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# AFRICAN WOMEN WRITERS ACROSS GENERATIONS: NAVIGATING LOCAL CONTEXTS AND EVOLVING FEMINIST APPROACHES

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***Abstract***: *Scholars in African feminism have historically repudiated the concept of feminism, which has been perceived as a Western imposition. Through a literary analysis of Ekomo (Nsué Angüe, 1985), Efuru (Nwapa, 1966) and Une si longue lettre (Bâ, 1979), the current article examines how first-generation African women writers approach the conditions that oppress women. Furthermore, the article discusses how the approach to women's challenges in first-generation novels differs from the forms of feminism that are being articulated more recently by African feminist activists. The findings show that Nsué Angüe, Nwapa, and Bâ's novels project the experiences and concerns of their female characters through the various ways of liberating women in the local context such as nego-feminism and snail-sense feminism. These African variants of feminism cater to their local peculiarities in ways that reflect the differences between African and Western cultures. However, these earlier approaches to women's challenges do not align with the forms of feminism articulated today.*

***Keywords***: *African (Hispanophone) feminist literature, gender, Ekomo, Efuru, Une Si Longue Lettre*

## 1. Introduction

In her much-acclaimed essay *We should all be feminists* (2014), the renowned Nigerian feminist writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, narrated why she decided to declare herself a "Happy African Feminist" (p. 8). This, she explains, was a reaction to how the "word *feminist* is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture …" (2014, p. 8). Taken in connection with African feminist models such as womanism, snail-sense feminism, nego-feminism, stiwanism and motherism, this collocation of adjectives

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appears to be a paradox because African feminists have for long repudiated the label 'feminist' and criticised feminism as a Western imposition. Indeed, several scholars point to the "indignation" (Arndt, 2002), "detachment" (Nkealah, 2006) and "aggressive reaction" (Eze, 2006) from some African female writers when they are associated with feminism. However, more recently, after the passing of the Ghanaian feminist Ama Ata Aidoo in 2023, Adichie is once more quoted as saying "I occupy the space of a 'Black African Happy Feminist' because writers like Aidoo came before me" (cited in Lehaha, 2023). The apparent paradoxical undertones of Adichie's earlier referenced statement are thus dismantled when deconstructed in light of the influence of avant-garde African feminist authors like Ama Ata Aidoo and the foundations they laid for contemporary feminist thinkers—"presenting women in a new light – bold and overtly feminist, and unafraid to subvert or challenge inherently discriminatory patriarchal ideologies and culture" (Fongang, 2021, p. 1907). In addition to Ama Ata Aidoo, other African feminist literary icons such as Flora Nwapa, María Nsué Angüe and Mariama Bâ stand tall within the hall of fame of cross-generational influence from where other contemporary writers draw inspiration—re-echoing, revising, and building on issues like motherhood and female agency and thus reimagining and positing new perspectives and a burgeoning African feminist consciousness.

The present study seeks to provide a historical view of the status of women in African societies by engaging with some older works written by the first generation of African women writers that are grounded in the colonial and postcolonial discourse. It aims to build a bridge between the past and the present by examining African feminisms and their evolving narratives. To achieve the aims of this study, I analyse three postcolonial novels from the Anglophone, Francophone, and largely unacknowledged African Hispanophone contexts. The term "African Hispanophone" (Campoy-Cubillo & Sampedro Vizcaya, 2019) is used to describe cultural productions from Equatorial Guinea, an African country which was formerly colonised by Spain. As Garuba observes, the term "African female writers" is predominantly used to refer to "early African women who.published novels either in English or in French mainly" (2021, p. 113). With the analysis of *Ekomo* I thus engage the less known African Hispanophone tradition which converges values from African and Hispanic indigenous cultures. The selected texts for the current study—*Ekomo* (Nsué Angüe, 1985*), Efuru* (Nwapa, 1966) and *Une si longue lettre* (Bâ, 1979*)*—merit attention because although the female writers belong to three different cultures separated by distant geographical locations, they connectively project similar issues

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related to the African woman—making them excellent avenues for comparative literary studies on African Feminism.

