefore Efurū’s completely refusal of traditions could not be plausible. Instead of this, Nwapa tried to initiate a changing progress with the reinterpretation from the part of Efurū towards those values, suggesting the beginning of a new female attitude.⁷²

Finally, in the same way also the end of the novel could be read with different eyes. The fact that Efurū accepts her fate and lives happily with her condition of bareness suggests that motherhood should not be the aim of women. Nwapa seems to criticise the traditional vision that a woman could be complete only with children, supporting on the contrary the idea that there are more important values in life than being mothers, and the fact that the goddess that Efurū worships is also infertile is the demonstration of that.

⁷⁰ R. A. Mohamed, “Breaking the Silence: *Efurū* by Flora Nwapa”, *Journal of Arts and Human Sciences*, 88:4 (2019), p. 924.

⁷¹ Nwapa, pp. 17-18.

⁷² Lu, p. 135.

2.5 The strength of Nigerian women: Nnu Ego

Nnu Ego is the protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's fifth novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*. The novel was first published in London in 1979, and only the year after, in 1980, it was published in Africa, in Heinemann's African Writers Series. The story covers the first half of the twentieth century, which is a challenging period due to colonial occupation and the outbreak of the World War II. It is set in-between Ibuza, a rural town in Nigeria, and Lagos, now the biggest city in Nigeria, and it tells the story of a Nigerian woman, Nnu Ego who tries to survive against both what society demands her and the present cultural changes due to colonial rules. As the title suggests, the novel is centred on motherhood and what women are expected to be in society. However, if on one hand, the author exposes 'the joys' of pregnancy, childbirth, and of all the activities a mother should undergo to take care of her children and her household; on the other hand, the same 'joys' includes sufferings, anxiety, and social pressures. Both joys and miseries are faced by the protagonist during a period of social change that in turn challenge her role as mother, wife, and woman. Nevertheless, critics have different views on what the novel wants to depict. For instance, Nnaemeka's view on the novel is strongly in disagreement with Umeh's viewpoint, who sees the novel as a description of the enslavement and victimisation of Igbo's women to the rules of traditional Igbo customs. Nnaemeka, on the contrary, states that the novel is a detailed exploration of motherhood and its consequences from different women's point of view.⁷³ The issue of motherhood with both its complications and delights is without doubt the major theme of the novel; however, the roles of the woman as a wife and as an active member of society are under extreme attention as well. Emecheta was willing to portray a different type of woman from the traditional one, she aims at describing how the traditional roles of women could not be applied in the colonial period.⁷⁴ Thus, the writer tries to challenge the conventional values of Nigerian society presenting the changing role of women in two different geographical contexts, the traditional Ibuza and the modern Lagos.

⁷³ Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries", p. 88.

⁷⁴ S. Nadaswaran, "The Legacy of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Women's Fiction", *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 2:2 (2012), p. 147.

Following Flora Nwapa's lead, Emecheta with her novel also wanted to convey a different representation of women from that of male writing. She wanted to express women's feelings and thought from a direct female perspective. In general, it is important for her to make her voice heard for what regards women's issues and preoccupations. Contrary to her colleague Nwapa who depicts a woman able to fight patriarchy and oppression with her goodness and charisma, Emecheta's female characters fight in a more active manner. The author depicts strong women who have had enough of men and must free themselves from the chains of patriarchy.⁷⁵ With the character of Nnu Ego, Emecheta was able to produce a female character distant from the typical stereotypes that represent women as passive, portraying instead a woman able to fight actively men's oppression. In Christopher B. Ogunyemi's words, "Emecheta projects her heroine as a woman who is critical of the oppressive structures within her society and assertive about her individuality. Her fiction helped in establishing a new tradition of women's writing that takes feminist concerns into consideration as women navigate colonialism and modernity."⁷⁶

Therefore, Buchi Emecheta posits herself in a female writing tradition and follows the steps already covered by Flora Nwapa. In fact, taking Nwapa's *Efuru* as a respectable predecessor one can unveil several similarities between the two novels.

2.5.1. From *Efuru* to *Nnu Ego*: the passing of the baton

Starting from the female point of view of the two protagonists *Efuru* and *Nnu Ego* and their similar experiences, *Efuru* and *The Joys of Motherhood* share many similarities. The common thread that connects the two women's life is motherhood. Both women feel the social pressure and expectations to be mothers, and for both the inability to conceive led to the rejection of their first husbands, Adizua in *Efuru*'s case and Amatokwo in *Nnu Ego*'s case. Moreover, both women experience the death of their first child. However, as the story unfolds, *Nnu Ego* gives light to nine children, whereas *Efuru* has to deal with the failure of being childless.

⁷⁵ Nwankwo, p. 202.

⁷⁶ C. B. Ogunyemi, "Gender (Re)configuration in Nigerian Literature through Time and Space", *Journal of Literary Studies*, 34:4 (2018), p. 129.

What really unites the two novels is visible from the title of Emecheta's novel. The 'joy of motherhood' that the last lines of *Efuru* cite is literally evoked in Emecheta's novel title, where it is transposed into plural. According to Andrade, this act had the aim of giving to Nnu Ego, Emecheta's protagonist, what *Efuru* wishes many times over. Doing so, Emecheta revises and renames her precursor's text.⁷⁷ However, other critics disagree with Andrade's view, sustaining on the contrary that "Emecheta echoes Nwapa's stand in implying at the end of the text that there are other options for women other than motherhood."⁷⁸ In other words, Emecheta wanted to challenge the vision of motherhood as the primary function of Nigerian women. In this way, the use of the term 'joys' in the title implies a sort of irony, suggesting that being mother is not only a journey full of happiness and fulfilment, but it also means pain, grief, and misery. The challenge of traditional values as regards motherhood is also visible in the novel's end. Even in this circumstance, the two novels can be compared. *The Joys of Motherhood* ends with the Nnu Ego's death and her 'transformation' into a deity. Thanks to her ability to give birth to several children, women went to her shrine asking for children. However, the model mother denied their requests: "Stories afterwards, however, said that Nnu Ego was a wicked woman even in death because, however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did. Poor Nnu Ego, even in death she had no peace!"⁷⁹ As in *Efuru*, where the last passage suggests that women could be happy and complete even without children, also Emecheta seems to convey the same idea. The message behind the last passage of the novel could possibly express the idea that Nnu Ego, having experienced both joys and miseries of motherhood, wanted to free other women from experiencing the same.

Moreover, with regards to misery and grief, both protagonists lose a child. This experience connects once more *Efuru* and Nnu Ego, who see the event as a total failure towards what society demands. After the death of her only child Ogonim, *Efuru* starts saying, "My only child has killed me. Why should I live? I should be dead too and lie in state beside my daughter."⁸⁰ *Efuru*'s only possibility to deal with the

⁷⁷ Andrade, p. 100.

⁷⁸ Nadaswaran, p. 147.

⁷⁹ B. Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London, Longman, 1994, p. 224.

⁸⁰ Nwapa, p. 73.

death of her daughter is to reach her in the other world. The same happens to Nnu Ego, who goes a step further and try to kill herself. The chapter in which this event is described is entitled *A Failed Woman*. This already indicates the importance of motherhood in African societies. Nnu Ego, ready to jump from a bridge, expresses her feelings and shows the pain caused by what society demanded but to which she has failed to respond:

Who was going to give her the energy to tell the world that she had once been a mother, but had failed? How would people understand that she had wanted so desperately to be a woman like everybody else, but had now failed again? Oh, God, I wish these people, though they mean well, had simply let me be. Her heart was pounding in pain, and bitterness welled from the same heart into her mouth. She tried several times to talk, but her voice produced no sound.⁸¹

The feeling of failure is clearly described in Nnu Ego's words, who, as Efurū, thinks of death as the only possible solution to end her sorrows.

Finally, another similarity regards the structure of the two novels. As shown in the analysis of *Efurū*, the protagonist throughout the novel is able to learn, develop, and mature from her experiences and from her friends' knowledges. Her roles as a woman, a mother, and a wife change through the story making her grow from a young and naïve woman to a self-conscious woman. The same is noticeable for Nnu Ego, who will be more aware of herself as a woman, a mother, and a wife after she is forced to overcome many obstacles. Growth and education are significant characteristics of both novels and fundamental features of a *Bildungsroman*. Therefore, *Efurū* and *The Joys of Motherhood* can be labelled as such. As Ogaga Okuyade states in his essay, in a *Bildungsroman* the development of the protagonist is "usually physical and psychological, each stage correspond[s] to their major areas of abode in the novels, since the environment in which they find themselves influences their worldviews at any given time."⁸² All these distinguishing marks are present in the two novels, allowing them to subscribe to the category of *Bildungsroman* and making them even more similar.

⁸¹ Emecheta, p. 61.

⁸² O. Okuyade, "Trying to survive: Growth and transformation in African female narratives", *California Linguistic Notes*, 35:1 (2010), p. 6.

2.5.2. The revaluation of womanhood, motherhood, and wifehood

As illustrated for the character of Efurū, also Nnu Ego throughout the novel will traverse a path of maturity and self-consciousness. This transformative journey allows one to consider the novel as a *Bildungsroman*, where the experiences that the protagonist has will make her reconsider her roles as a woman, a mother, and a wife.

The revaluation of her sense of 'woman' deals primarily with two distinct places: Ibuza, her hometown, and Lagos, the modern city where she will build her family. Initially the novel is set in Ibuza where Nnu Ego is conscious of her womanhood, a womanhood that is strictly related to her traditions. Here, the protagonist is positioned in a world that she knows and in which she can express herself consciously. Her womanhood is fixed in social expectations and pressures that she needs to respect. These expectations also regard her role as a mother, her need to bear children. In this sense, "Nnu Ego absorbs the tribal view of womanhood completely, so much so that she is almost destroyed by her own failure to bear children when she marries".⁸³ In fact, in Ibuza Nnu Ego is married with Amatokwo, with whom she could not have children, therefore she is rejected by him. This event makes Nnu Ego trapped in her own sense of failure and worthlessness which are linked to her traditional view of womanhood, that is, a woman whose main function is motherhood. After this experience and the reappropriation of her sense of womanhood, she is ready to remarry and to regain her vitality. This time she is sent to Lagos, where she has to adapt to a new city, a modern one, and therefore build a new sense of womanhood. In Lagos, she starts a new life with her second husband Nnaife, with whom she will have seven children. What is put under attack here is the concept of 'woman' in regard with her economic responsibilities. She soon understands that her family counts on her. The challenges of the urban life, caused by the arrival of colonialism and European administration, make Nnu Ego reconsider her consciousness and what she already knew in her hometown. Because of colonial administration and rules, her husband goes to work away from home and the economy and the care of her family fall entirely on her shoulders. With time, she is able to manage the situation, so much so that she learns self-reliance and gains her own power. This is evident thanks to Emecheta's

⁸³ M. J. Daymond, "Buchi Emecheta, laughter and silence: Changes in the concepts 'woman', 'wife' and 'mother'", *Journal of Literary Studies*, 4:1 (1988), p. 67.

touch in using as a coincidence the return of her husband. Nnaife was in fact absent for years from home because of his job. When he returned, it is evident how Nnu Ego changed and all the gained power in decision-making was turned upside-down.⁸⁴

As her role of womanhood changed with the shift of the geographical place and new values, also her role of motherhood changes completely. Motherhood is actually the main theme of the novel, as the title suggests. As stressed before, motherhood in Africa is sacred and intended as a spiritual path that a woman must take.⁸⁵ Therefore, women with no children are considered as failures, as incomplete. These traditional conventions are interiorised by women themselves, who if barren feel that their life has no purpose. Nnu Ego is the very example of this condition, which is caused by two distinct events: her incapability to conceive and the death of her own child. The opening scene of the novel already portrays the struggles that the protagonist must overcome after the death of her child:

she felt and at the same time did not feel the pain. This was also true of the pain in her young and unsupported breasts, now filling fast with milk since the birth of her baby boy four weeks before. [...] She felt the milk trickling out, wetting her buba blouse; and the other choking pain got heavier, nearing her throat, as if determined to squeeze the very life out of her there and then. But, unlike the milk, this pain could not come out, though it urged her on, and she was running, running away from it. Yet it was there inside her. There was only one way to rid herself of it. For how would she be able to face the world after what had happened? No, it was better not to try. It was best to end it all this way, the only good way.⁸⁶

The pain that she feels is evident, as it is her feeling of failure. Nevertheless, the same failure was then partially fulfilled with the birth of seven children. The 'joys of motherhood' are achieved by the protagonist who sacrifices all her life for them. Through the novel, the reader can notice her devotion, how she thinks of her children as her whole life, and not as part of her life. She only aimed at their well-being, she ensured them the best life she could give. She gave them the best education she could afford. However, her self-denial in the name of her children's life costs her much pain. When her first-born child chooses to continue his study abroad, the world falls on her:

⁸⁴ Daymond, p. 69.

⁸⁵ Akujobi, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Emecheta, p. 8.

Nnu Ego, Okpo, Adim and several of their friends went to the airport to wave him goodbye. It left an emptiness in Nnu Ego's heart that was hard to communicate. Please, God, teach him to be used to being alone, for a person like Oshia who put ambition first at the expense of his family was always a loner, Nnu Ego thought as she returned home dry-eyed. Friends and well-wishers were surprised to see that she did not cry; [...]. Her joy was to know that she had brought up her children when they had started out with nothing, and that those same children might rub shoulders one day with the great men of Nigeria.⁸⁷

Notwithstanding the departure of his son Oshia, she is able to find a joy in the situation, that is, the educational success of Oshia.

After this event, it takes her several other circumstances to understand her role as a mother and all that she did for her children:

“God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?” she prayed desperately. “After all, I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them, I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul. [...] When will I be free?” But even in her confusion she knew the answer: “Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband---and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build.”⁸⁸

From this passage, it seems clear that the protagonist is in the process of self-awareness. She is beginning to understand that her role as a mother makes her a prisoner in her own body and house.

Therefore, with the protagonist's thoughts it seems that Emecheta is criticising the conventional notion that motherhood brings joys and fulfilment to women. This is also noticeable from the end of the novel: Nnu Ego, after having devoted all her life and strengths to her children, dies alone: “She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother”.⁸⁹ At the moment of her death, her children were not present, but still when they had the news they came and a shrine in her honour was build. Her life, her experiences as a mother, her strength in raising

⁸⁷ Emecheta, pp. 201-202.

⁸⁸ Emecheta, pp. 186-187.

⁸⁹ Emecheta, p. 224.

seven children were considered as an example for other young girls, and her ability to give birth to many children gave hope to them. The shrine was then visited by these women, who asked for fertility and joys. However,

[s]tories afterwards [...] said that Nnu Ego was a wicked woman even in death because, however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did. Poor Nnu Ego, even in death she had no peace! Still, many agreed that she had given all to her children. The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children, they said.⁹⁰

Her death, in a sense, makes her understand the reconsideration of her role as a mother and as a woman. Her rejection to offer other women children expresses the beginning of her self-assertion. She starts to be conscious about a life full of sacrifices and grief, devoted to her children; a life in which she was not able to think for herself, to put herself first.⁹¹ Nnu Ego is silent, and this silence represents a refusal; the refusal to follow her traditional spiritual power. In this sense, the refusal is also the beginning of her self-expression, the beginning of a new degree of understating and judgement of herself as a woman and as a mother.⁹² If the protagonist herself understands too late her role as a mother, from the building of the shrine it seems that her children, on the contrary, did not understand all the efforts and changes that their mother had to face.⁹³ The shrine symbolises the traditional concept of motherhood, one that consider the bearing of children as the primary function for women. So, the building of it makes this concept important and vital, without acknowledging the urban and modern concept of motherhood, one in which a mother must not cancel out herself as a person for her children.

Finally, the process of self-consciousness also regards her role as a wife. Central in the revaluation of wifeness is the character of Adaku, the inherited wife after the death of Nnaife's brother. With the arrival of this woman, Nnu Ego becomes the senior wife. What really makes her challenge the concept of 'wife' is the differences faced with Adaku. One more time, the two distinct geographical entities, Iboya and Lagos, compete: Nnu Ego is immersed in the traditional reality of Iboya, whereas

⁹⁰ Emecheta, p. 224.

⁹¹ Nadaswaran, p. 147.

⁹² Daymond, pp. 65-66.

⁹³ Daymond, p. 71.

