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# Our Women Keep our Skies from Falling: the Female Figure in Contemporary African Novels

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## Introduction

In his poem « Our Women Keep our Skies from falling », American poet Kalamu ya Salaam forcefully captures contemporary African women's conditions as he depicts the difficulties they face in today's society and the ways they overcome these problems. Salaam's line has been borrowed for the title of this paper because it also deals with the representation of women in three novels which are based on the portrayal of the African female figure, the loads she has to carry and the way she copes with challenges. Through a feminist analysis of the representation of women in three African award-winning novels<sup>1</sup>, namely *We Need New Names* (2013) by Zimbabwean writer, NoViolet Bulawayo, *Juillet au pays, chroniques d'un retour à Madagascar* (2007) [July in the Country, Chronicles of a Return to Madagascar, by Malagasy writer, Michèle Rakotoson, and *Americanah* (2013) by Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, this paper sheds light on new and revisited images of African women. According to these writers, African women are victims of several forms of violence and injustice; however, they are resilient and are able to achieve agency thanks to national and transnational feminist solidarity. Such solidarity offers freedom and the power to bring changes in their country. The novels also highlight the significance of writing for women.

## Contextual Background

The current status of African women<sup>2</sup> according to the latest UNDP report is still marked by challenges, as reflected by “the ongoing efforts of African countries to accelerate the pace of assuring women's empowerment through all spheres of society – in the home and community, in health and education, in the workplace, and in political participation and leadership.” (84) In spite

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1. *Americanah* won the American Library Association, the US National Book Critic Circle Award, as selected as one of the 10 Best Books of 2013. *We Need New Names* won the 2011 Caine Prize. Michèle Rakotoson was awarded the Grand Prize of the French-speaking world

2. The use of the term African women is not meant to say that it is true for all women, it refers to women in general, but obviously there are exceptions.

of all the advances being made in the promotion of women's conditions, gender equality for African women and girls is not yet satisfactory. Many women face severe deprivations in terms of health as a result of early age marriage, sexual and physical violence. The spectrum of violence affecting women includes domestic violence, intimate partner violence, rape, genital mutilation, intimidation.

If such is the reality of African women, the representation of this reality reveals several facets that have remained unexplored. The most recent literary publication dealing with the status of African women is *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices* edited by Hernandez et al. It features the ways in which women overcome adversities, how they discern the root causes, and how women engage these challenges on a personal level. The three novels discussed in this paper reflect the use of Literature to resist, transgress and reinvent.

### Women's representation in African Literary Tradition

If such is reality of African women, the representation of this reality reveals several facets that generally remain ineffable. The most recent literary publication dealing with the status of African women is *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices* (2010) edited by Hernandez et al. It features the ways in which women overcome adversities, how they discern the root causes, and how women engage these challenges on a personal level. The three novels discussed in this paper reflect the use of Literature to resist, transgress and reinvent.

The choice of these novels lies first of all on the message they convey. All three focus on the representation of Sub-Saharan African women who try to master their destinies by fighting for their rights to education, to choose the life they want to lead in spite of violence and injustice. *July in the Country* portrays the journey of Michèle who leaves Madagascar for France in the 1980s because of the difficult socio-political context. Decades later, she returns to the country in order to renew her relationship with her roots.

Similarly, *We Need New Names* traces the journey of Darling from teenage to adulthood as she grows up in the shanty town of Zimbabwe and later moves to the US. Written in the first person point of view, that of Darling, the story begins with an overview of the harsh living conditions of the protagonists. Darling and her friends have stopped going to school and are almost literally starving. The first part of the novel recounts the daily lives of those characters and the strategies they use to survive. The second part portrays Darling living in America and focuses on her coming-of-age as an immigrant and her relationship with her country of origin.

*Americanah* also depicts the journey of Ifemelu a young Nigerian woman who immigrates to the US. Written in medias res, the novel is about the love story between the heroine and her university boyfriend. However, serving as a backdrop to this romance is the tough living condition in Nigeria. Ifemelu's life trajectory is shaped by the general context: her father's unemployment and the shutting down of her university. She thus moves to the USA and like the other heroines, comes to grips with the experience of immigration and becomes a writer. At the end she comes back and

settles in Nigeria.