María Nsué Angüe (born in 1948 in the city of Bata (Sampedro Vizcaya, [2016]) was a notable Equatoguinean writer, poet, and politician. When she was eight years old, she emigrated to Spain with her family and after her studies, returned to Equatorial Guinea, where she worked as a Minister. Her most acclaimed work is *Ekomo* (1985), which was the first novel written by an Equatoguinean woman to be published. The novel tells the story of Nnanga, a Fang woman who, living in a patriarchal society, faces the double burden of childlessness and neglect by her husband (Ekomo). Likewise, Flora Nwapa (born in 1931 in Oguta) was a Nigerian author and a trailblazer in African feminist literature. Her debut novel, *Efuru* (1966), was the first book to be published internationally by a Nigerian woman—and, by extension, any African woman. In *Efuru*, the author recounts the story of the protagonist, a brave, independent and beautiful woman who is constrained by tradition which prioritises childbearing as a woman's fundamental role. The Senegalese Mariama Bâ (born in 1929 in Dakar) was another prominent first-generation writer. Her debut novel, *Une si longue lettre* (1979), is a semi-autobiographical work which poignantly portrays the sorrow and resignation of a woman (Ramatoulaye) who is compelled to share her husband (Modou Fall) with a high school student as a co-wife.

Through the lenses of the texts of Nsué Angüe, Bâ and Nwapa, I examine the main strategies of patriarchal resistance used by the female protagonists in "first wave" African feminist literature (Fongang, 2021); and how these strategies differ from the forms of feminism that are being articulated today, in the 21st century (i.e., third wave African feminist literature). Specifically, I use the struggles encountered by the female protagonists in the three novels to portray how they negotiated patriarchy on their own terms. These 'strengths' will then be linked with the present through the works of contemporary African and African diaspora feminist writers - specifically, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin, Guillermina Mekuy and Imela Oyono Ayingono. The analysis centres primarily on Adichie's epistolary form manifesto *Dear Ijeawele: A feminist manifesto in fifteen suggestions* (2017) while using Ayingono's *Sabor a caracol* (2019), Mekuy's *Tres Almas Para un Corazón* (2011), and Shoneyin's *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives* (2010) as the points of reference for 21st century African feminist literature.

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## 2. African women writers and evolving feminist approaches

In the following section (2.1.), I provide a brief historical overview of the development of feminism in Africa. Sections 2.2. and 2.3. will focus on the feminist consciousness of first and third wave African women writers, respectively.

### 2.1. A historical overview of the development of feminism in Africa

The development of African feminism (AF) as a theoretical approach is traced to anthropologist Steady (1980) and her seminal collection, *The black woman cross-culturally* (Terborg-Penn, 1995). In 1980, Steady maintained that before colonial rule, gender roles in Africa were more egalitarian than those of Western society. She argued that the Western women's movement had sometimes been imperialist and noted that racial factors, rather than gender issues, contributed more significantly to the discrimination and marginalisation experienced by black women. Affirming that "the essence of feminism is not hatred of men or blaming men," (pp. 35-36), Steady called for a greater focus on the repercussions of neocolonialism on African men as well as women and introduced what she called an "African brand of feminism" (Steady, 1980, p. 28) which had the following as some of its features: female autonomy, cooperation between the sexes, and the centrality of children. She affirmed that "race and class are important variables" in the experiences of the majority of black women "and are significantly more important barriers to the acquisition of the basic needs for survival than is sexism" (Steady, 1980, p. 3). Terborg-Penn (1980) attributed this to (i) the "pervasiveness of white female prejudice and discrimination against black females in woman's groups" from the 1830s to 1920, and (ii) the distinctive needs of Afro-American women during that era (Terborg-Penn, 1980, p. 306). In line with this accusation, Staples questioned the association of black women with feminism thus:

> In contemporary America, a female liberation movement is beginning to gain impetus. This movement is presently dominated by white women… whether black women should participate in such a movement is questionable. Hatred of a social curse which is part and parcel of an exploitative society that discriminates not only against blacks but also women should not be confused with hatred of men…Any movement that augments the sex-role antagonisms extant in the black community will only sow the seed of disunity and

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> hinder the liberation struggle…Black women cannot be free *qua* women until all blacks attain their liberation…. The revolutionary vanguard has a male leadership but the black woman has stepped beside her man engaged in struggle and given him her total faith and commitment. The black woman should be revered and celebrated …for her contemporary role in enabling black people to forge ahead in their efforts to achieve a black nationhood. (Staples, 1980, pp. 346-347).

Against this background, feminism in Africa developed into a plurality of concepts rejecting Western feminism and defining African women's emancipation based on an 'African identity' and what Pucherová describes as a "culturally self-enclosed feminism" (2022, p. 9). Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004), snail-sense feminism (Ezeigbo, 2012), woman palavering (Ogunyemi, 1985), African womanism (Kolawole, 1997), motherism (Acholonu, 1995), femalism (Opara, 2005), and stiwanism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994) are some examples of these "competing theoretical camps" (Pucherová, 2022, p. 6) which were introduced at various end times of the twentieth century (Alkali et al., 2013). These models reflect the "appreciation of African cultures, a recognition of the heterogeneity of African cultures, a realistic and wholesome strategies devoid of unnecessary aggressiveness" (Sotunsa, 2009, p. 232). They basically submit that "African men and women are complementary because they need each other in order to survive and develop their society" (Garuba, 2021, pp. 107-108). Taken together, they form what is known as "African feminisms"—though, according to Nkealah (2016), the term serves for "linguistic convenience only, acknowledging that the theories…have resisted the feminist label by encoding their own renamed labels" (p. 64). The theories under discussion show that the meaning of feminism has, over the decades, differed for women around the world depending on their race, culture and historical experiences (Amaefula, 2021). Below in Section 2.2, I examine how the selected first-generation African women writers—Nsué Angüe, Nwapa, and Bâ—construed feminism in their approach to issues which were considered central to women's lives (motherhood, polygamy, sisterhood, female agency and marriage). In Section 2.3, I explore how feminist consciousness has evolved in the works of third-generation African feminist writers.

### 2.2. Feminism in early African women's writings

It is common to find marriage, motherhood and the family as the salient thematic foci in the works of most female African writers, irrespective of their sociocultural and/or

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geographical backgrounds. *Ekomo, Efuru* and *Une si longue lettre* can be used as a case in point. These novels recount the stories of three women from different sociocultural and geographical backgrounds who are united by their common experience of subjugation as a result of the gender roles imposed on them by their societies—wifehood and motherhood. The importance of the traditional family life within the African context is illustrated by Steady's description of motherhood as "probably the most fundamental difference between the African woman and her western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women" (Steady, 1980, p. 29). She adds that "for African women, the role of mother is often central and has intrinsic value" (Steady, 1980, p. 29).

Perhaps, the main difference between these novels is the approach and intensity with which the authors address these issues. *Ekomo* has been described as a "feminist travel narrative" (Lomotey & Boampong, 2022) that interrogates how the protagonist, Nnanga, navigates the demands of her patriarchal society. In her quest to satisfy her society's expectations of motherhood, she travels both symbolically—through the author's use of flashback—between her past and present; and physically—from her village to a different town. As we travel with her to her childhood days, the journey exposes the roots of the deep-seated desire for motherhood. It illustrates how young children learn, at a tender age through role-playing games, stereotypes that constrain gender roles and identities:

> mi mente, pensando en Ekomo, retrocedió muchos años atrás para localizar el primer día que le vi. Estábamos jugando a los bebés con los troncos de los plátanos, los pelábamos y nos los atábamos a la espalda diciendo que eran nuestros hijos [my mind, thinking of Ekomo, went back many years to the first day I saw him. We were playing babies with the trunks of bananas; we peeled them and tied them behind our backs saying they were our children]. (Nsué Angüe, 1985, pp. 64-65; all translations are mine except otherwise indicated).[1]

Societal pressures markedly contribute to Nnanga's vulnerability and become the oppressive factors that alienate her both socially and psychologically: "hacía dos años que estaba casada en aquel pueblo y todos deseaban ya oír decir que esperábamos un nuevo miembro en la familia [I had been married in that village for two years and everyone was already waiting to hear that we were expecting a new member of the family]" (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 37). The value of motherhood among the Fang society of Equatorial Guinea is revealed through

[1] Quotations from *Ekomo* are from the 2007 edition of the novel published by Sial/Casa de África.

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Nnanga's visit to the *curandero* 'medicine man' where she finds several women in search of a cure for their infertility. Nwapa's Efuru suffers a similar predicament, and her statement: "it was a curse not to have children" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 207)—echoes the stigmatization that has traditionally been associated with barrenness in many African societies (Steady, 1980). The valuation of fertility and the centrality of children surfaces in *Une si longue lettre* as well which narrates how Ramatoulaye struggles to survive the injustice of polygamy and widowhood rites. Unlike Nnanga and Efuru, Ramatoulaye has several children (12) for her husband. Her emphasis on this demonstrates that she expected a differing treatment from her in-laws: "Nos belles-soeurs… célèbrent, avec la même aisance et les mêmes mots, douze et trois maternités. J'enregistre, courroucée, cette volonté de *nivellement* [Our sisters-in-law... celebrate, with the same ease and the same words, a dozen and three births. I recognise, in anger, this desire to equalize]" (Bâ, 1979; emphasis mine). Thus, in the Senegalese society, just as many other African societies, not only do women expect to be valued for their roles as mothers but additionally, a woman's value often increases (or decreases) in accordance with the number of children she has. Together, these novels reveal that both wifehood and motherhood—traditionally considered as intrinsically linked to an African woman's social prestige and self-worth—have been considered as "a source of strength and a position of identity construction that allows African women not only to achieve status in society but also to establish their sense of fulfilment and happiness in life" (Fongang, 2015, p. 87).

First wave African feminist writers have thus consistently inclined towards the problems associated with this quest for social prestige and self-worth—namely, infidelity, polygamy and abandonment. They examine marriage, as Ogundipe-Leslie observes, as "a major site of women's subjugation on the African continent" (as cited in Aliyu-Ibrahim, 2018), and how African women navigate these challenges. Particularly, tenets of nego-feminism, snail-sense feminism and womanism are evident in *Ekomo, Efuru* and *Une si longue lettre*. Nnaemeka's (2004) "African feminist theory" which is "built on the indigenous" (p. 376)—nego-feminism—is the feminism of negotiation; no ego feminism—which focuses on issues of peace, conflict management and resolution, negotiation, complementarity, give-and-take, and collaboration. Nnaemeka (2004) contends that African feminism "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" (pp. 377-378). Ezeigbo's (2012) parallel theory, snail-

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sense feminism, draws on "African women's clever use of negotiation and diplomacy in patriarchal systems of socialization to assert and affirm their self-actualization and empowerment" (Garuba, 2021, p. 111). Nego-feminism and snail-sense feminism (and indeed all the strands of African feminisms) have significant ideological similarities (Alkali et al., 2013). Nego-feminism was conceived from the habits of the chameleon, which, according to Nnaemeka (2004) adopts the colour of its new environments without imposing itself. Thus, the feminist scholar calls for a "feminist engagement" which, like the chameleon is "goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 382). In a similar vein, the ideological foundations of Ezeigbo's (2012) snail-sense feminism were derived from the characteristics of the snail. She explains:

> The snail *carries its house on its back without feeling the strain*. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it *withdraws into its shell and is safe*. This is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria's harsh patriarchal culture. It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate. (as cited in Garuba, 2021, p. 111; emphasis mine).