Adaku represents the modern wife of Lagos. Their distant codes make them see as unbearable a life together. However, one episode begins to change the situation; when the family economic situation is no longer sustainable, Adaku persuades Nnu Ego in refusing to cook for Nnaife until he is willing to give them more money. Their unity in rebellion shifts the sense of wifeness of Nnu Ego and makes her understand that she has always lived as a subaltern.⁹⁴

In this way, Nnu Ego's position in traditional concepts of 'wife', 'mother' and 'woman' starts to be questioned and new modern concepts of these roles comes to be considered.

2.5.3. Between tradition and modernity

As already emphasised, central to the growth of Nnu Ego as a woman, a mother, and a wife is the passage from her traditional life in Ibo to the urban life that she finds in Lagos:

When Nnu Ego moves from her Ibo village, Ibo, to Lagos, she has literally to learn a new language, that of the city, which is Yoruba; but what is crucial in her move is not the new set of sounds but the new concepts operative in urban life which she has to learn. These entail the Western ways that the colonisers have imposed as well as the new meanings the traditional terms have acquired in the changed context.⁹⁵

Therefore, Nnu Ego finds herself in-between two worlds, one which is interiorised and well acknowledged, and the other in which she has to adapt. These two places are fundamental in the novel, and they function as real characters, since they dictate the experiences and the development of the protagonist. In other words, it can be stated that two socio-spatial identities are put in contact in the novel: Nnu Ego's rural hometown, Ibo, and the urban and modern area of Lagos. Besides these two places, a contact is made also between two distinct cultural temporalities, the indigenous Igbo traditions found in Ibo, and the Western modern values found in Lagos.

The coexistence of these two sides fixes Nnu Ego in a challenging position. She needs to mediate in order to find a balance between her inner values, traditions and

⁹⁴ Daymond, pp. 69-70.

⁹⁵ Daymond, p. 66.

attitudes, and the new and modern way of life that she finds in Lagos. If on one hand, her traditional values push her towards a sense of anxiety due to social pressures and expectations regarding 'proper' roles and behaviours as a woman, mother, wife, and daughter; on the other hand, modernity challenges these traditional visions and push her towards a sense of assertion and fulfilment. In this sense, she finds herself in-between a "double pursuit of social acceptance and an internalized sense of self-fulfilment".⁹⁶

The social recognition that she tries to aim at and that is in contrast with the modern values of the urban life is strictly related to the male figures of her life that she has to respect, her father, her husband, and her sons. Nnu Ego is positioned in a place in which she has to respect her father's traditional values and try to adapt to her husband's way of life, demonstrating how she is imprisoned in a patriarchal system that oppress and limit her self-assertion. The state in which the protagonist tries to negotiate in both worlds is without doubt a state of anxiety and trauma. In fact, the reader can witness the multiple challenges and experiences that the protagonist needs to face being at the same time stuck in her hometown traditions which are symbolised by her father, and in the urban Lagos, where the colonial experience makes its appearance. In this position, Nnu Ego represents the traumatization and the psychological fragmentation of the colonized female subject and demonstrates her marginality towards the superiority of men. Even in the absence of the male figure, for instance after the death of her father, she feels the burden of his judgement. Returned to Ibuza to stay with her father in his last days, she hopes to not return to Lagos; however, Adankwo, the senior wife of Nnaife's brother, who will be then inherited by Nnaife, warns her to go back and conform to her father's wishes:

"[...] you're not doing him justice by backing away from the responsibility he entrusted you with. He knew your roots are deep here, that was why he promised to come back to you [...]"
"But what responsibility did he leave me that I have neglected?"
"Don't you see, Nnu Ego, daughter of Agbadi? Can't you see that you are running away from the position your *chi* [personal god] has given you and leaving it for a woman your husband inherited from his brother, a woman whom we here all know to be very ambitious, a woman who has not even borne a son for this family? And you, you have deep roots. [...] You are the senior wife of your husband; you are like a male friend to him. Your place is at his side, to supervise his younger wife. Have you ever

⁹⁶ S. Robolin, "Gendered Hauntings: "The Joys of Motherhood," Interpretive Acts, and Postcolonial Theory", *Research in African Literatures*, 35:3 (2004), p. 82.

heard of a complete woman without a husband? You have done your duty to your father, a man with such nobility of spirit it defied explanation. Now it is to your husband that you should go.”⁹⁷

Adankwo’s warning gives support to patriarchal power legitimising the authority of the father even in his absence. She clearly asks Nnu Ego to go back to Lagos and subscribe to her role of senior wife and mother, as her father have always taught her.⁹⁸

Contrary to the character of Adankwo, who seems to justify and adhere to a patriarchal system, Emecheta portrays the figure of Adaku, the inherited wife of Nnaife. Adaku is an important character who can represent the foil to the protagonist. Whether Nnu Ego seems to accept the traditional values and beliefs of her community, Adaku is depicted as a rebel who cannot live by patriarchal power and authority. For this reason, the critic Andrade recognises in Nnu Ego a traditional character, whereas in Adaku a rebellious character.⁹⁹ The rebel attitude of Adaku is mainly showed in her decision of leaving Nnaife’s house and becoming a prostitute in order to give a better life to her daughters. In doing so, she hopes to give them more opportunities, and especially a more independent and satisfying future:

“My *chi* be damned! I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my *chi*!” [...] Nnu Ego could not believe her ears.

“[...] I’m leaving here tomorrow with my girls. I am not going to Ibuza. I am going to live with those women in Montgomery Road. Yes, I’m going to join them, to make some of our men who return from the fighting happy.” [...]

“I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons. The way they go on about it one would think I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband. [...]”¹⁰⁰

In Adaku’s words it is visible her rejection towards a male world, where women have to bear male children who could eventually carry on the household and the family, and where female children are not preferable because they are essentially not useful for the society. Adaku continues saying to Nnu Ego: “Yet the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior

⁹⁷ Emecheta, p. 158.

⁹⁸ Robolin, pp. 82-83, 86.

⁹⁹ Andrade, p. 104.

¹⁰⁰ Emecheta, pp. 168-169.

wife. So I have to set my own”.¹⁰¹ According to Adaku, life in Lagos is unbearable due to social expectations and male hegemony. This condition leads Adaku to decide to leave and build her own life, according to her own choices and desires. Prostitution therefore seems the option chosen by Adaku to resist patriarchal power; however, if prostitution allows her an estrangement from male domination, she still depends on male patronage in order to survive. Moreover, with her choice it seems that she acted not so differently from Nnu Ego, in fact she also decides to sacrifice all for her children, as did Nnu Ego for her whole life. In this way, it can be stated that patriarchal structures and traditional social codes are not fully exceeded.¹⁰² Moreover, as Katherine Frank stresses, the fact that Adaku is not totally free from male domination demonstrates that the notion of a “liberated African woman is a contradiction in terms”¹⁰³. In other words, there is a contrast between the African identity and the African as a woman, so she has to choose one over the other. If she chooses her ‘woman’ side, she will lose her ‘African’ side. This means that to find and eventually reach self-fulfilment and independence, she is obliged to abandon her homeland and change scenario. Therefore, her identity as an African person cannot find a place together with her identity as an African woman.

Emecheta seems to depict the very condition of Igbo women, who find themselves trapped in a place governed by patriarchal structures and rules, unable to set free if not willing to abandon their traditional cultural and social codes. The desperate question “When will I be free?”¹⁰⁴ of Emecheta’s protagonist sums up the unbearable condition of these women who need to live according to accepted social rules which oblige them to follow proper conducts, such as their duties as mothers, wives, and housekeepers. The same question sheds light on the irony of the title, *The Joys of Motherhood*, where motherhood does not always correspond to a life full of joys and liberation.

¹⁰¹ Emecheta, p. 169.

¹⁰² Robolin, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰³ K. Frank, “The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta”, *World Literature Written in English*, 21:3 (1982), p. 492.

¹⁰⁴ Emecheta, p. 187.

CHAPTER III

New worlds in contemporary Nigerian women's writing: Helen Oyeyemi and Oyinkan Braithwaite

From the 1960s, with the emergence of Nigerian women's writing led by Flora Nwapa's voice, many other women followed her example and made their voices heard through writing. As seen in the previous chapter, among them were Buchi Emecheta, who with her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, published in 1979, also became a reference point in Nigerian literature. Since then, Nigerian women's writing has evolved and changed, without losing its place in the Nigerian literary tradition. The multiple historical periods that Nigeria had to face throughout the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century have led Nigerian literature and Nigerian writers to express different issues, topics and concerns. Notwithstanding this, Nigerian female writers' purpose in representing their own world and feelings have not changed through time. This will be evident in the analysis of two contemporary Nigerian works, Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018). In these two surprising novels, new worlds in terms of styles, themes and genres are explored, while maintaining a common interest, that is a purely feminist look through strong and self-determined female characters.

Thus, the present chapter highlights the evolution and the gradual changes that Nigerian literature has experienced from the 1960s to the 2010s, demonstrating how Nigerian history and politics have marked the way writers expressed concerns and ideas in their works. The transformation of Nigerian literature created a sort of stratification that scholars and critics have articulated as 'generations', therefore differentiating Nigerian writing in three, sometimes even four, distinct 'boxes'. However, the term 'generation' and its criteria posed some difficulties with regards its definition and opened a critical debate on the use of the term. The chapter then focuses on contemporary Nigerian literature. The aim is that of exploring the genres and the themes used by contemporary authors, especially female ones. A closer look at two contemporary women writers, Helen Oyeyemi and Oyinkan Braithwaite, is

offered. With their two novels, respectively *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), and *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018), two different but new world are examined, exposing, on one hand, how Nigerian literature has evolved, and on the other hand, how still today female writers feel the need to make their voices heard in order to claim their place in the world and to represent their own feminist perspective in a male-dominated context.

3.1. 'Generations' of Nigerian writing

3.1.1. The Nigerian social and political background in the last decades

From the end of the Second World War and the end of the British occupation in Nigeria, the new nation had to confront its effects. As seen in the previous chapter, Nigerians, and other West African people, suffered psychological damage caused by the internalisation of Western values and ideologies. In the same period, in the whole area of West Africa, Western education and Christianization began to create new educated people who started to write literary works.

West African writing, thus, emerged from the importation of Western canons and narrative traditions, but also from the transformation and inheritance of the oral cultures and traditions already existing in Africa. As Joanna Sullivan stated, the “African novel evolved from a combination of both its own traditional literary forms of folklore, poetry, epics, and myth and the colonially imposed form of the novel”.¹ This was largely demonstrated in the previous chapter, where in fact it was argued that postcolonial literatures emerged from the evolution of orality and the need to convey a different representation of African history and society from that expressed by the colonialist literature.

From this, it seems evident that African writing, and Nigerian writing in this case, have always been connected to the land, its culture and its history. The need to subvert the ideas that Western people and their colonialist literature have exposed shows the modern commitment of African writers and serves to express their own perspectives

¹ J. Sullivan, “Redefining the Novel in Africa,” *Research in African Literatures*, 37:4 (2006); quoted by O. Okuyade, “Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent: New Voices in the African Novel”, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 44:1 (2013), p. 3.

on their social and cultural history. Therefore, the belonging to a land composed by its cultural, ethnic, and social spheres is a fundamental feature for the emergence of African literature.

Each country with its own history, national experience, politics, and topography provides not only the setting of the writings but also becomes a repository of materials from which writers draw their allusions and visions. Each country has its own ethnic folklores which the writers draw from to express themselves. For instance, there is so much drawing from the fauna and flora in such unique ways that many Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Tanure Ojaide, among others, use the iroko, the eagle, and the tortoise which have symbolic meaning in various folklores of the country.²

The emergence of the first Nigerian writers, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka among all, was characterised by a strong commitment to the local history and cultures with the aim of re-establishing and re-giving voice to what the colonial experience annihilated. Their writing was then devoted to a self-assertion of colonised people and to a social and cultural change. As several scholars argued, Nigerian writers emerged soon after the end of the British occupation were still deeply hurt by the colonial experience and their psychological grief influenced their works. In those works, there was an “urgency of contesting colonial myths to reclaim both the denied humanity of the African and the integrity of his denigrated cultures, and in the process inspired a resurgence of African culture”.³

Nigerian history, however, was marked by several social and political events that influenced and hindered the development of a national literary tradition. From the mid-1960s, Nigerian people were facing the complications of their newly born independent State, which included difficulties in the administration and the outbreak of crisis and conflicts. In particular, the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970,⁴ also

² T. Ojaide, *Indigeneity, Globalisation, and African Literature: Personally Speaking*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; quoted by I. Diala, “A Writers' Body and the Nigerian Literary Tradition”, *Research in African Literatures*, 50:4 (2019), p. 123.

³ Diala, p. 124.

⁴ The Nigerian civil war which started in 1967 and lasted till 1970 was the bloodiest war in Africa. Soon after the British left, there were already ethnic conflicts caused by the federational nature of the country. The nation was ‘divided’ into two main areas: in the North, there were the Muslim Hausa people while, in the South, there were the Christian Igbo people. Undoubtedly, it was not a rigid division and naturally the two ethnic groups were present in the entire surface of the country. Having Igbo people who lived in the Hausa territory caused conflicts. The Hausa people decided that they did not want to have them in their communities, in their houses and therefore they started to kill them, to explode their houses. These first conflicts caused the initiation of several coups, until the Igbo people decided that they had enough, and they declared their own Independence with the birth of the Republic

known as Nigeria-Biafra war, left its marks on the minds of the younger generations and created a sort of feeling of disillusionment. This deep disillusionment mixed with a feeling of ambiguity and confusion about the nation as an entity marked the overturning of Nigerian writing. According to Obi Nwakanma, especially Igbo people and writers were marked and influenced by the trauma of the war which left an imaginative absence evident in the writing produced between 1970 and 1983.⁵

With the end of the Nigerian Civil war, a long period dominated by dictatorships and a hostile social climate started. As Ogaga Okuyade explains, from the late 1980s, but actually already from the beginning of the 1970s, not only Nigeria, but Africa as a continent started to experience transformations in their social and political life and administrations. Several military dictatorships came in succession and brought changes in the ruling of the nation.⁶ In Nigeria, in particular, the dictatorship of Sani Abacha was the most violent one; he prohibited any political activity and protest, that on the contrary brought intellectuals and writers to speak even louder and to protest publicly for their rights. Many people were persecuted because of this and some of them even ended up in prison. Within this social and political climate, Nigerian writing evolved together with the national atmosphere; in fact, “[s]ince the novel describes changing realities, the novel necessarily changes too; its structural and narrative designs change with the evolving social climate”.⁷

Still today Nigeria has to face continuous moments of conflicts, crises and conquests, which influence the literary production of Nigeria and the minds of Nigerian writers, thus forging multiple trends in writing. The different temporalities and objectives that each historical period produced gave birth to what scholars call ‘generations’ of Nigerian writing.

of Biafra. The institution of Biafra gave start to the civil war between the state of Nigeria and the new Republic of Biafra.

⁵ O. Nwakanma, “Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel”, *Research in African Literatures*, 39:2 (2008), p. 7.

⁶ Okuyade, “Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent”, pp. 1-2.

⁷ Okuyade, “Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent”, p. 3.

3.1.2. A closer look at the term 'generation'

From the distinction of the socio-cultural and political periods that marked Nigerian history, it was also possible to identify different literary stages. These stages are commonly called by critics and scholars 'generations'. In detail, in the Nigerian literary production, three generations have been identified. The literary critics Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton are the main supporters of this proposition. In their article *Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations* (2005), they argue that the term 'generation' may be complex to define and fix in limited boundaries, yet they consider the notion as the main basis for a possible literary criticism. In their view, the generational approach can offer a systematic comprehension of the tendencies that a corpus of literature may manifest. They stated that:

the project of defining and delimiting the boundaries of a literary generation can never escape the problem of semantic, thematic, and even ideological indeterminacy. Factors such as thematic fluidity and temporal overlaps constantly ensure that even the most ostensibly reliable rules of generational boundary-cutting are very easily overwhelmed by exceptions. Yet, the generational approach remains one of the cornerstones of literary criticism [...].⁸

Adesanmi and Dunton expose the difficulties in the employment of a generational approach, however they find some features that are significant for the establishment of a generation, namely the temporal coevality and the ideological or thematic coherence. In their words, "the writers / artists and intellectuals who are categorised as belonging to a particular generation either fall within a loosely determined age bracket, or are published within a loosely defined timeframe [...] and their themes / tropes are shaped by identifiable events or experiences commonly shared".⁹ The use of the word 'loosely' already indicates the uncertainty that the notion of 'generation' may encounter. This uncertainty and complexity in the definition generated critical debates. In response to the literary critics Adesanmi and Dunton's assertions, Hamish Dalley argues that there are novels, especially contemporary ones, that cannot be classified as belonging to a specific critical 'generation' because they generate

⁸ P. Adesanmi, C. Dunton, "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations", *English in Africa*, 32:1 (2005), p. 13.