Those three texts at the same time continue and disrupt the African women's literary tradition. In her seminal text on African women's writing, Obioma Nnaemeka argues that in African Literature by women, "issues in feminism – voice, victimhood, agency, sisterhood, motherhood, subjectivity, speech, silence, power, gaze, knowledge and nation... are recast in different, complex, and interesting ways" (1). Such a focus on feminist issues places those novels within African women's literary tradition. A closer analysis of the different tropes and motifs deployed by the three writers however enables us to distinguish several shifts in the tradition. This paper aims to shed light on those new representations of the female figure.

### **Women's Conditions in the three novels: State failure and its impact on African women**

One of the most important literary elements which are given a lot of representational attention in the novels is the setting. All three writers portray the socio-political and economic contexts as the first force oppressing women. Through meticulously-chosen short and very vivid scenes, the reader witnesses the deprivations experienced by the female characters in the three novels.

In *We Need New Names*, three generations of women are painfully hit by the socio-economic agony of Zimbabwe. High rate of unemployment, poverty, hyperinflation and hunger are the dominant facts affecting their lives. Because of lack of jobs, Darling's father has left for South Africa but never sends money and her mother has to do several jobs to make ends meet. The very first pages of the novel open with a scene rendering this sad reality: the heroine, who has dropped out of school, spends her days stealing guava in the neighborhood because she has nothing to eat. Such physical deprivation also affects the characters' morality. The symbolic episode in which Darling's group of friends discovers the dead body of a woman who had hung herself in a guava field and steals her shoes because they are new and can be sold puts emphasis on Zimbabweans' moral and economic breakdown characterized by wild mercantilism.

The women in *Americanah* and *July in the Country* are also crushed by extreme poverty due to unemployment and hyperinflation. From the beginning of the novel till the very last pages, Rakotoson presents a clear indictment of the State's failure to protect its citizens as reflected in women's conditions. Counting the number of paragraphs, pages and chapters relating women's poverty in the novel would be a tedious endeavor but some of those excerpts are worth mentioning. One of them is the chapter entitled "The small garage owner". The writer offers a very detailed account of the life of a female small garage owner in Antananarivo and how she lives below the poverty line on a daily basis. Her dwelling and livelihood are "*un bout de trottoir, un talus, une bouteille de gaz pour la vulcanisation du caoutchouc, quatre tôles qui servent de maison* [a patch of pavement, embankment, a gas cylinder for rubber vulcanization, four steel sheets serving as a house.]" (78) The concision of this description perfectly captures the scarcity which characterizes the lives of this woman and her family.

In *Americanah*, “Nigeria’s failed promises” (Adichie) to borrow the author’s terms can be seen in the high rate of unemployment and the dereliction of the education system. The impact of Ifemelu’s father’s joblessness is described with dark humor through the dysfunction of the household: unpaid rent, low purchasing power and the visible malaise of the father. Ifemelu somehow manages to escape this situation as she goes to the university but soon after that, the university goes on strike and closes down. It is this event that literally changes the course of Ifemelu’s life. She moves to the United States, thus leaving behind her family, boyfriend and parts of her dreams. This departure is her way of survival, the subject of the next section.

## **Women’s Survival and Agency in the three novels.**

### **Sisterhood and Solidarity**

In her discussion of women’s situation in the face of challenges, Nnaemeka asserts that “victimhood and agency are not mutually exclusive; victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways” (3). Indeed, the three heroines all end up surviving their tribulations and gaining several forms of agency. In major and minor elements, the reader can feel the thrumming pulses of the novels which present myriads of ways for women to survive harsh living conditions.

The most significant of these strategies of survival is probably female solidarity as it is the energy that nourishes the narratives. It can be seen through the act of alleviating the tasks and duties of one another. As said earlier, Darling’s mother in *We Need New Names* does a lot of odd jobs and it is her mother who is in charge of the household and Darling’s education. Similarly, when Uju follows her medical studies, it is her niece who is in charge of her son. In *We Need New Names*, Chipo who is pregnant after an incestuous rape is helped by her friends to have an abortion. Through a poignant scene which serves as a microcosm for the precarious conditions of women in Zimbabwe, the heroine and her friends who are all adolescents at the time, elaborate a plan to help Chipo to put an end to her pregnancy by using dangerous and inefficient means such as herbs and esotery.