Womanism and its variants also merit attention in the analysis of how some first-generation African feminists approach marital issues and African women's strategies in navigating these challenges. Ogunyemi (1985) postulates womanism/woman palavering which she defines as "black centred" and "accommodationist". Her womanist theory supports solidarity, complementarity and equality between men and women and centres on advancing the importance of heterosexual marriage and traditional family life for African women (Garuba, 2021). Likewise, Kolawole's (1997) African womanism has its ideological foundations built on the African worldview as family-oriented, inclusive rather than separatist and polarizing, and most importantly, not anti-men.

In *Ekomo, Efuru* and *Une si longue lettre*, marriage is so important that even when the female characters encounter challenges with infidelity, polygamy and abandonment, like the snail or the chameleon, they attempt to navigate the patriarchal landmines—to, in the words of Nnaemeka, "collaborate, negotiate, compromise", rather than "challenge, disrupt, deconstruct, blow apart" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 380) the patriarchal shackles that coerce them. Ramatoulaye is abandoned by her husband of 35 years after being compelled to accept polygamy: "Je n'intéressais plus Modou et le savais. J'étais abandonnée: une feuille qui voltige mais qu'aucune main n'ose ramasser [Modou was no longer interested in me, and I knew it. I was

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forsaken: a leaf that flutters but which no hand dares to pick up]" (Bâ, 1979, p. 74). Similarly, Nnanga is abandoned by her husband, Ekomo, who leaves for the city and has an affair while there: "Ekomo se marchó con sus hermanos a las fiestas de la ciudad, recuerda mi mente. Ellos regresaron después de las fiestas y él se quedó embrujado por una mujer de mala vida [Ekomo went off with his brothers to the city festivals, my mind recalls. They returned after the festivities, but he stayed behind, bewitched by a woman of ill repute]" (Nsué, 1985, p. 24). Efuru suffers a similar fate, and, on the surface, she seems not to be bothered about her husbands' infidelity. She actually takes an active role in finding wives for her second husband and repeatedly asserts that she does not object to being in a polygamous marriage although she did object to "being relegated to the background" (p. 62-63) i.e., abandonment.

As nego-feminism submits, African women challenge through negotiation, accommodation, and compromise (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 380). Efuru's apparent tolerance of her husband's infidelity and her subsequent acceptance of polygamy illustrate how, as a childless woman, she navigates, adapts to, and compromises with the patriarchal norms that endorse male infidelity and polygamy, particularly as a remedy for barrenness. When her mother-in-law praises her for her keen interest in getting another wife for her husband, she says: "I want my husband to have children. I am barren" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 228). The novel highlights the power play that shapes women's collaborative behaviours in polygamous marriages:

> Efuru… Don't you think you will begin now to look for a young girl for him? It will be better if you suggest this to your husband. He will at least know that you want him to marry another wife and have children. If you leave it to him and his mother, his mother might get someone that will over-ride you. You will have no control over her and it will be difficult for you. (Nwapa, 1966, p. 206).

It must be emphasised that early African feminist writers often had conflicting views on polygamy (see Fongang, 2021). For instance, whereas Bâ sharply criticises polygamy, Nwapa and Nsué Angüe do not offer such entrenched positions. Indeed, for Nsué Angüe, rather than a direct criticism of polygamy, she foregrounds, in consonance with African womanism, the interconnection between colonialism and other forms of domination that condition African women's lives. She achieves this through the experience of Oyono the polygamist. Having decided to become a Christian, Oyono is instructed by the priest to convert to a monogamous marriage as a condition for baptism and acceptance to Christianity. Through the voice of Nnanga, the protagonist, Nsué Angüe declares: "Maldije a aquel hombre blanco porque hacía

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desgraciada a una familia y hacía desgraciados a unos niños, exponiéndolos a quedar sin madre [I cursed that white man because he made a family miserable and made some children miserable, forcing them to remain without a mother]" (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 118). Ekomo as a womanist postcolonial novel, thus navigates the "borderline space of conflicting cultures and traditions" (Odartey-Wellington, 2007, p. 165) and prioritises the criticism of the effects of colonialism on traditional African family life rather than the patriarchal institution of polygamy.