⁹ Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 13.

complex models of time and space.¹⁰ In his view, the two fundamental characteristics identified by Adesanmi and Dunton cannot be applied to some novels and therefore the notion of ‘generation’ is not useful.

Also Ogaga Okuyade seems to criticise the generational stratification of writing. According to him, in the context of the African literature, it represents a challenging approach that loses coherence and precision. Nevertheless, the scholar finds the necessity of a classification and periodisation of the African literature: “[d]espite the difficulties of classification, it is nevertheless imperative to periodically reevaluate the African novel in order to come to terms with the process, developments, and trends of its evolution”.¹¹ In his view, African literature has certainly developed and changed, thus it is important to highlight the different tendencies and changes in the literary production.

Having exposed both the complexities and uncertainties of a concept such as ‘generation’ and the necessity ‘describing’ a still-evolving literature, this study will use various terms to describe the different trends and processes of Nigerian literature, including ‘generation’, ‘wave’, ‘contemporary’, ‘postcolonial’, ‘emergent’, ‘new’. All terms serve to describe and acknowledge the varied productions that characterise Nigerian literature.

3.1.3. The development of Nigerian literature

As observed in the previous section, Nigerian literature did change in different times, due mainly to the influence of the multiple and problematic experiences that Nigerian people had to live. The succession of conflicts, crises and dictatorships crafted a varied literary production that can be categorised and periodised.

With the end of colonialism and the aim of re-establishing an African history and experience different from that conveyed by the colonialist literature, the emergent writers of the 1950s and 1960s began to produce their own writing. The common purpose of cultural affirmation and nationalism of these writers gives birth to what

¹⁰ H. Dalley, “The Idea of “Third Generation Nigerian Literature”: Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel”, *Research in African Literatures*, 44:4 (2013), p. 16.

¹¹ Okuyade, “Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent”, p. 4.

critics and scholars have named the ‘first generation’ of Nigerian writing. Their aim was to cancel out the internalised Western ideas and values that the experience of colonialism imported. As argued in the previous chapter, the writers of this generation were all males, while the female voice was still little recognised and had no space in the literary and critical scene. Despite this, Flora Nwapa with her novel *Efuru*, driven by the purpose to convey a different representation of African women’s experiences and history, was able to open the doors to many other female writers in the following years.

Following the category of ‘temporal coequality’ identified by Adesanmi and Dunton for the recognition of a generation, this first group is categorised as belonging to the same temporality, that of colonialism. Most of these writers in fact were born in the first half of the twentieth century, and among them are Sedar Senghor, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwapa, Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and many others.¹²

From the 1970s, Nigeria witnessed a social and political change after the years of the violent Nigerian Civil war, which led to the establishment of endless military dictatorships. This historical moment influences Nigerian literature producing what critics have identified as the ‘second generation’ of Nigerian writing. This second ‘wave’ is mainly characterised by a strong disillusionment about the hope of a new independence and a deep confusion about the nation. The event of the Nigerian Civil War in particular affected second-generation writers and their writing. This group of writers also belonged to the colonial time, but the years shaped by independence were the years in which they were most productive. For this reason, the temporal sphere that characterises this generation is that of post-independence.¹³ Among those writers, there are Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Niyi Osundare, Bode Sowande, and Buchi Emecheta. As emphasised previously, Buchi Emecheta, situating her writing in a purely feminist perspective, follows the path started by her predecessor Flora Nwapa and still depicts strong and independent female characters who try to find their own way to fight against patriarchy and colonial rules.

¹² Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 14.

¹³ Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 14.

Finally, the mid-1980s gives birth to a new ‘wave’ of Nigerian writers, that of the ‘third generation’. These writers are deeply touched by the atmosphere and the fall of hopes born soon after the establishment of the new-born independent state. The desire to finally have power over their own country was soon dismantled by the continuous conflicts and autocracies. These events shaped the third-generation writing; a writing that expressed the disenchantment with the nation and the administrative failures of the government. Moreover, most writers also have in common the need for social and economic emancipation.¹⁴ In addition to this common ideological thread, the writers belonging to this third group also share a historical moment: most of them are in fact born after 1960, that is after the years impacted by colonialism. However, the first writers who could be identified as belonging to this third generation are not Nigerians; among them there could be found “Uganda's Moses Isegawa, Ghana's Ama Darko, Zimbabwe's Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga, Cameroon's Calixthe Beyala and Djibouti's Abdourahman Ali Waberi”.¹⁵ The dearth of Nigerian novelists was essentially caused by the predominance of poetry as the main genre present in the last decades of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, eventually Nigerian literature has also produced its own novelists, such as Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, Helon Habila, Helen Oyeyemi, Chika Unigwe, Oyinkan Braithwaite, and many others.

What really characterises contemporary Nigerian writing is its diasporic nature. As Beauty Bragg stresses, many authors of the third generation were either born outside the nation or migrated in other continents and currently living abroad. One example among all is the writer Chris Abani, who was born in Nigeria in 1966 but he migrated to the United Kingdom in 1991 and he is now living in the United States of America. This diasporic and transnational nature raised the question on whether these writers should be considered African or not, however the dilemma does not seem to be solved. Third generation writing therefore could be depicted as a transnational, diasporic and global writing. Its nature is visible in the literary productions that express the subjective relationship of the author to concepts such as that of home,

¹⁴ Okuyade, “Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent”, p. 5.

¹⁵ Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 14.

black identity and nation.¹⁶ Moreover, according to Ogaga Okuyade, this same nature could also be the cause of the scarcity of novels in contemporary Nigerian literature. Most novels in fact are not present in Nigeria and are published abroad. So, not only writers are distant from their country of birth or that of their ancestors, but also their novels are published and therefore renowned mainly in the West. One heavy consequence of this phenomenon regards the Nigerian economy; since these novels are not found in Nigeria or they are too expensive, the economy is jeopardised. According to other critics, this is a problematic situation that could lead either to acknowledge Nigerian, or African, literature only in the West or to the extinction of Nigerian, or African, writers.¹⁷ Despite this, many contemporary Nigerian novels recall the Nigerian experience and culture, proving that writers who published abroad or live abroad are still tied to their roots or background.

To sum up, it is proper to remember that the literary stratification into generations cannot be identified as fixed and precise; however, it helps to categorise and delineate some distinct thematic and temporal spheres that have shaped Nigerian literature from the 1950s onwards.

3.2. Contemporary Nigerian writing

Contemporary Nigerian writing or the so called ‘third generation’ of Nigerian writing makes its appearance in the literary scene in the middle of the 1980s. Most of the writers who belong to this ‘wave’ have been influenced by the dramatic years of the Nigeria Civil War (1967-1970) because either they lived the experience as children or they have interiorised the memory of it from their mothers and fathers. In recent years, several novels have described this event, marking “the entrance of Biafra and the Biafran War into transnational memory”.¹⁸ According to Madhu Krishnan, third generation writing tries to make a connection with the past, representing the

¹⁶ B. Bragg, “Racial Identification, Diaspora Subjectivity, and Black Consciousness in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird*”, *South Atlantic Review*, 82:4 (2017), p. 123.

¹⁷ O. Okuyade, “Trying to survive: Growth and transformation in African female narratives”, *California Linguistic Notes*, 35:1 (2010), pp. 1-2.

¹⁸ M. Krishnan, “Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure in the Third Generation Nigerian Novel”, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2:2 (2010), p. 186.

trauma lived and producing a sense of identity and community with the sharing of the same experiences.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the influence and the importance of the war, which marks a fundamental thread in contemporary novels, other themes and trends could be identified. Third-generation writers seem to give attention to a wide range of themes and they seem more versatile in their styles and vision. Apart from the leitmotif of war, the main issues that contemporary writers deal with are transnationality, exile, migration, and cultural reaffirmation.²⁰ Contemporary novels distinguish themselves for their newness and nowness. They are able to place themselves in the process of evolution of the African literary production, at the same time distancing from previous generations and renewing the same concerns and themes.²¹ In Ogaga Okuyade's view, there are two main traits that characterise the third-generation writing: the first is the "gradual disappearance of indigenous African narrative techniques as in Chinua Achebe's, Ayi Kwei Armah's, Ngũgĩ's, Buchi Emecheta's, and Wole Soyinka's novels"²², which according to the scholar opens, and closes without an answer, the question whether this absence is the result of globalism or transculturation. The second trait regards the dominance of the child figure, which could be either a rhetorical figure to question the human rights condition in Africa or the representation of the growth and evolution of the continent.²³

The versatility of the third-generation novels is also stressed by Adesanmi and Dunton in their essay *Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations* (2005). According to the scholars, the contemporary novelists distance themselves from the previous generations because of the absence of a 'centre' which is built on historical and traditional grounds. They in fact are defined by a large creative space, varied plots, and a language that lacks the typical domestic pattern of the first and the second generation. The setting therefore is often urban and characterised by late modernity and globalisation.²⁴

¹⁹ Krishnan, p. 187.

²⁰ Okuyade, "Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent", p. 7.

²¹ Diala, p. 130.

²² Okuyade, "Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent", p. 7.

²³ Okuyade, "Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent", p. 7.

²⁴ Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 16.

Last but not least, Ogaga Okuyade also emphasises a significant presence of female writers, which denotes an exponential rise of Nigerian women's writing in the literary production. If emergent writers of the 1950s and 1960s were mainly male, recent years have showcased a powerful feminist streak. According to Eustace Palmer, as mentioned by Okuyade, the rise of female writing developed from the 1990s could be attributed to different elements, such as the emergence of feminism or 'womanism', the greater access of women to education, or the development of relationship between man and women in society. Among the numerous female novelists who make their appearance in the contemporary Nigerian literary scene are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Helen Oyeyemi, Oyinkan Braithwaite, Unoma Azuah, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chika Onigwe, and many others.

3.2.1. Literary genres

The Nigerian contemporary literary scenario which can be dated from the middle of the 1980s was and still is characterised by a large production ranging from poetry, novel, and drama, and by a versatility in themes and concerns.

With regards to genres, as Adesanmi and Dunton denote, the decade 1985-1995 was mainly dominated by poets who emerged from the two major literary cities of Nigeria: Ibadan and Nsukka. These two cities have in fact the reputation of being the fundamental sites in which the first generation of writers began. From the connection between the Ibadan group, where poets such as Afam Akeh, Amatoritsero Ede, Nike Adesuyi, Kemi Atanda Ilori, Chiedu Ezeanah, Remi Raji, Kunle George, Onookome Okome, Sanya Osha, Nduka Otiono, and Sola Olorunyomi were the major exponents, and poets who studied in other parts of the country and then settled in Lagos, for instance such names as Uche Nduka, Ogaga Ifowodo, Toyin Adewale-Gabriel, Obi Nwakanma, and Epaphras Osondu, the Lagos-Ibadan axis of the third generation writing emerged and entered the Nigerian literary scenario. The location of these new poets was not the only factor that led to the dominance of poetry in the early years of the third generation; there are other elements that reinforced the primary position of this genre in the literary production of the period. The first factor is the legitimisation of poetry by the *Association of Nigerian Authors* (ANA) through prizes such as the All Africa Okigbo prize for poetry. Moreover, the same Association sponsored

publications that concerned poetry. Another factor, finally, regarded the predominance of poets in the literary criticism, where poets such as Sesan Ajayi, Akeh, Nwakanma, Osha, and Otiono also developed a critical tradition.

Most of the poets that gave birth to the third-generation writing moved to Europe and America in the 1990s and continued to publish their works in the United States, in Holland, and in other parts of the Western world.²⁵

Even though the first decade of the third generation of Nigerian writing was dominated by poetry, the novel acquired a growing visibility through the years. According to Adesanmi and Dunton, there are three novelists that guaranteed the revival of the novel as a genre in the third-generation writing. These three novelists are Helon Habila, Chris Abani, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.²⁶ Besides them, also Sefi Atta, Akin Adesokan, Helen Oyeyemi, Chika Unigwe and Oyinkan Braithwaite found their place in the Nigerian literary scenario of the last years. Most of the time, the contemporary Nigerian novel is categorised by an urban setting and an emphasis “on deprivation, on the denial of individual human rights and aspirations, and on the degradation of social relations under a series of increasingly despotic and corrupt regimes”²⁷.

Another flourishing genre in the contemporary Nigerian literary production is drama. This genre has been present in the literary Nigerian tradition since the 1960s. Its prestige, however, is not uniform over the years: for example, in the 1990s, ANA refused to award the drama prize since it was argued that the manuscripts of that period were low-quality. Moreover, in Nigeria the relationship between the publication of the plays and their performance was not consistent. On one hand, some significant plays that have been print had no performances; on the other hand, some plays were not published and, thus, only remembered by those who attended the performances.²⁸ Nevertheless, the main factor that contributed to the decreasing prestige of the genre is the decreasing activity of live performances in Nigeria. In the conference *Performing Africa* in the University of Leeds, UK, in 2004, Femi Osofisan, writer, critic and playwright, highlights the decline of live performances in

²⁵ Adesanmi and Dunton, pp. 8-10.

²⁶ Adesanmi and Dunton, pp. 10-11.

²⁷ Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 11.

²⁸ Adesanmi and Dunton, p. 12.

theatres in Nigeria, the almost total disappearance of the popular Yoruba Traveling Theatre²⁹, and the increasing limitations of resources and structures for contemporary Nigerian dramatists.³⁰ If the presence of drama in contemporary Nigerian literary production seems fragile, poetry and fiction continue to have a solid place and to make Nigerian writing visible in the rest of the world.

3.2.2. Themes in fiction

As regards the genre of the novel, the contemporary Nigerian novel is characterised by a fluid versatility in themes and trends. Since every piece of writing is not created in a vacuum, on the contrary it is connected to a precise historical moment and exists in relation of a precise society in which it is written, the very first trend that accompanies the whole Nigerian tradition is the *liaison* with their land and history. As the first and second generation, also the third generation of writers is influenced by the experiences of Nigerian people. Many contemporary writers still retrieve their imaginative scenarios from history, politics and society. As Isidore Diala states, a large corpus of recent novels still explores distinct Nigerian historical moments, such as the Civil War (Nigeria-Biafra war) or the military dictatorship period. The belonging to a land, to its culture and history continues therefore to shape the Nigerian literary tradition even in the most recent years.³¹ The theme of the war is thoroughly represented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), where the writer is able to move smoothly from the period just before the Civil War (the beginning of the 1960s) and the exact period of the war (1967-70). Doing so, she makes the reader conscious of the atmosphere and feelings that Nigerian people experienced in those years.³² Together with Adichie's novel, also Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) are significant examples in which the war theme returns. In dealing with the difficult years of the Civil War and the experiences of people who lived that period, these writers "seek to make sense of the present tensions and ethnic strife in their country

²⁹ See Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*, Lagos, Nigeria Magazine Publications, 1984.

³⁰ Adesanmi and Dunton, pp. 12-13.

³¹ Diala, p. 131.

³² C. N. Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, London, HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.

through an interrogation of the past, putting special significance on the human scale of trauma and the individually negotiated state of belonging and community engagement”.³³

Related to the theme of the war is the examination of the human body. According to Diala, contemporary Nigerian fiction is giving growing attention to the exploration of the human body in a clinical way. Many contemporary writers focus on the examination of “terminal diseases such as cancer, heart diseases, stroke, diabetes, sickle cell anemia, epidemics, or simply mysterious wasting diseases”.³⁴ It seems that what they are trying to convey is the figure of a fragile body who is fighting against death. From this viewpoint, it seems possible to trace a connection between the theme of the examination of the human body and the theme of the war, of the civil strives, of violence, and of terrorism that Nigerian social and political scenarios have affected. Among the novels in which the exploration of clinical human body is to be found there are Yejide Kilanko’s *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (2014), Maryam Awaisu’s *Burning Bright* (2014), Ogochukwu Promise’s *Sorrow’s Joy* (2015), and Ifeoma Okoye’s *The Fourth World* (2013).³⁵

Another frequent theme, which can be identified as a new sub-genre belonging to the Nigerian third-generation writing, is the child-soldier narrative. A fascinating example is Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007), where the protagonist is in fact a child soldier. This figure represents both innocence and guilt, he can symbolise both the victim and the oppressor. This kind of narrative seems without doubt a link to the atmosphere that people are living in Nigeria, it is linked to the endless conflicts and wars that Nigeria must confront. As Okuyade argues,

The child-soldier became popular in Africa with the end of the Cold War. Most of the prior crises involved struggles to sustain or expand territories or control natural resources. The new wars involve internal rifts centered on ethnicity. [...] The image of a child in combat bearing a Kalashnikov bigger than him/her reflects a new brand of violence within the African continent. While the child soldier is neither a nascent phenomenon nor unique to Africa, it amplifies the failure of the human world to protect its future, which is signified in the identity of the child.³⁶

³³ Krishnan, p. 187.