The importance of solidarity in the three novels is symbolically represented by the hair braiding metaphor. Hair braiding for some African societies is generally an act that is not done by oneself but has to be performed by another person, generally a woman. It can be regarded as a way of taking care of each other but also of making a woman gain some time, time to rest, time to look and feel good and time to be used for other things. In *Americanah*, the story begins with a scene in which, the heroine, Ifemelu is in the US and crosses the whole city in order to find a hair salon specialized in African braiding. The braiding session is indeed a moment for those immigrant women to talk, give advice to one another, share joys and pains and comfort one another. Also, prior to Ifemelu’s departure to the USA, her aunt advises her to braid her hair, a premonitory advice which predicts the help and feminine solidarity that the latter will greatly need later in life. In *We*

*Need New Names*, the heroine fondly reminisces how women sat “outside a shack and gossiping and doing one another’s hair” (28). Similarly, in *July in the Country*, the very last words of the writer powerfully evokes the image of braiding which is a necessity for survival: “*un tissage régulier [où] on rassemble les fils, on les tire et on les croise* [a regular braiding in which threads are brought together, pulled and crossed]” (122).

Like hair strands which make up braids, women in the novels get together, help and support one another in order to preserve their rights or find better opportunities. The idea of solidarity and sisterhood is not new in African Literature by women. But the particularity of the novels studied here are their representation of transnational sisterhood. The most recurrent motif in the novels is that of an older woman, sometimes an aunt, an older sister or a mentor who lives in a developed country and who helps another woman to escape from the bankruptcy of her country of origin. Most often, the older lady helps the other one to move to the developed country.

### Migration, Writing and Agency

As already said, all three women leave their countries to settle in the USA and in France. Such an action first of all enables the family of the migrant heroines to have a better standard of living, but above all, it is for them a gateway for new experiences which liberate and empower them. It is true that female migration can be violent and disruptive but for the three protagonists, but it enables them to go through a very enriching experience: awakening and expression.

Often regarded as a coming-of-age novel, *Americanah* indeed traces Ifemelu’s awakenings. The most studied of these awakenings are her discoveries of racial and cultural issues in the United States. Adichie weaves this racial awakening of Ifemelu through a subtle input of events that expose the protagonist to her own identity. Indeed, Ifemelu slowly understands her positioning in the world, a fact that is revealed by her decision to move back to Nigeria.

Similarly, after two decades spent in France Michèle, the heroine of *July in the Country* returns to Madagascar in order to remember the reasons of her departure. Before such a decision, she is tormented by existential questions related to her country of origin, the people, especially the women she left behind. She spends two months in Madagascar and goes back to France to write her memoirs about that trip. This *mémoire* is a tribute to the courage of the Malagasy women that could not leave the country. Darling, the youngest of the three protagonists, also goes through an awakening phase. The last chapter of *We Need New Names* depicts Darling’s anger, rage and frustration when she talks over the telephone to her friend Chipso who has remained in Nigeria. When the latter asks her why she has left and says that she has no right to talk about Nigerians’ sufferings, Darling enters in a fit of uncontrolled anger. She is unable to describe how she feels, but her reaction is expressive of a growing sense of identity.

Another unifying point between those female characters is the role they assume for their community at the end of their journey: writing. Writing is indeed an essential practice in women studies. It means empowerment because it represents the ability to say, to do, to reinvent, to

transform, transgress and above all to create. According to feminist thinkers: “Story-telling registers survival on two scores – the survival of the storyteller and that of his/her listeners. The storyteller survives to tell the story and his/her listeners survive because they learned from the story.”(Nnaemeka 7)

This is indeed what happens in the novels most notably in *Americanah* and *July in the Country*. The women achieve agency and freedom as they become writers who are able to make the impossible within reach through words. In *We Need New Names*, Darling is not a writer per se yet, but her habits of writing on the walls reveal her potential as a writer. Moreover, the title *We Need New Names* alludes to the possibility to reinvent oneself and the world offered by writing.

To conclude, this paper has enabled us to reveal a few old and new features of African women in contemporary novels. The image we get is deeply embedded in society and politics. The novels present African women as both traditional and modern, both victims and agents. The portrayal we have seen insists on the importance of solidarity. Such solidarity is more efficient if it transcends generations and national borders.

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