³⁴ Diala, p. 133.

³⁵ Diala, p. 133.

³⁶ Okuyade, “Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent”, p. 13.

Therefore the association between the figure of the child-soldier and the tropes of violence, terrorism and war is immediate. Moreover, the dominance of these themes, that of the war, that of the clinical human body examined in its fragility and precariousness, and that of the child-soldier, in recent Nigerian novels seems to indicate the absolute contamination of the national scenario in the imaginative work of contemporary writers. These writers, in other words, seem to shed light through different images and tropes on the very fragility of their national places, history and societies.

Different from the theme of the war and all the tropes that are linked to violence, conflicts and physical or psychological trauma, but similar in the focus of the human being, and the lived experience is the theme of the 'coming of age', or the *Bildungsroman*. Many new Nigerian narratives are associated with the *Bildungsroman* and its traits. The sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman* especially refers to narratives in which the protagonist undertakes a journey of growth and education. The term derives from the German 'Bildung', which means formation, and 'roman', that is novel. Novels of growth and education are frequent in the third-generation of Nigerian writing. In these novels the main characteristic is the focus on the psychological and physical development of the protagonist. According to Okuyade, each phase of the protagonist's growth is linked to the surroundings in which he or she is located, therefore the environment is crucial in influencing his or her worldviews.³⁷ Moreover, the scholar emphasises that another typical trait of this sub-genre is the common education of both the protagonist and the reader. In fact the protagonist is educated by his or her living experiences, while the reader is educated by the narration of someone else's education: "[t]he focus of the *Bildungsroman* is to lead the reader to greater personal enrichment as the protagonist voyages from childhood to psychological or emotional maturity".³⁸

Among the Nigerian novels that could belong to the *Bildungsroman* sub-genre are Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004) and *Becoming Abigail* (2006), Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl* (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) and

³⁷ Okuyade, "Trying to Survive", pp. 6-7.

³⁸ Okuyade, "Trying to Survive", p. 7.

Measuring Time (2007), and many others. However, even though the genre derives from the Western form and takes the structure of the German *Bildungsroman*, it seems proper to state that the African form of these narratives differs from the traditional one. As Okuyade argues,

The African coming-of-age narrative does not emphasize self-realization and the harmonious reconciliation between the protagonist and his society as the prototypical Western *Bildungsroman* does. Instead, it expresses a variety of forces that inhibit or prevent the protagonist from achieving self-realization. These forces include exile or dislocation, problems of transcultural interaction, poverty, and the difficulties of preserving personal, familial, and cultural memories.³⁹

The social and cultural dimensions therefore seem to be fundamental elements also in the coming-of-age narratives, where the path to maturity of the protagonist is determined by her or his surroundings. A surrounding that is not always a peaceful one, but strictly connected to the problematic atmosphere of the state.

The thematic and genre versatility of the third-generation Nigerian fiction is also visible in Nigerian women's writing, where the same themes and genres are accentuated and developed according to their own patterns and characteristics.

3.3. Contemporary Nigerian women's writing on the rise

As mentioned before, contemporary Nigerian women's writing developed courageously and strongly over the recent years, finding its own place in the Nigerian literary tradition. However, its place was not uniform in the passage from generation to generation. According to many feminist and womanist critics of Nigerian literature for many years the Nigerian canon excluded women writers. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi strongly claims that Nigerian literary production is "phallic, dominated as it is by male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience".⁴⁰ This was evident in the previous chapter, where with the beginning of postcolonial literatures the first to get access to writing were men. This was caused by their privileged access

³⁹ Okuyade, "Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent", p. 12.

⁴⁰ C. O. Ogunyemi, *African Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996; quoted by H. Hewett, "Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation", *English in Africa*, 32:1 (2005), p. 77.

to education. The result was then that emergent writers were mostly men and their concerns were mostly related to their own sex. This highlights what could be the main possibility for the exclusion of women writers from the canon, that is the economic, cultural and psychological obstacles that women had to face because of their gender.⁴¹ The quasi-total exclusion of women from the literary tradition was evident also for Jane Bryce, who in one of her essays explains:

In the 1980s, as a PhD student at the University of Ife, the response I commonly encountered when I said my research topic was Nigerian women's writing was, "I didn't know there was any." For male academics at that time, since the fathering of Anglophone Nigerian literature by Tutuola, Achebe, J. P. Clark, Okigbo, Soyinka et al., it had been masculine by origin and by definition. [...] [However, s]ince the 1980s, African women's writing has achieved a level of visibility where it is no longer possible to ignore it or pretend it does not exist, as testified by the increase in critical attention.⁴²

As affirmed by Bryce, the dominance of male writers over female writers was especially noticeable in the origins of Nigerian writing, that is the immediate years from British occupation. In those years, as seen in the second chapter of this thesis, emergent male writers were mostly preoccupied about their own problems and they privileged an active and powerful male representation over gender inequalities and female concerns. The result was a representation of men protagonists in highly social and political positions with central and active roles. Where women were present, they had marginal roles and they were represented from a patriarchal point of view which gave a misleading portrait of their feelings, thoughts and social, political, and cultural roles. Female writers therefore needed to take their own places in literature and dismantle the patriarchal representation of women characters. Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta are significant examples of female responses.⁴³

In contemporary times, Nigerian female writers are more and more present in the national literary landscape, establishing an important increase of female writing. According to Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi, these women writers "navigate the past, present and the future to present in their writing the full spectrum of oppressions

⁴¹ Hewett, p. 77.

⁴² J. Bryce, "Half and Half Children": Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel", *Research in African Literatures*, 39:2 (2008), p. 50.

⁴³ C. B. Ogunyemi, "Gender (Re)configuration in Nigerian Literature through Time and Space", *JLS/TLW*, 34:4 (2018), pp. 126-129.

women experience as gendered subjects”.⁴⁴ Their aim is that of representing not only a fight against patriarchy as their predecessors, but they also call for a social and cultural change of the conditions of Nigerian women. Moreover, what is significant is that not only female writers undertake this transformative journey of the literary production, but also male writers have close to their hearts the women’s cause. Therefore, male authors also write from a feminist point of view giving importance to the roles of women and men in society and to their collaboration for a common purpose, that of a social and human transformation in Nigeria.⁴⁵

3.3.1. Changing visions in female narratives

Even though contemporary Nigerian women writers follow the steps of their foremothers establishing a process of self-assertion and self-determination, having in mind a social transformation of women’s roles and positions they also locate themselves in opposition to their female predecessors. Differently from female writers of the first and second generation, third-generation Nigerian women writers create female characters who are no longer linked to the domestic sphere. On the contrary, their places are to be found outside of it.⁴⁶ Whether traditionally female characters were mostly portrayed as mothers, wives and daughters who spent their whole life confined in these roles, recent female narratives showcase characters who can be at the same time strong, educated, and career-oriented women and wives, mothers and daughters. Contemporary Nigerian female writing aims at building a dissimilar representation of women from that of previous generations giving to their heroines more power and strength to create their own worlds and future as wives, mothers and daughters and as human beings with independence, agency and individual identities. The process towards self-determination and agency is especially highlighted in narratives that expose the typical traits of the sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman*. As stressed before, growth, education and development are its main characteristics. In

⁴⁴ Ogunyemi, p. 131.

⁴⁵ Ogunyemi, p. 131.

⁴⁶ C. Courtois, “Third-Generation Nigerian Female Writers and the Bildungsroman: Breaking Free from the Shackles of Patriarchy”, in *Growing Up a Woman: The Private/Public Divide in the Narratives of Female Development*, ed. S., Šnircová, M., Kostić, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 102.

these narratives, female characters undertake a journey from childhood to personhood where they are able to find empowerment, independence and agency.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, it is proper to mention that the form of the *Bildungsroman* traditionally is a male form. This is emphasised by the critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who exploring the main phases of this narrative seems to privilege a male protagonist, excluding the possibility to have a female experience.⁴⁸ Despite this, in recent times a greater number of female writers found interest in this sub-genre making possible to delineate the typical characteristics of a female *Bildungsroman*. According to Okuyade, there are four distinct traits that defined the female coming-of-age narratives: (1) the awakening, the heroine becomes aware of her limitations about her future; (2) self-awareness, the protagonist gains awareness about herself thanks to the collaboration and guidance of other women; (3) exploration of femininity, the protagonist starts a process towards her femininity and towards the redefinition of her identity; (4) maturity, the heroine reaches maturity and independence concluding in this way her journey of self-discovery. These are the main phases of a female *Bildungsroman*, however it must be noted that some novels can follow the patterns more closely than others. Some significant examples that expose these four characteristics are Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005).⁴⁹

Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that the journey undertaken by female characters in those narratives is usually characterised by the mother-daughter relationship. What is fundamental in this relationship is the need for young female characters to distance themselves and their experiences from those of their mothers. In this way, young women try to find independence without taking their mothers' life experiences as a model. In other words, young third-generation women's mothers are the women who have spent their life being oppressed by colonialist rules and patriarchal power, having little possibilities to seek for independence. For this reason, the third-generation daughters distance themselves from their mothers in order to seek

⁴⁷ S. Nadaswaran, "Rethinking Family Relationships in Third-generation Nigerian Women's Fiction", *Relief*, 5:1 (2011), pp. 19-22.

⁴⁸ See Bakhtin, M. M. "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical typology of the Novel)", in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: U of Texas Press, 1986, to find a further description of the *Bildungsroman*.

⁴⁹ Okuyade, "Trying to Survive", pp. 9-10.

for agency, self-determination and a better future. The mother-daughter relationship therefore is a relation of ambivalence and opposition.⁵⁰ The opposition to their mother's moral and cultural codes, that was actually the social moral codes of their mother's periods, can be constructed through the rebellious character of daughters. Their rebellions "emphasize the need to attain a voice, exercise agency, and experience female bonding"⁵¹ in order to obtain a social change and create their own lives.

This particular example of the mother-daughter relationship that can be found in contemporary female narrative is just one instance of younger writers' attempt to separate their writings from those of their predecessors. Other examples can be noticeable from the versatility of genres that contemporary female and male writers experiment. Two peculiar examples that will be explored in the following sections are Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018). The first one is a revisitation of Snow White, namely a post-modern fairy-tale, while the second is a crime fiction. These two female authors therefore are able to overcome the traditional representations of the first and second generation, redefining new worlds and visions in the Nigerian literary scenario.

3.4. *Boy, Snow, Bird*: a postmodern fairy tale

Boy, Snow, Bird is the title of Helen Oyeyemi's fifth novel (2014). As the title suggests, Boy, Snow and Bird are the three main characters of the novel. All three are female. In an interview with the newspaper *The Guardian* in 2014, the author Oyeyemi was asked whether she prefers to write about women, since many novels of her are centred on female characters:

I sometimes get asked: "How come the men in your stories don't have such strong characters?" And I'm like: "I don't care." I just want to find out about all the different lives a woman can live. But my feminism has never been against men. It's not erasure; it's just they're not the focus. In real life, they're quite nice.⁵²

⁵⁰ Nadaswaran, pp. 28-29.

⁵¹ Okuyade, "Trying to Survive", p. 10.

⁵² L. Hoggard, "Interview: Helen Oyeyemi: I'm interested in the way women disappoint one another", *The Guardian*, 2014. Available at: www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/02/helen-oyeyemi-women-disappoint-one-another [Accessed 16 May 2023].

From this extract of the interview it is possible to highlight which kind of feminism Oyeyemi supports, that is a feminism which is not separatism between the sexes. On the contrary it is a cooperation between men and women. This, however, does not prevent the author from focusing her attention mainly on women and her multiple experiences and natures. The positions in which female characters find themselves in the novel underlines how these characters in contemporary women's writing are no longer connected to a domestic sphere, as seen with *Efuru* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. Here, Oyeyemi depicts women who are no longer confined in the roles of mother and wife, on the contrary they are independent, strong women who are trying to comprehend their inner self and to seek their future.

In the novel, the multiple natures of women are well expressed by three completely different female characters. Boy is a young woman who, at the beginning of the story, decides to leave her house and her abusive father to start a new chapter of her life and build her own future. She settles in Flax Hill, Massachusetts, where she meets Arturo Whitman, who will become her husband. Arturo is the father of Snow, the second female protagonist of the novel. Snow is a seven-year-old girl whose life has always been based on her beauty and appearance. The third female character of the story is Bird, the newly born daughter of Boy and Arturo. Bird's birth will be a fundamental event in the lives of all characters, since it will cause the uncovering of a secret hidden for decades and the change of relationships among the characters.

The novel is composed of three distinct parts: the first and the third part are narrated by Boy, while the second part illustrates the epistolary exchanges between Bird and Snow, making them the two narrators of this section. This fascinating revisitation of the fairy tale of Snow White covers two decades, the 1950s and the 1960s, and it is set in America, in both the white and the black community.

What is interesting in Oyeyemi's novel is that it can be considered a perfect example of diasporic writing. In Beauty Bragg's words, "[i]n this novel, Oyeyemi fuses the mythology of Europe and the social experience of African Americans in an intriguing revision of the Snow White narrative. [...] no actual African nation state is

referenced in the novel,”⁵³ since it is set in America. However, there are elements that make reference to her origins, as shown in the following sections.

In order to be clearer, it needs to be stated that Helen Oyeyemi was born in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1984, but when she was only four years old she moved to London. While still at school, she signed a publishing deal and in 2005, her first novel *The Icarus Girl* was published in London. After this novel, she was able to write and publish other novels, such as *The Opposite House* (2007), *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), *Gingerbread* (2019), and *Peaces* (2021). In all those years, she continued to move from city to city. As she explained in an interview, she dated several cities in her life; she stayed in Berlin, Paris, Budapest, and at the time of the interview, in 2019, she was living in Prague.⁵⁴ This fluid movement from city to city is a thing that she inherited from her parents. As she affirmed, “[t]here are many traits I’ve inherited from my parents. Among them are [...] the idea that you don’t have to stay in a place just because you were born there, or because you’re used to it”.⁵⁵

Oyeyemi thus started her process of migration moving from her hometown in Nigeria to London. Now she is a British citizen of Nigerian descent who is currently still relocating herself in different cities. According to Paol Tiyambe Zeleza, Oyeyemi can perfectly embody what in his mind is the process of diasporization, that is a process that begins with migration, continues with a resettlement and then it is reproduced through the offspring of the migrants. Zeleza explains this condition comparing it to the process of immigration. Diasporization and immigration are, in his view, distinct processes. The elements that distinguish them are the prolonged and permanent resettlements. When a subject permanently resettles in a specific environment, that can be considered a diasporic subject, like Helen Oyeyemi. Even though she continues to relocate herself in different cities around Europe, she does not return to her homeland, thus she is identifiable with the process of diasporization

⁵³ Bragg, p. 124.

⁵⁴ A. Akbar, “Interview: Helen Oyeyemi: I had such a lovely time dating different cities”, *The Guardian*, 2019. Available at: www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/02/helen-oyeyemi-gingerbread-interview [Accessed 16 May 2023].

⁵⁵ “Once upon a life: Helen Oyeyemi”, *The Guardian*, 2011. Available at: www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jun/26/helen-oyeyemi-once-upon-a-life [Accessed 16 May 2023].

rather than that of immigration. This process is visible in her novels, which present an ongoing communication between her homeland and her hostland that demonstrate her engagement with a diaspora identity.⁵⁶

3.4.1. The world of fairy tales

As briefly mentioned, *Boy, Snow, Bird* is a revisitation of the fairy tale of Snow White. Fairy tales are an integral part of the social and literary scenario of the Western world. They enter the life of a human being from childhood, where they create new visions and let the imagination of children grow. As Paula Barba Guerrero argues, they are fundamental elements of every person's self, and also of how people conceive their society. They can mirror human experiences and influence multiple aspects of the contemporary lives, such as the social, political and cultural ones. Significant in most fairy tales are the questions of gender relations and femininity. Both issues are figured as corresponding to the norm, making people believe what is portrayed as the truth. In particular, they depict in a conservative way binary representations of the characters and of the situations; in this way, there are only two sides of things, one good and one bad, one happy and one sad.⁵⁷ In most fairy tales women are the main characters who are in need of some sort of help or rescue, which can only come from a male figure. This is typical in fairy tales such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella. This structure promotes undoubtedly a view on womanhood as passive, dependent and alone.⁵⁸

Many contemporary women writers are trying to challenge and subvert the misleading representations of female characters that can be found in traditional fairy tales. Their aim, as stated by Guerrero, is that of rewriting femininity and gender identity against the norm established by traditional tales.⁵⁹ What is spellbinding is that not only literature provides a new viewpoint and interpretation of traditional fairy

⁵⁶ Bragg, pp. 123-125.

⁵⁷ P. B. Guerrero, "Fairy-Tale Reflections: Space and Women Host(age)s in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*", in *Contemporary Fairy-Tale Magic. Subverting Gender and Genre*, ed. L. Brugué, A. Llompарт, Boston, Brill, 2020, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁸ S. Bonner, "Resistance and Revolt: Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty Re-Viewed", in *Contemporary Fairy-Tale Magic. Subverting Gender and Genre*, ed. L. Brugué, A. Llompарт, Boston, Brill, 2020, pp. 89-98, pp. 89-90.

⁵⁹ Guerrero, p. 34.

tales, but also other arts in the last decades are trying to do the same. A fascinating example related to the fairy tale of Snow White is Carrie Mae Weems' work of art, *Mirror Mirror* (1987-88). The artist has always been involved in the questioning of gender and racial identification and in the gender and racial stereotypes as methods of oppression. Her art is based on an attractive mixture of images, photographs, texts, fabric and audio recordings. In particular, in *Mirror Mirror* she showcases the image of a black woman in front of the mirror echoing in this way the scene where the Evil Queen in Snow White speaks to the mirror.



Figure 1: Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror Mirror*, 1987-88.

The image presents a black woman who, holding the mirror, does not look directly into it. In front of her, the mirror reflects the face of another woman dressed in white. What is significant here is also the text above the photograph, which exposes more aggressively the message that the artist wanted to convey. Here, it is possible to notice a response to cultural and racial prejudices and stereotypes. Weems wants the viewer to capture the difficulties of identification for both the black woman and the white woman, and wants him or her to challenge the concepts of femininity and beauty in which they find themselves. Sarah Bonner, analysing the work also adds that “Weems has taken here the common understanding of Snow White to expose implicit racial prejudice. The black woman is made other in relation to the white feminine ideal. She is not absent in the tales, but not fully present either.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Bonner, p. 96.

As Carrie Mae Weems did with visual art, Helen Oyeyemi revisits the fairy tale of Snow White with writing in her novel *Boy, Snow, Bird*. The novel can therefore be considered a postmodern fairy tale, where a response to misrepresentations of female characters and of the typical and traditional elements is given. Oyeyemi in an interview in 2014 expresses her relationship with fairy tales:

I think that they're the purest form of story that you can get. They sort of strip down human behaviour to the absolute basics. So with *Snow White* you have this story about envy and what the consequences of those are. And I suppose that when I'm reading a fairy tale I find it easier to rescue the characters than with other stories.

And I wanted to rescue the wicked stepmother. I felt that, especially in *Snow White*, I think that the evil queen finds it sort of a hassle to be such a villain. It seems a bit much for her, and so I kind of wanted to lift that load a little bit.⁶¹

From this passage it is evident that the main theme that the author was interested in was the sentiment of envy between the female characters and its consequences. Connected to this aspect is the element of beauty and appearance which is extremely present in both the traditional fairy tale and the novel. Moreover, Oyeyemi shows a particular empathy with the character of the stepmother and that is evident in the novel, where the evil stepmother figure is embodied by Boy Novak once she marries Arturo Whitman, who had already a daughter, Snow. Snow in this way embodies the nature of Snow White, a charming and beautiful girl.

The centrality of the evil stepmother is stressed by the author in another interview, where she affirms:

For me *Boy, Snow, Bird* is very much a wicked stepmother story. Every wicked stepmother story is to do with the way women disappoint each other, and encourage each other, across generations. A lot of terrible things can come out of that disappointment. I also wanted to explore the feminine gaze, and how women handle beauty without it [having] to do with men, per se. The women all want approval from each other and are trying to read each other. I also wanted to look at the aesthetics of beauty – who gets to be deemed the fairest of them all. And in *Snow White* that is very explicitly connected with whiteness. It had to be an American story because "passing" is an American phenomenon.⁶²

⁶¹ "Interview: 'Boy, Snow, Bird' Takes A Closer Look Into The Fairy Tale Mirror", *NPR*, 2014. Available at: www.npr.org/2014/03/09/287335293/boy-snow-bird-takes-a-closer-look-into-the-fairy-tale-mirror [Accessed 16 May 2023].

⁶² Hoggard.

A whole feminist perspective on the relationships between women and on their various experiences in life is what Oyeyemi wanted to express in her novel. Moreover, to create a challenging revisitation of Snow White, she adds the elements of beauty, of the mirror, of race, and of 'passing' as main ingredients. As Jack Zipes states, Oyeyemi "uses a fairy tale to intervene in a long discourse about how racism and notions of beauty define some of the more destructive aspects of American culture".⁶³ The author is therefore able to intertwine the categories of race, gender and beauty with the magical atmosphere retrieved from fairy tales in a fascinating story set in the American environment of the 1950s and 1960s.

3.4.2. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?

The relationships between the three female characters are the key elements that expose the mechanisms of feminine identity and female representation. The story starts with a young woman, Boy Novak, who is trying to escape from her abusive father, also named by her as The Rat Catcher. Boy suddenly finds herself in a new city, with new people and new surroundings. She settles in Massachusetts, where she starts to work as a bookkeeper. Here she becomes friends of Mia, a journalist, and meets Arturo Whitman, who will become her future husband. From the connection with Arturo, she also becomes acquainted with his daughter Snow. At this point, it seems evident that Boy starts to embody the role of the wicked mother, even though she actually does not possess the quality of wickedness. Her relationship with Snow is in fact a lovely relationship: "maybe it's the thief in me, but I think this girl is mine, and that when she and I are around each other, we're giving each other something we've never had, or taking back something we've lost".⁶⁴ The love and closeness between the two female characters seems indestructible. However, with Bird's birth all changes. Boy's sentiments for Snow turn upside down from the moment her daughter Bird was born and they culminate with the decision of sending Snow away from home.

⁶³ J. Zipes, *Grimm Legacies. The Magic Spell of the Grimms' Folk and Fairy Tale*, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 168.

⁶⁴ H. Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, London, Picador, 2014, p. 109.

Moreover, Bird's birth uncovers a long-hidden secret of the Whitman family, that is their racial heritage which is well covered up by Snow. At this point it seems possible to notice the differences between the two girls. Snow symbolises grace and beauty, while Bird does not. The main aspect of evaluation is appearance, which is made even more noticeable now that Bird is born. "Bird was born in spring. [...] There was the quicksand, then there was Bird in my arms, safe and well, and dark. As the nurse said when she thought I was too wiped out to hear: "That little girl is a Negro.""⁶⁵ Bird is coloured and Snow is white, this is the main difference between the two, and this is the difference from which beauty is calculated. Snow's appearance has been covered up for her whole life by her family, determining race and whiteness as the main aspects for beauty. Thus, Boy worried about the future of her daughter Bird and about the difficulties that she will encounter being 'different' from her stepsister Snow, decides to send Snow away.

However, race as related to beauty is a concept that Snow herself interiorises from her family's consciousness. Even from a young age, Snow's appearance was exhibited by her family, influencing in this way her role in society and her own representation. A significant example is to be found in Boy's reflection of how others perceive Snow when she came back for the celebration of Thanksgiving. Boy emphasises how the Whitman family kept making references to Snow's external characteristics rather than focusing on how much they have missed her: "Everyone who remembered Snow seemed glad to hear she'd be back. "So pretty", I kept hearing. "So well behaved". No one said they'd missed her."⁶⁶ From this passage seems evident that Snow is not perceived as a person to be missed, a person in her humanity, but rather she is only perceived as an object, an object with beautiful attributes.⁶⁷ Besides, Snow herself is aware of how others perceive her and how her beauty can have social consequences. In a letter to Bird, she writes:

I felt abandoned for a while, By "a while" I mean years, not months or weeks. I'd be able to push Flax Hill and you and Dad and your mom to the back of my mind for a few days, but then there'd be nights when that turned me over and lay me on my side like a doll that had been dropped on the floor. I began to know what dolls know. It felt like I've been discarded for another toy that was better, more

⁶⁵ Oyeyemi, p. 131.

⁶⁶ Oyeyemi, p. 241.

⁶⁷ R. M. S. Rowe, "Multiplicity of the Mirror: Gender Representation in Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*", Dayton, University of Dayton, 2015, p. 16.

lifelike (you). People sometimes said, “What a beautiful little girl,” but I thought that beautiful was bad.⁶⁸

Snow seems aware of her beauty, which, however, is a negative thing for her. She feels a doll and therefore she “know[s] what dolls know”⁶⁹, she feels an object that can be used whenever people are in need it. Snow, making explicit how she feels and being conscious of her own representation and objectification is able to subvert her condition. She knows that because of her appearance she must face social expectations; nevertheless, she is also in search for her self-knowledge and self-determination. Oyeyemi, at the same time, giving her female character a voice and giving her the power to resist feminine objectification and beauty is challenging the traditional figure of Snow White, the traditional message that the fairy tale wants to convey, that of a woman oppressed by her own appearance.⁷⁰

The concepts of beauty and appearance could provide an interesting link to the precedent analysis of *Efuru*. Even though, the two novels are extremely different they both present the element of beauty, in fact both the characters of Snow and Efuru are frequently described as ‘beautiful’, indicating in both cases a particular interest in their appearance. However, if in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, beauty is connected to social expectations and Snow sees it as a negative feature, in *Efuru*, beauty as a concept located in the African context in the late 1940s and the early 1950s – when the novel is set – is not seen by the protagonist and the people around her as something negative. On the contrary, Flora Nwapa connects Efuru’s beauty with her female conditions of being pregnant, underlining one more time how women were mainly considered in their roles as mothers: “Efuru was very happy, She was even more beautiful now. She was fairer, robust and fresh. Many men envied her husband. Women were jealous of her beauty”.⁷¹

Totally different from this description of Efuru’s appearance is Snow’s condition in Oyeyemi’s novel. Here, the author provides a deepest interpretation on the concepts

⁶⁸ Oyeyemi, pp. 230-231.

⁶⁹ Oyeyemi, p. 231.

⁷⁰ Rowe, p. 17.

⁷¹ Nwapa, p. 28.

of beauty and appearance, making her character Snow confront her consciousness and the knowledge of herself and her place in society.

The concepts of appearance and beauty are also emphasised by the figure of the mirror. The writer herself in an interview underlines the importance of the mirror in the story. According to her, mirrors symbolise the fact that we do not have the entire image of someone just by looking at them; on the contrary, there is a whole world beneath everyone's appearance.⁷² They are representatives of concepts such as reflection and perception. In Guerrero's view, they also appear as spatial entities, that is both as a space of reproduction and as a space where identity is examined, reflected and reformulated.⁷³

Hereafter, the symbol of the mirror will be analysed according to its functioning as a reflection of objectivity and subjectivity. Mia's experience, a journalist who will become Boy's friend, will be the main object of enquiry.

In the novel, Mia is a female character with independence, intelligence and strength. She works as a journalist and as a woman she feels the weight of aging and not having succeeded in anything. She knows what the social expectations of that time are, she knows that she is expected to be a wife and a mother. Her feelings are then accentuated when she finds herself in front of a mirror: "[w]hen Mia sees herself in the mirror, she is "measur[ing]" her appearance reflected in the mirror."⁷⁴ She senses her age increasing and feels as an object rather than a subject. Even though she is not submitted to the patriarchal structure and no male is present, when she looks at herself in the mirror she feels the male gaze. In other words, she does not feel comfortable in aging because the perception of her own self is missing. This is, however, an internalised patriarchal framing of beauty, one that sees women as the objects of gaze rather than subject with their own consciousness and sense of self. The internalisation of a patriarchal framing of beauty is evident in her dialogue with Boy:

"Hey, Bird-"
"Yeah?"
"Do I look forty?"
"Forty years old?" I asked, trying to buy time.

⁷² Librerie Mollat, "Interview: Helen Oyeyemi - Boy, Snow, Bird", 2016. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR9ffRxyrjw> [Accessed 16 May 2023].

⁷³ Guerrero, p. 39.

⁷⁴ Rowe, p. 26

“Yes, forty years old”.⁷⁵

Mia searches for affirmation in Boy, demonstrating her concern with her appearance and her age. In Rachel Marie Rowe’s words, “[r]ather than looking toward the mirror as a source of identity or self-reflection, she sees her own reflection through the male gaze, which would instead emphasize a woman’s fading looks”.⁷⁶ The mirror makes her external features become unknown and it inhibits herself from reaching a sense of self. It also highlights how the male gaze is internalised in the perception of Mia’s self as a subject, making her, on the contrary, an object unable to see her reflection as it is.

A different interpretation of the figure of the mirror is provided by Kimberly J. Lau. The scholar claims that the mirror is an actual character in the novel. She thinks of it as the real trickster of the story. It is indeed a figure that can overcome the distinction between reality and reflection, considering it in this way a clear association with the very nature of the trickster.⁷⁷ Boy herself from the beginning of the novel opens the borders of reality observing the untrustworthiness of the mirror: “Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy.”⁷⁸ Also Snow and Bird find it difficult to distinguish between reality and reflection once they are looking at themselves in the mirror. Snow, for example, questions the failure of showing up in the mirror and among the causes she lists an optical illusion or a symptom of eye disease, the possibility of not being human, the possibility that the mirror is an enemy who wants her out of sight, and the possibility of an enchantment.⁷⁹

Therefore, the mirror acts as a central character changing perceptions, creating different realities and questioning reflections.

⁷⁵ Oyeyemi, p. 200.

⁷⁶ Rowe, p. 28.

⁷⁷ K. J. Lau, “Snow White and the Trickster: Race and Genre in Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird*”, *Western Folklore*, 75:3/4 (2016), p. 387.

⁷⁸ Oyeyemi, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Oyeyemi, pp. 162-163.

3.4.3. The trope of passing

In *Boy, Snow, Bird*, the mirror is not only a central character, but it could also be a particular trope. The trope of the mirror is by the way present in many genres and narratives, such as the fairy tale, the *Bildungsroman* and the passing narrative. The scholar Erika Renée Williams in a fascinating essay called *Subverted Passing and Trans* Transition in Helen Oyeyemi's Boy, Snow, Bird* (2021) examines the trope of passing and how it is exposed and developed throughout the novel. She underlines that the story can be read as a passing narrative since one of its main elements is the secret hidden by the Whitmans, disclosed by Bird's birth. This secret produces a 'passing' plot, that of the black heritage of Snow Whitman and her whole family.⁸⁰

Before probing the passing plot of Snow, it seems appropriate to give a clear definition of a passing novel. As Williams states, the traditional passing narrative "concerns itself with how the presumably passing subject might avoid misrepresenting her historic identity"⁸¹. In other words, it is a fiction that narrates the story of a person claiming a racial or ethnic identity that he or she does not possess. It seems evident that the character of Snow embraces the given definition. With Bird's birth, who showcases a black skin, the long covered up secret of Arturo's family came to the surface. As a matter of fact, Snow, as her ancestors, has 'passed' as white for many years covering up her true racial heritage. The passing narrative, thus, functions as a wide box where the categories of race, nation and personal identity are intertwined one with another.

Vital for this type of narrative is the setting. According to Oyeyemi, it was necessary for her to set the story in America since 'passing' is a typical American phenomenon.⁸² America and Africa in this way are connected and united through the use of the passing narrative.

As stressed before, Bird's birth is crucial in initiating the disclosure of the passing phenomenon. It is in fact with the birth of her second daughter that Arturo explains to Boy the mechanisms that have long secured his family's passing:

⁸⁰ E. R. Williams, "Subverted Passing and Trans* Transition in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*", *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies*, 48:2 (2021), p. 182.

⁸¹ Williams, p. 183.

⁸² Hoggard.

In his mind he was no more colored than I was; he'd never even met his grandparents or cousins, his parents were the only ones from their families who'd decided to move north from Louisiana and see if anyone called them out on their ancestry. His father had stood in line behind a colored man at the front desk of the Flax Hill Country Club and eavesdropped as the colored man tried and failed to gain membership. "We're fully subscribed," the colored man was told. But Gerald Whitman was offered a membership form to fill out without further ado. It was too bad for the other guy, but Gerald liked golf and didn't see why he shouldn't play it in those surroundings if he could get away with it. Gerald had thought: *Well, what if I just don't say . . . what if I never say?* He'd passed that down to Arturo, the idea that there was no need to ever say, that if you knew who you were then that was enough, that not saying was not the same as lying.⁸³

From this point, their secret was in people's eyes and the passing was no longer possible. Despite this, Arturo seems to be quite good with the situation and he also confesses that he feels for Bird something that he never felt with Snow. This seems to indicate that having a daughter who really embraces all the characteristics of his belonging makes him feel even better and attached to his Afro-American descent.

The same is not true for Boy, who seems to show some concerns for her daughter Bird. Her dark features, in fact, create fears and preoccupations in Boy. She seems to fear especially the comparisons that will be made between Bird and Snow, comparisons that will showcase the distinct external features and will create racial prejudices. Therefore, Boy decides to send Snow to live with her Aunt Clara in Boston in order to make an end to all the possible fears. Specifically, Boy's decision denotes two key considerations: the first one is exposed by the scholar Williams, who emphasises the subversion of a traditional passing paradigm. Whether it was expected that would be the dark child to be sent away, Oyeyemi inverts the situation and makes the white-looking child leave.⁸⁴ The second consideration is observed by the scholar Bragg, who underlines the racial identification of the author. In her view, Oyeyemi with her use of the passing narrative and making Boy take this difficult decision seems to express a "conscious rejection of whiteness and [a] positive identification with blackness"⁸⁵, and her roots.

Hereafter, Aunt Clara becomes a crucial character. She is the visibly black sister of Arturo, whose look was the cause for her estrangement from the family. Her story is

⁸³ Oyeyemi, pp. 132-133.

⁸⁴ Williams, p. 188.

⁸⁵ Bragg, p. 127.

a starting point for examining black agency and self-identification. From the epistolary exchanges between Bird and Snow in the second part of the novel, Snow will recount the experiences of Aunt Clara and Uncle John as leader members of their hometown movement, that of the Civil Rights movement.⁸⁶ According to Bragg, this fact is only alluded in the novel, but it serves to clarify what Snow expresses, namely her strong identification with her relatives' sensibility and background: "We're friendly toward strangers because of a general belief (I don't know where it comes from) that we're born strangers and that the memory of how that feels never really leaves us".⁸⁷ Snow seems to give importance to a shared experience and a shared memory, therefore giving space to a possible connection despite the external difference between the two, Aunt Clara is visibly black while Snow has a white appearance.⁸⁸

The passing narrative, thus, functions as a way for Oyeyemi to show signs of a not-too-distant connection with the African continent. She is able indeed to present both the European context with the re-telling of a fairy tale and the African one with the representation of the African American community and concerns.

Boy, Bird, Snow is a multi-layered and multivocal novel which exposes multiple themes and subgenres. The aspects analysed in this thesis are only a small part of the aspects present in the novel, but they are exemplary to illustrate the complexity and the versatility of Helen Oyeyemi's writing. Her work shows how intricate the relationship is between diasporic and nation-based forms of writing, between Nigeria and the Black Atlantic: it also confirms that literature from Africa is now claiming the world as its province.

⁸⁶ The Civil Rights Movement was a nonviolent social movement and campaign from 1954 to 1968 in the United States to abolish legalized racial segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement throughout the United States. Source: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_rights_movement#:~:text=The%20civil%20rights%20movement%20was,disenfranchisement%20throughout%20the%20United%20States.

⁸⁷ Oyeyemi, pp. 218-219.

⁸⁸ Bragg, pp. 127-128.

3.5. *My Sister, the Serial Killer*: a thriller

My Sister, the Serial Killer is Oyinkan Braithwaite's debut novel. It was published in 2018 and it soon gained wide acclaim and success. In 2019 she was awarded multiple prizes, such as the 2019 *LA Times Award* for Best Crime Thriller, the 2019 *Morning News Tournament of Books*, the 2019 *Amazon Publishing Reader's Award* for Best Debut Novel, and the 2019 *Anthony Award* for Best First Novel. Moreover, it was shortlisted for the *Women's Prize for Fiction 2019* and the *British Book Awards 2020*. Oyinkan Braithwaite's career as a writer, however, did not start with the publication of her novel. She entered the literary world as a graduate of Creative Writing and Law from Kingston University and soon after she worked as an assistant editor at a Nigerian Publishing House. Since this moment, she has been freelancing as a writer and graphic designer. Before publishing her debut novel, she also published short stories in anthologies.⁸⁹

As her colleague Oyeyemi, Braithwaite was born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1988 and then moved to London, where she attended primary school. Contrary to Oyeyemi, however, she spent her childhood in both Nigeria and the UK, and still today she keeps moving from one country to the other. She in fact returned to Lagos in 2001 when her little brother was born, and finally she moved back once more in 2012 to work as an assistant editor.

The tie with her hometown is an aspect that often create some expectations in the reader, especially in the Nigerian reader. Having in mind the Nigerian literary tradition, one might expect to find in her writing a strict bond with the nation and its history. However, her incessant back-and-forth relocation between Lagos and London made it impossible for her to closely witness the historical past of her hometown, and therefore, to represent this past in her writing. Often she has been asked whether she is conscious that her writing goes beyond the boundaries of what people consider 'typical' African literature, but she does not always seem to fear the comparisons that could be made between the Nigerian literary tradition and her writing. In an interview with *The Guardian*, she brings the attention to the fact that she does not have the knowledge of her hometown past and for this reason she affirms:

⁸⁹ Oyinkan Braithwaite's official website. Available at: www.oyinkanbraithwaite.com/about/ [Accessed 20 May 2023].

“I can’t give you what I don’t have,” she says. The idea that writers can represent some universal Nigerian experience is a chimera, when a universal Nigerian experience simply doesn’t exist, she explains. “We have a wide divide between classes and we have a wide divide between cultures because we’re from different tribes, we have different religions. You don’t have to walk very far to see someone who has a really different life from you.” [...] “I wouldn’t want to write a novel and people feel that I’m speaking to a Nigerian experience – I’m speaking to my experience, to the things I’m interested in, and that’s all I can do.”⁹⁰

The fact that Braithwaite willingly decides not to depict the Nigerian historical past and that every person has their own cultural and, therefore, literary background is mentioned by the author in another interview, where she states:

I just write what I like, and I'm not limited by what has been written before in Nigeria. I always knew that my future wouldn't necessarily be like my predecessors. I come from a different literary background in terms of the books I'm drawn to and the things that I read, so I was never going to write like that and I didn't have to make a conscious effort not to write like that.⁹¹

Placing herself in a diverse literary position from that of her predecessors, Braithwaite is able to open the doors of a fascinating new world, that of the crime thriller fiction.

3.5.1. The novel in a nutshell

My Sister, the Serial Killer recounts the story of two sisters, bond in an indissoluble relationship. Beyond their blood tie, they also share a complicated and dangerous secret. Korede, the oldest sister who works as a nurse in a hospital in Lagos, feels the necessity to endlessly help her younger sister, Ayoola, who serially murders the men she dates, but when her sister meets Tade, the man Korede is secretly in love with, she struggles between the support for her family and the need to save Tade from what Ayoola could do to him. The unique bond between the two sisters is something that the writer retrieved from her personal life. As she affirms, she has two younger

⁹⁰ R. Lea, “Interview: Oyinkan Braithwaite’s serial-killer thriller: would you help your murderer sister?”, *The Guardian*, 2019. Available at: www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/15/oyinkan-braithwaite-thriller-nigerian-author-comic-debut-novel-my-sister-the-serial-killer [Accessed 20 May 2023].

⁹¹ D. Durosomo, “Interview: Oyinkan Braithwaite's 'My Sister the Serial Killer' Is the Lagos-Set Novel Rocking the Crime Thriller Genre”, *OkayAfrica*, 2019. Available at: www.okayafrika.com/oyinkan-braithwaites-my-sister-the-serial-killer-is-rocking-the-crime-thriller-genre/ [Accessed 20 May 2023].

sisters with whom she spends every moment of her life: “[s]ometimes we hate each other. Sometimes we are really not speaking, but I’ve noticed that when push comes to shove we can also band together quite tightly. You know that, whatever happens, that person will be there for you.”⁹² The same seems to happen to the two female protagonists of the novel, who go through life together despite what they experience.

The setting of the novel, Lagos, Nigeria, was meticulously chosen by the author because of the crime and corruption aspects that really exist in her country. Having a woman that serially gets away with murder could happen in Nigeria, as the author suggests in an interview for the website *CrimeReads*: “there is so much corruption that goes on in every strata of society in Lagos and that is the perfect environment for all sorts of good bad incidents to unfold.”⁹³ So, the difficulties in discovering crimes and incidents in Nigeria led Braithwaite to choose her hometown as the ideal location for her debut novel.

With regards to the structure of the novel, it is composed of seventy-six brief chapters which are entitled with only a word that characterises every single part. The way the chapters were written reflects the fact that Braithwaite used to write poetry. Thus, as she states in an interview with Kendra Winchester and Autumn Privett in their podcast *Reading Women* in 2019, writing poetry taught her brevity. This then affected her prose and her novel, where in fact every chapter is very short. She also explains that every chapter was written as a separate word document and that this method implicates that sometimes the novel presents some gaps that readers must fill on their own. According to the writer, in fact, it is not mandatory that the author should write everything about her characters, environments and events, it is interesting that the reader is involved not only in the act of reading but also in the act of imagining and creating.⁹⁴

Finally, the main themes present in the novel are sisterhood, violence, beauty and patriarchy. Braithwaite stresses the idea that initially the only issues in her mind were

⁹² Lea.

⁹³ M. Odintz, “Interview: Oyinkan Braithwaite has two sisters, neither of whom is a serial killer”, *CrimeReads*, 2019. Available at: www.crimereads.com/oyinkan-braithwaite-has-two-sisters-neither-of-whom-is-a-serial-killer/ [Accessed 20 May 2023].

⁹⁴ K. Winchester, A. Privett, “Interview with Oyinkan Braithwaite”, *Reading Women*, 2019. Available at: www.readingwomenpodcast.com/blog/interview-with-oyinkan-braithwaite [Accessed 20 May 2023].

that of beauty and its engagement in society and that of the bond between two women.⁹⁵ This second aspect is extremely important to the author, who wanted to express how gigantic a love could exist between two sisters, and how even horrific experiences cannot demolish the tie between them. The genre of the thriller perfectly matches these themes, creating, among other things, the exact situations to impede the sisters' relationship.

3.5.2. The world of thriller fiction

The thriller genre, defined as a “tense, exciting, and sometimes sensational type of novel or play or film [where] the action is swift and the suspense continuous”,⁹⁶ has gained greater success over the years even in African literature. This genre, associated with other types of fiction such as the mystery, detective and crime fictions, has also gained increasing attention by critics, who linked these narratives to the function of promoting social criticism.⁹⁷ Not surprisingly, a glimpse of social criticism is also visible in *My Sister, the Serial Killer* where the author, choosing a Nigerian setting, seems to unveil and challenge the social and cultural structures of her hometown.

In most parts of the world, the thriller subgenre has become popular among women writers, developing a true feminist crime fiction. Contrary to their male counterparts, female writers opened the boundaries of the genre, redefining its textual and cultural aspects, challenging gender roles and dealing with social and political issues in their interest. As Carla Rodríguez González and Esther Álvarez López argue, in contemporary times “in spite of the highly masculinized associations of the mystery genre, the work of influential female writers has always been an essential part of the tradition, starting with the pioneering contributions of Agatha Christie”⁹⁸ and many others. So, not only in Africa, but also in the rest of the world, women writers have always found their place in an initially male genre.

⁹⁵ Winchester, Privett.

⁹⁶ Ezenwa-Ohaeto, “Critical Realism And The Thriller Tradition In Nigerian Fiction: Williams, Nwankwo And Uzoatu”, *Obsidian II*, 10:1/2 (1995), pp. 205-206.

⁹⁷ C. R. Gonzalez, E. A. Lopez, “Strangers and Trespassers in Contemporary Women’s Crime Fiction (2000-2020)”, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 58:1 (2022), p. 3.

⁹⁸ Rodriguez, Lopez, p. 8.

Braithwaite's novel seems to match perfectly the aims established by female crime fiction. In fact, in the narrative it is possible to detect the main characteristics that shape this genre: the challenge of gender roles, social criticism and strangeness. Moreover, the depiction of a woman as a serial killer in *My Sister, the Serial Killer* overcomes the limits of the genre, which usually portrayed women only as helpless victims, villain's girlfriends or as the desired *femme fatale*. Braithwaite, on the contrary, giving the killer role to a woman gives light to a fascinating antiheroine. In Eleonore Gardner's view, the antiheroine is a character whose strangeness is expressed by her "problematic embodiment of the violence [she has] internalized through harmful experiences, such as body monitoring, patriarchal sexuality, psychological manipulation, and coercive control, but also on [her] resorting to violence, which [she] self-inflict[s] on [her] bod[y] as well as against those who have wronged [her]."⁹⁹ Ayoola seems to embody this strangeness which, as it will be shown, could be in fact related to the patriarchal conditions in which she had to spend her childhood and to the violence that she had to experience.

Notwithstanding the intriguing characteristics that shape the novel and made it a great success, the display of a female serial killer and the depiction of killing in general, however, is not said to be so warmly welcomed in Nigeria as one might hope. In an interview with Damola Durosomo for *OkayAfrica* in 2019, Oyinkan Braithwaite discusses this issue with the interviewer, who argues that talking about killing in Nigeria, a profound religious place, could be even a taboo. Braithwaite promptly responds stating that in her first intentions her novel was not a crime thriller, even though it possesses some elements of the genre. She, on the contrary, just wanted to write what she had in mind without giving too much concern to what people might think.¹⁰⁰

The detachment from the crime thriller genre may be noted in the tone the author employs. The novel does not present an immersive dark atmosphere as one might expect from a thriller. Braithwaite in fact did not want to immerse herself and her

⁹⁹ E. Gardner, "'To Start: I Should Never Have Been Born': The Antiheroine as Stranger in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*", *Papers on Language and Literature*, 58:1 (2022), pp. 45-69; quoted by Rodriguez, Lopez, p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Durosomo.

characters in the darkness throughout the whole story, she just wanted her characters to do things and then move on.¹⁰¹

3.5.3. Women could be anything they want, even killers

The protagonists of *My Sister, the Serial Killer* are two strong, powerful, yet different women. Braithwaite has always been interested in women, especially in women having their own agency. She strongly believes that women can do anything and can be anything they want, even killers, as the novel demonstrates. As the writer affirms in different interviews, she has always been attracted to strong women. This is noticeable in all her female characters, who in fact are characters who own themselves and who can be powerful people even in the worst situation ever.¹⁰²

Korede and Ayoola, the two female characters of the novel, are the ideal representation of what their creator's beliefs and thoughts are. Korede, the older sister, is a strong and independent character. She represents what has been affirmed previously about female characters in contemporary women's writing: women are depicted as self-reliable, determined and career-oriented characters. Korede, in fact, is a nurse, she is trying to build her future and she does not want to be only considered in her status as a woman; on the contrary, she is a human being with intelligence and agency. Moreover, she is not afraid to express her opinions, even when she is talking to her little sister:

I turn on my sister. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"What?"

"Do you not realize the gravity of what you have done? Are you enjoying this?" I grab a tissue and hand it to her, then take some for myself.

Her eyes go dark and she begins to twirl her dreadlocks.

"These days, you look at me like I'm a monster." Her voice is so low, I can barely hear her.

"I don't think you're—" ¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Lea.

¹⁰² H. Weiss, "Oyinkan Braithwaite's Lethal Feminine Fiction", *Interview Magazine*, 2018. Available at: www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/oyinkan-braithwaites-lethal-feminine-fiction# [Accessed 21 May 2023]; Durosomo; Lea.

¹⁰³ O. Braithwaite, *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, London, Atlantic Books, 2018, p. 23.

Her strong and active character is nevertheless opposed to her love for Ayoola. She feels in fact the need to protect her little sister, who is portrayed as the opposite of Korede. Ayoola seems a more naïve and innocent character who has no fear and has no consciousness of the consequences of her actions. In many parts of the novel, she is depicted as a selfish and reckless character.¹⁰⁴ For instance, soon after the murder of one of her boyfriends she is not cautious on her behaviour; on the contrary she does not seem to care of what happens and just thinks of posting a picture of her mother on Instagram. Even in this situation, Korede is ready to scold her:

“Let me take a picture of you?” Ayoola asks, pulling out her phone.

Mum strikes what seems like a hundred poses, with Ayoola directing them, and then they scroll through their handiwork on the screen and select the picture that satisfies them—it is one of my mum in profile with her hand on her hip and her head thrown back in laughter. It is a nice picture. Ayoola busies herself on the phone, chewing on her lip.

“What are you doing?”

“Posting it on Instagram.”

“Are you nuts? Or have you forgotten your previous post?”¹⁰⁵

What really characterises Ayoola is beauty. Beauty is the aspect from which Ayoola derives her confidence and power. Because of her appearance she is able to get away with murder. Ayoola is aware of this, thus she uses her beauty as a weapon to let people think that she would never commit such crimes. Beauty as related to social expectations is therefore a significant theme in the novel. What society expects is a man to be a serial killer, but Braithwaite is cunning to depict a woman as such. In addition, the fact that she is a beautiful woman subverts even more the expectations. As she explains in the interview with Autumn Privett and Kendra Winchester in 2019, in literature there is the topos that beauty and goodness are synonymous, while if a woman is bad, she must also be ugly. So, with her novel she wanted to illustrate that people are diverse and that not necessarily does beauty mean goodness.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ S. Kuban, *Patriarchy, Feminism and Representation of Women in Oyinkan Braithwaite's My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Prague, Charles University, 2022, pp. 43-44.

¹⁰⁵ Braithwaite, p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ Winchester, Privett.

Ayoola is not the only one conscious of her beauty and the power of it, also Korede realises her power: “It’s because she is beautiful, you know. That’s all it is. They don’t really care about the rest of it. She gets a pass at life.”¹⁰⁷

Besides, beauty and appearance are also connected to the objectification of women. Women as objects is in fact a crucial theme in the novel. It is showcased through the recurrent descriptions of Ayoola’s beautiful appearance, which seems to be the only aspect that matters in a woman: “Her leg is dangling off one end, her arm dangling off the other. Hers is the body of a music video vixen, a scarlet woman, a succubus. It belies her angelic face.”¹⁰⁸, or again “Her miniature eyes take in her wide nose and fat lips, too big for her thin oval face. The red lipstick she has painted on further accentuates the size of her mouth.”¹⁰⁹. Her appearance seems to be also the only aspect that makes men desire her, as Femi’s poem, one of the murdered boys, seems to suggest:

*I dare you to find a flaw
in her beauty;
or to bring forth a woman
who can stand beside
her without wilting.*¹¹⁰

Femi is not the only one captured by Ayoola’s beauty. Also Tade, Korede’s co-worker, will succumb to her appearance. Even though Korede, who is secretly in love with him, keeps defending him, thinking that he’s different from the others, eventually he will appear no different from the past Ayoola’s boyfriends. This is evident when Tade asks Korede if she likes the ring that he is going to give her sister. Korede, surprised, asks him what he really likes about her: ““Everything.” “But if you had to be specific.” “Well...she is...she is really special.” “Okay...but what makes her special?” “She is just so...I mean, she is beautiful and perfect. I’ve never wanted to be with someone this much.””¹¹¹ Tade seems not to find a credible answer, he is only able to mention her beauty. So, whether Tade could be the only reasonable man in the

¹⁰⁷ Braithwaite, p. 124.

¹⁰⁸ Braithwaite, p. 19.

¹⁰⁹ Braithwaite, p. 24.

¹¹⁰ Braithwaite, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Braithwaite, p. 164.

novel, he also demonstrates his patriarchal mentality considering women only as sexual objects. In the interview with Molly Odintz for *CrimeReads* in 2019, the interviewer argues that the novel does not portray any good man. However, Braithwaite seems to give a not-too-direct answer, affirming on the contrary that not only men are bad, but also all the female characters of the novel have a bad side. According to her, “there will always be bad men, there will always be bad people. Literature, movies etc can go a long way to evolving the general mindset, but there will always be those who are resistant to change.”¹¹²

3.5.4. Sisters beyond family

The family bonding and, most of all, sisterhood are crucial traits in the novel. The very choice to depict two sisters as main characters gives to the story a tie that cannot be easily untied. Braithwaite, in fact, states that initially she was thinking about two friends, but this would not have justified why Korede goes so far for Ayoola. In her view, this must have been beyond friendship, and this is when she opted for sisterhood.¹¹³ Family and sisterhood are also important elements of her personal life, maybe this is why the writer was that affectioned to her character’s bond. Moreover, as she explains,

I’m interested in the dynamic between men and women, and family is something that has come up in my writing before. Especially in Nigeria where it’s more than just your nuclear family, you have your extended family to deal with, you have all the expectations forced on you—all the responsibilities thrust on you in this kind of community.¹¹⁴

Family bonding, thus, is something related to her own culture and society. It is something that is strictly intertwined with responsibilities and expectations. This is evident in the novel, where Korede keeps helping and feels the necessity to be responsible for her little sister.

However, if this could be considered the positive side of the family bonding, there is also a negative side that is exhibited throughout the story, namely the patriarchal

¹¹² Odintz.

¹¹³ Winchester, Privett.

¹¹⁴ Durosomo.

structure present in the protagonists' family. The novel displays the problematic relationship between the two female characters and their father. The father symbolises the law of the family, the person to whom all the family members must obey: "We didn't call him Daddy. We never had. He was not a daddy, at least not in the way the word "daddy" denotes. One could hardly consider him a father. He was the law in our home."¹¹⁵ The complicated relationship with their father suggested also by the difficulty to consider him a true father is further challenged by the violence and oppression that the two sisters had to face as children. The story portrays the figure of the father as an abusive person, able to inflict violence whenever not only his daughters, but also his wife will not obey to his rules:

"Ayoola, come here." She looked up, saw the cane and trembled. Mother trembled. I trembled. "Are you deaf? I said come here!" [...]

"Please, sir, please," I whispered. I was already crying. "Please."

"Ayoola." She stepped forward. She had started crying too. "Strip."

She removed her dress, button by button. She did not hurry, she fumbled, she cried. But he was patient. [...]

"I am paying all that money for you to be a prostitute?! Answer me na!" [...]

"You think you are all that, abi? I will teach you who is all that!" He struck her again. This time, the cane grazed me, too. I sucked in my breath.

"You think this boy cares about you? He just wants what is between your legs. And when he is done he will move on." Pain has a way of sharpening your senses. I can still hear his heavy breathing. He was not a fit man. He quickly tired during a beating, but he had a strong will and a stronger desire to instill discipline. I can still remember the smell of our fear—acidic, metallic, sharper even than the smell of vomit.¹¹⁶

In this passage, one might see what Shalini Nadaswaran argues in her essay *Rethinking Family Relationships in Third-Generation Nigerian Women's Fiction* (2011). Even though at the time of the essay's publication, Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* was not yet written nor published, Nadaswaran already gives some coordinates about the representation of female characters and their relationship with patriarchy that could be found not only in third-generation women's writing, but also in Braithwaite's novel. As the scholar mentions, in those writings the authoritarian power of male figures is used as a weapon to manipulate female characters in order to lead them to do the desirable actions for the father. Moreover, the experience of acts of violence or mistreatment are fundamental for female

¹¹⁵ Braithwaite, p. 184.

¹¹⁶ Braithwaite, pp. 183-184.

characters to search for their self-agency and evolution.¹¹⁷ The same could be identified in the novel, where Korede and Ayoola's father uses violence as a means to bring his daughters to do what he thinks are the most desirable actions. The self-agency that Nadaswaran mentions is also showcased in the novel, nevertheless the two sisters display it in different ways. On one hand, the abusiveness that Korede experienced as a child brings her to revolt against marriage, a concept that is reiterated by her mother and her Aunt Taiwo:

“So are the two of you seeing anyone?” “Ayoola is dating a doctor!” Mum announces. “Ah, wonderful. You people are getting old o and the competition is tight. Girls are not joking. Some of them are even taking men away from their wives!” [...]

“You know, men are very fickle. Give them what they want and they will do anything for you. 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, fast fast.”

My mother nods sagely. “Very good advice.”

Of course, neither of us is listening. Ayoola has never needed help in the men department, and I know better than to take life directions from someone without a moral compass.¹¹⁸

The trauma of her childhood seems to be found in her idea that men cannot have power on her; she feels the need to be an agent and independent person. On the other hand, Ayoola seems to revolt against patriarchal power in a totally different way. As Stanislav Kuban claims in his thesis, the killings could be a way for her to revolt against what she has experienced as a child.¹¹⁹

Even though they have distinct ways to manage trauma, they both are trying to overcome the problematic relationship with their father. Trauma, in this sense, is the basis of the construction of an even greater form of bond between Korede and Ayoola. In fact, Braithwaite states that their relationship goes even beyond sisterhood: “when people go through something together, even if it's not something really horrific, but something trying or whatever, it gives you something that the rest of the world isn't privy to. And so their shared trauma has given them another stage of bonding”.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Nadaswaran, p. 23.

¹¹⁸ Braithwaite, pp. 81-82.

¹¹⁹ Kuban, p. 45.

¹²⁰ Winchester, Privett.

Trauma, thus, could be considered the motif according to which Korede feels the duty and the responsibility to protect her sister despite her behaviours and actions.

My Sister, the Serial Killer proves to be a novel where violence and love are skilfully intertwined in order to represent the difficulties and problems of a contemporary Nigerian family.

In conclusion, both contemporary novels, *Boy, Snow, Bird* and *My Sister, the Serial Killer* are representatives of the multiple worlds that contemporary Nigerian women's writing are portraying nowadays. The fact that this thesis focuses its attention just on a little part of the multitude of themes and aspects that these novels include indicates the complexities and versatilities that women writers are trying to produce in this period of time, without losing trace with their predecessors and their origins.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to trace a path along Nigerian women's literature, observing the development and changes that it had to face. The main objects of enquiry throughout the whole dissertation were the feminine perspective, how female characters are represented, and the main interests of Nigerian women writers. Crucial to the description and analysis of this path were several critics' articles that have been examined and the four Nigerian novels which characterise the different phases of Nigerian women's literature: Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018). Thanks to them, it was possible to trace a line that departs from the emergence of Nigerian female writing and arrives to the contemporary one, underlining both changes and similarities that these works showcase. The investigation tried also to inspect the different historical periods in which each novel was written and published, giving to the study a second layer of analysis, that of the progression of Nigerian history.

In Nigeria, history and literature seem to have been identified as two firmly connected fields. For this reason, the first chapter was fundamental to delineate the passage from the main social and cultural aspects of the precolonial period in Nigeria and in other parts of West Africa to the colonial adaptation and changes. Vital was the meticulous study provided by the sociologist and gender scholar Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, who through a linguistic approach explored a specific Nigerian society, the Yorùbá society, and highlighted how the Yorùbá language and the conception of Yorùbá societies were not based on a gender system similar to the Western one. The structure of precolonial West African societies, together with the exploration of precolonial practices and precolonial roles of women in different spheres of society wanted to demonstrate that the present West African societies are a product of the reshaping and mutation implemented by the colonial power. Thereafter, from 1960 and with the end of the colonial experience, Nigeria had in fact to re-start its history as an independent state. The passage from the colonial rules and control to a new-born status of independence has proved to be far from immediate. Nigeria had to face the multiple changes that British occupation brought, which have among other things influenced the mentality of Nigerian people. One transformation among all was the

passage from orality to literacy and writing. From precolonial times, Nigeria was characterised of an oral culture where myths, proverbs and folktales were used as a teaching method and passed from generation to generation. Already in those times, women had a fundamental role as custodians of traditions, which gives a hint about the importance that will have for female writing in the following decades. However, the rise of Nigerian women's writing had to encounter several obstacles. From the 1950s and 1960s, when Nigerian literature emerged as a product of Nigerian educated people, it was dominated by male writers who had the access to education and therefore had the privilege to gain success. Nigerian women writers only emerged after the leading appearance of Flora Nwapa, the first Nigerian female novelist to publish a work in English. Her position in Nigerian women's literature seems to represent an example for the following Nigerian female authors who entered the literary scene. Her novel, *Efuru* (1966), also seems to highlight the atmosphere and feelings that the writer wanted to express. Precisely, the representation of Nigerian women and their roles in society gave a clear picture of their actual position in Nigerian history. Already from this novel analysis, the study has attempted to manifest the connection between women's literature and Nigerian history. The association, then, has tried to be outlined also with the second novel examined, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). The analysis has endeavoured to create a passage from Nwapa's novel, describing the similarities and discrepancies between the two and identifying how Emecheta represented her female characters and how she placed them in her historical and cultural period. Proceeding over the years, the connection between history and literature seems to be found also in the most recent Nigerian novels. In particular, the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 and the long period of military dictatorships influenced contemporary Nigerian literature, which, however, has revealed to be more complex and multifaceted than previous writings. One aspect that can confirm this statement is the research of contemporary writers in diverse genres and styles. Contemporary Nigerian female writers are exemplary in this. They work in different types of narratives, including at the same time different themes and perspectives. Helen Oyeyemi and Oyinkan Braithwaite's novels have tried to expose two different worlds; Oyeyemi with a fairy tale world, while Braithwaite with a thriller world. Moreover, another aspect that showcase the distance

from previous Nigerian writings is the diasporic nature of contemporary ones. The study has in fact underlined an increasingly frequent dislocation of several Nigerian authors outside Nigeria, which is an event that can lead either to a wider awareness of Nigerian literature in the rest of the world, or to a gradual disappearance of 'Nigerian' writers. Despite the dissimilarities of contemporary Nigerian female writing from previous writings, contemporary women writers still embody the feminine perspective that can be found in previous novels, observing in this way a common thread typical of the whole Nigerian female literary production. Having said that, one can suggest that Nigerian literature could be difficult to erase completely since, still nowadays, many Nigerian writers blend together their history and their cultures with European's ones, making their homes, cultures and histories living forever.

In conclusion, this study has attempted to put into writing Nigerian women's voices and spread their views, their thoughts and their feelings. With this aim, the hope was to raise awareness about some Nigerian female voices and to increase interest in this literature.

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SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

Per la mia tesi di laurea magistrale ho deciso di compiere un viaggio attraverso la letteratura nigeriana femminile, analizzando la sua nascita, la sua evoluzione e i suoi cambiamenti nel tempo. La scelta dell'argomento deriva principalmente dall'interesse che questa letteratura ha suscitato in me, ma soprattutto dalla volontà di poter dare voce alle donne e scrittrici nigeriane che molto spesso potrebbero non essere conosciute in Italia e nel resto d'Europa.

Sebbene la letteratura nigeriana, e in particolar modo quella femminile, potrebbero non essere così conosciute nel mondo occidentale, offrono tuttavia un gran numero di opere che meritano di essere lette e ricordate. Per quanto riguarda in particolare la scrittura femminile nigeriana, negli ultimi anni la sua produzione è aumentata raggiungendo un grande successo dopo un lungo viaggio di esclusione e limitazione dalla tradizione letteraria nigeriana. Oggi, infatti, le scrittrici nigeriane, sebbene dislocate in tutto il mondo, stanno diffondendo le loro voci, quelle della loro gente e delle loro città d'origine, seguendo, da un lato, i passi di chi è venuto prima di loro e, dall'altro lato, distanziandosi da questi con la creazione di mondi e visioni diverse.

Per cui, la presente tesi ha lo scopo di ripercorrere i passi delle scrittrici nigeriane in modo tale da esaminare le diverse fasi vissute e i molteplici ostacoli che hanno dovuto superare. Il viaggio che si vuole intraprendere parte dalla fine dell'esperienza coloniale e la nascita della Nigeria come stato indipendente nel 1960 e arriva fino ai giorni nostri. Il progetto si è svolto, non solo attraverso la raccolta di molteplici articoli e studi svolti da critici letterari che hanno analizzato la scrittura femminile nigeriana negli anni, ma anche attraverso la lettura dettagliata e l'analisi di quattro romanzi che vogliono essere esemplificativi dell'evoluzione e dei cambiamenti che questa letteratura ha incontrato con il passare dei decenni: *Efuru* (1966) di Flora Nwapa, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) di Buchi Emecheta, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) di Helen Oyeyemi e *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) di Oyinkan Braithwaite. Questi quattro romanzi rappresentano il movimento negli anni della letteratura femminile nigeriana a partire dagli anni '60 del ventesimo secolo fino ai giorni contemporanei.

Tuttavia, il processo di affermazione ed evoluzione della letteratura femminile nigeriana non può essere dissociato dalla produzione generale della letteratura nigeriana, né tantomeno dalla storia e cultura del popolo nigeriano. Per questo motivo,

l'intera tesi si è anche preposta di svolgere un'accurata analisi dell'evoluzione storica nigeriana, spesso toccata da eventi catastrofici, e della produzione letteraria nigeriana alla quale la scrittura femminile appartiene.

La produzione letteraria nigeriana fin dai suoi esordi è strettamente legata alla storia del paese in cui nasce. L'evento principale che ha dato vita alla stessa è il colonialismo. Tuttavia, ancora prima dell'occupazione britannica in suolo nigeriano e in altre parti dell'Africa occidentale, esistevano già delle forme di espressione e condivisione ben ancorate alla tradizione di ogni popolo. Il periodo precoloniale, infatti, è fondamentale per comprendere la graduale trasformazione che le società dell'Africa occidentale hanno dovuto subire non solo nel campo culturale ma anche in tutte le altre sfere della società. In particolar modo, è cruciale comprendere come la posizione delle donne nigeriane, e non solo, è totalmente mutata a causa delle nuove leggi importate a seguito del colonialismo. A parte la nascita e la trasformazione del sistema di conoscenza e interpretazione nigeriano, anche le sfere che riguardano l'organizzazione sociale, la politica, l'economia e la religione sono state influenzate dall'esperienza coloniale. Un dato essenziale fornitoci dalla sociologa e studiosa di genere nigeriana Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) ci fa capire come la nostra comprensione riguardo alcune società africane sia totalmente basata su costrutti occidentali. In altre parole, attraverso un approccio linguistico sulla società Yorùbá, in Nigeria, la studiosa osserva come il sistema di genere sia un discorso che deriva dall'Occidente e che non può essere legato alle società africane. Già a partire dalla lingua Yorùbá, la quale si presenta come neutra per quanto riguarda il discorso di genere, si può intuire la rappresentazione sbagliata che viene data alle società africane. Ovvero, se nel mondo occidentale i termini 'uomo' e 'donna' sono legati a determinate posizioni sociali e costruiscono delle gerarchie dove l'uomo è considerato superiore alla donna, la quale quindi si trova in una posizione di inferiorità sociale, nel mondo Yorùbá, in questo caso, questo sistema non sussiste, in quanto l'organizzazione sociale e la gerarchia vengono delineati a seconda di un sistema basato sull'anzianità. Per cui, donne e uomini Yoruba non si trovano in posizioni binarie, ma possono entrambi avere ruoli di potere e controllo a seconda della loro età. A partire dall'accurata analisi di Oyěwùmí si può notare come in epoca precoloniale le donne Yorùbá e non solo

ricoprivano alte posizioni sia in ambito politico, che in ambito economico, che in ambito religioso. In ambito politico, molte donne potevano avere importanti ruoli sia all'interno del governo, sia addirittura come reggenti. In ambito economico, invece, le donne erano fondamentali nel mercato e nel commercio di beni. Infine, nell'ambito religioso svolgevano funzioni fondamentali nelle pratiche e attività di questa sfera, ma esistevano anche divinità femminili che assicuravano prosperità e salute a molte altre donne. Tutte queste posizioni, tuttavia, vengono ribaltate a causa dell'arrivo dell'occupazione britannica alla fine del diciannovesimo secolo e portano alla quasi totale esclusione delle donne da ogni tipo di posizione di controllo e potere. Con l'inizio del colonialismo, infatti, le società dell'Africa occidentale subiscono una graduale mutazione in tutti gli ambiti e sono costrette a adottare i sistemi di amministrazione, le leggi, e tutti i nuovi valori importati dal potere britannico. Tra queste adozioni, oltre all'alterazione dei ruoli sociali e all'introduzione del sistema di genere, vi sono l'introduzione del Cristianesimo e dell'istruzione tipica occidentale. Sia il Cristianesimo che il sistema di istruzione occidentale sono cruciali per la nascita della scrittura nigeriana. Infatti, se prima del colonialismo il sistema di conoscenza e interpretazione era basato essenzialmente su una cultura orale, dove miti, leggende, storie popolari e proverbi si passavano a voce di generazione in generazione, con l'introduzione di un nuovo sistema di conoscenza l'oralità viene sostituita dalla scrittura.

All'inizio, ovvero nella seconda parte del diciannovesimo secolo e all'inizio del ventesimo secolo, la scrittura in Nigeria veniva prodotta principalmente dalle persone britanniche che vivevano in quei luoghi. Questa scrittura però esprimeva i primi rischi, ovvero che quello che veniva prodotto essendo filtrato da occhi occidentali trasmetteva una rappresentazione errata della Nigeria, e della storia e delle culture del suo popolo. In seguito, intorno alla fine del ventesimo secolo, grazie all'influenza della cristianizzazione e dei metodi educativi occidentali, i nativi iniziarono a produrre la propria letteratura per sovvertire la scrittura fuorviante dei britannici, nota anche come letteratura colonialista. La scrittura locale era il prodotto di scrittori nigeriani istruiti che avevano lo scopo di riscrivere la loro propria storia, di re-immaginare il loro mondo, ristabilire le loro culture e abitudini e ridare voce alla loro gente. La letteratura prodotta in questo periodo e tutte le opere pubblicate dopo la fine

del colonialismo, sono denominate da studiosi e critici con il termine 'letterature post-coloniali'. Poiché quanto prodotto è nato per sovvertire la mentalità europea fissata nella letteratura colonialista, gli studiosi Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths e Helen Tiffin nel loro testo *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) teorizzano il concetto del 'writing back' e lo considerano il metodo principale utilizzato dagli scrittori nigeriani per ricreare la loro letteratura e ridare potere e controllo alla vita della loro gente. Da questo momento, con la fine dell'esperienza coloniale, si sviluppa la produzione letteraria nigeriana. Ciononostante, essa ha anche prodotto alcune conseguenze negative legate principalmente alla questione di genere. Visto che la scrittura post-coloniale è nata da persone istruite nigeriane e africane, è anche vero che sia stata principalmente prodotta da scrittori maschi a causa del loro accesso privilegiato all'istruzione. La dominazione di scrittori uomini non era visibile solo nella produzione letteraria, ma anche nella critica letteraria. La loro predominanza ha causato la produzione di un ritratto fuorviante di personaggi maschili e femminili, ovvero il ritratto di donne in ruoli marginali e di uomini, al contrario, in ruoli centrali.

Qui, quindi, inizia l'esclusione e limitazione delle donne dalla tradizione letteraria nigeriana non solo come scrittrici, ma anche come personaggi femminili. L'ascesa del femminismo e del 'womanism' tipicamente africano nella critica letteraria africana, tuttavia, hanno aiutato lo sviluppo della scrittura femminile nigeriana. Grazie alle loro critiche sulla rappresentazione ingannevole di personaggi femminili nella letteratura maschile, le scrittrici hanno trovato il potere e la forza di scrivere le proprie versioni. A partire dagli anni '60 del '900, infatti, molte scrittrici entrarono nello scenario letterario offrendo una diversa rappresentazione delle donne africane. Queste scrittrici sono emerse e hanno trovato il loro posto nella tradizione letteraria nigeriana con l'obiettivo di ridare potere, voce e determinazione alle donne. Le rappresentazioni errate espresse dai loro colleghi uomini vengono quindi riscritte da chi era il vero protagonista delle esperienze e storie descritte, ovvero da quelle donne che avevano invece il dovere e la responsabilità di parlare della propria storia. Le autrici, quindi, hanno ridato un posto nella storia a tutte quelle donne che l'avevano perso per colpa di una rappresentazione ingannevole creata degli autori maschili e hanno stabilito una nuova prospettiva femminile che ha dato valore ai sentimenti, ai pensieri e alle preoccupazioni delle donne. La prima scrittrice donna che può essere considerata

‘leader’ di questo processo di autoaffermazione è Flora Nwapa. Lei è infatti la prima scrittrice nigeriana a scrivere e pubblicare un romanzo in inglese. Il romanzo qui menzionato è *Efuru*, pubblicato nel 1966. Il romanzo racconta la storia di una giovane donna, Efuru, che deve costruire il suo futuro nella città di Ugwuta, in Nigeria, durante un periodo di cambiamento socioculturale dovuto al potere coloniale. Il romanzo è ambientato tra la fine degli anni Quaranta e l'inizio degli anni Cinquanta e ritrae tutte le difficoltà che una donna deve affrontare a causa sia del momento storico che delle aspettative sociali a cui deve rispondere. Lo scopo principale dell'autrice, Flora Nwapa, era quello di rappresentare una donna forte e indipendente alla ricerca di ottenere una propria autoaffermazione, ma era anche quello di mostrare le tradizioni e i costumi della sua città natale, Ugwuta, i quali rispecchiano la vita del periodo precoloniale.

Seguendo la guida di Flora Nwapa, molte altre scrittrici entrarono nello scenario letterario nigeriano. Una tra tutte è Buchi Emecheta, la quale come il suo predecessore Nwapa, ha cercato di sovvertire la rappresentazione fuorviante dei personaggi femminili trasmessi dalla scrittura maschile. Il suo quinto romanzo, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) sembra condividere molti aspetti con *Efuru*. Partendo dalla prospettiva femminile di entrambi i romanzi, essi condividono anche alcuni temi, come la maternità e le difficoltà che entrambe le protagoniste devono affrontare nella loro vita. Nnu Ego, la protagonista del romanzo di Emecheta, come Efuru, ha bisogno di affrontare le aspettative sociali del suo popolo che le chiede di essere una madre, una moglie e una figlia perfetta. Inoltre, il fatto che il romanzo sia ambientato nella prima parte del ventesimo secolo, un periodo segnato sia dal colonialismo che dall'imminente inizio della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, crea un'ulteriore connessione con il romanzo di Nwapa: Nnu Ego, come Efuru, sente il peso di dover affrontare le difficoltà del periodo e allo stesso tempo di rispondere alle aspettative sociali.

Queste nuove prospettive femminili nella letteratura nigeriana gettano luce verso una sorta di sviluppo ed evoluzione della scrittura, che continuerà per il resto del ventesimo secolo e l'inizio del ventunesimo secolo. Arrivando ai tempi contemporanei, si può notare come questi abbiano mostrato un aumento sempre maggiore di scrittrici che fanno parte dello scenario letterario nigeriano, le quali hanno anche aperto i confini della rappresentazione e delle atmosfere precedenti. La

letteratura nigeriana contemporanea, infatti, mostra una maggiore versatilità nei generi e nei temi dando forma a una produzione letteraria varia. Inoltre, le scrittrici nigeriane contemporanee molto spesso sono dislocate al di fuori della Nigeria, facendo in modo da un lato di non essere quasi più considerate scrittrici nigeriane, ma dall'altro di poter far conoscere la propria voce anche nel resto del mondo. I due romanzi femminili contemporanei nigeriani che sono stati analizzati, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) di Helen Oyeyemi e *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) di Oyinkan Braithwaite, sono rappresentanti della complessità e della versatilità che caratterizzano la scrittura femminile nigeriana contemporanea. Il romanzo di Oyeyemi, da un lato, incarna il mondo fiabesco e magico in cui Biancaneve e la matrigna cattiva possono trovare nuovi corpi e situazioni. Insieme al mondo fiabesco, la scrittrice è in grado di aggiungere i concetti di razza, bellezza, e di 'passing' in modo tale da aumentare i livelli di analisi. Il romanzo di Braithwaite, dall'altra parte, personifica il mondo del thriller dove due sorelle vivono con un segreto pericoloso, ovvero il fatto che una di loro due è una serial killer. Anche in questo romanzo, il concetto di bellezza è fondamentale, sebbene sia esplorato in maniera differente. Insieme ad esso, gli altri aspetti analizzati sono l'importanza della famiglia, e in particolare del legame tra sorelle, e il sistema patriarcale legato alla società nigeriana in cui la storia è ambientata. Entrambi i romanzi dimostrano, da un lato, l'interesse delle scrittrici nel rappresentare i loro interessi e pensieri seguendo l'esempio di chi è venuto prima di loro per ciò che riguarda la prospettiva femminile, dall'altro, la volontà di distanziarsi da loro con la rappresentazione di generi alternativi e mondi complessi.

A parte l'evoluzione della scrittura nigeriana femminile, un altro aspetto fondamentale ed estremamente significativo è il collegamento tra l'impegno nazionale e l'intera tradizione letteraria nigeriana. Dalla nascita dei primi scrittori nigeriani fino a quelli più recenti, la storia e le culture nigeriane erano elementi predominanti. La letteratura in generale ha sempre avuto una stretta relazione con i concetti di nazione e storia. Molti romanzi nel corso degli anni sono infatti influenzati dagli eventi che hanno segnato questa storia. Tre periodi, in particolare, hanno caratterizzato la produzione letteraria: l'esperienza coloniale, la Guerra Civile nigeriana svoltasi tra il 1967 e il 1970 e il lungo periodo di dittature militari che durò dal 1970 al 1999. Il primo, l'esperienza coloniale, ha influenzato principalmente gli scrittori emergenti

degli anni '50 e '60, i quali avevano l'obiettivo di annientare ciò che la mentalità europea ha plasmato a causa di questa esperienza. La guerra civile nigeriana, al contrario, ha influenzato gli scrittori che hanno pubblicato negli anni '70 e nella prima metà degli anni '80. Questa atmosfera e le memorie di essa hanno portato alla produzione di opere caratterizzate da una forte disillusione e una confusione riguardo il concetto di nazione. Infine, il periodo segnato dalle dittature militari ha e sta influenzando la più recente scrittura nigeriana, dove la rappresentazione di temi come quello della guerra, della violenza, del trauma, e lo sviluppo di narrazioni tipiche legate alla violenza, come la narrativa del bambino-soldato, dimostrano l'influenza dell'evento catastrofico. Tuttavia, la letteratura nigeriana contemporanea, come accennato prima, non si concentra solo su questi aspetti, ma è anche in grado di produrre diversi scenari e portare il lettore alla scoperta di nuovi mondi.

Gli stessi tre periodi storici che hanno caratterizzato la storia nigeriana hanno anche dato vita a tre precisi periodi letterari. Secondo i critici Pius Adesanmi e Chris Dunton in particolare, la letteratura nigeriana può essere stratificata in tre diverse 'generazioni' secondo due fattori: l'affinità temporale e la coerenza tematico-ideologica. Gli scrittori della prima generazione sono accumulati a livello tematico-ideologico dalla volontà di riaffermare la propria cultura e di valorizzare la nazione e, per quanto riguarda la temporalità, scrivono e pubblicano principalmente negli anni '50 e '60. Gli scrittori della seconda generazione sono invece legati all'esperienza della Guerra Civile nigeriana degli anni 1967-70, la quale tra l'altro influenza un generale clima di disillusione e confusione riguardo la nazione. Questi scrittori pubblicano principalmente negli anni '70 e nella prima metà degli anni '80. La terza generazione invece è toccata dalle speranze ormai perse verso la costruzione di un nuovo stato indipendente dopo i molteplici scontri e le autocrazie, per cui gli scrittori sono accumulati da un clima di disincanto, ma anche da una volontà di emancipazione sociale e culturale. Inoltre, il periodo storico che li lega è quello appena successivo all'indipendenza della Nigeria, la maggior parte di essi è infatti nata dopo gli anni '60.

Sebbene i due critici identifichino queste tre principali stratificazioni generazionali, resta comunque complessa e imprecisa la suddivisione della

produzione letteraria in diversi ‘gruppi’ in quanto ogni prodotto letterario può produrre un diverso modello di tempo e spazio.

Infine, ma non per questo meno importante, è indispensabile sottolineare che la primissima spinta che ha portato alla scelta dell’argomento sia stata il fatto che la letteratura nigeriana, e soprattutto quella femminile, non sia ancora molto conosciuta in Italia e forse nel resto d’Europa. L’obiettivo iniziale, infatti, era proprio quello di dare voce alle donne africane, spesso ancora escluse e limitate. Così, attraverso questa tesi e le voci delle donne nigeriane, è possibile essere più consapevoli delle loro esperienze, delle loro storie e dei loro sentimenti.