Steady also argued that "ironically polygamy viewed from some perspectives as oppressive to women", enabled women to "have a certain amount of independence from absolute male dominance" (pp. 16-17). This theoretical supposition is crystallised in *Efuru*. In addition to the issue of barrenness, Nwapa's text suggests that the quest for autonomy is another reason women might 'happily' look for wives for their husbands. This is made evident when Ajanapu says: "I had to recommend a girl for my husband when I saw that I was too busy to look after him and my children, and at the same time carry on with my trade" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 67). In her development of snail-sense feminism, Ezeigbo (2012) explains the need for this strategy for a woman's survival in the "highly patriarchal" African context. She notes that survival will depend on a woman's ability to adopt "the lifestyle and habit of the snail…to be hardworking, resilient, tolerant, and accommodating" and like the snail "move[s] over rocks, boulders and even thorns with that lubricating tongue that is never pierced or hurt by these jagged objects that it crosses over because it has learnt to lubricate its tongue to help it negotiate and crawl over sharp and rough edges" (as cited in Odinye, 2022). Consequently, these women characters adopt survival strategies which they consider necessary to enable them to navigate the patriarchal landmines they encounter—examples of these landmines being society's expectations of childbearing, caregiving and marriage.

While emphasizing the need for cooperation and complementarity with men, first-generation African feminist writers also underscored female bonding/ sisterhood. They wrote about the importance of women sustaining each other in the midst of patriarchal hostility and pointed out that women sometimes contributed to the perpetuation of sexism. In 1980, for instance, Steady pointed out the need to avoid "false polarizations between men and women" and added that "rather than seeing men as the universal oppressor", women should also "be seen as partners in oppression and as having the potential of becoming primary oppressors themselves" (p. 3).

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The role of women in the perpetuation of sexist cultures is seen in the selected texts for the current study. Nsué Angüe sharply criticises the widowhood rites the protagonist is compelled to go through after her husband dies. Despite the physical ordeal she had just experienced due to her arduous journey with her husband in search of a cure for his illness, the emotional trauma from helplessly watching him die slowly before her very eyes, and the psychological strain of fighting impeding traditional structures in order to bury him single-handedly in a faraway land, Nnanga is maltreated as if she were a criminal—her only crime though being her status of widowhood. The maltreatment she receives is mainly from fellow women who she refers to as *las torturadoras*, "the torturers" (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 239):

> Estoy echada entre las cenizas. ¡Es natural! Soy viuda. Pero me pican las hormigas y no puedo moverme porque es tabú. Caen los palos sobre mi cuerpo. ¡Es natural! Soy viuda y todos tienen derecho a flagelarme. ¿Dónde estás, amigo mío? No siento hambre por tu causa, ni dolor por causa de tus hermanas. ¿Dónde estás, hermano? Todos me injurian y el látigo cae sobre me cuerpo pero (p. 235)…. ¡¡¡Ekomoooooooooooo!!!... Una patada en el costado y una voz me ordena: ¡Cállate zorra! ¿Quién te ha autorizado a gritar? [I am lying among the ashes. It is to be expected! I am a widow. The ants bite me, and I can't move because it's a taboo. I am being beaten with sticks. It's to be expected! I am a widow, and everyone has the right to flog me. Where are you, my dear friend? I feel neither hunger because of you, nor pain because of your sisters. Where are you, brother? They all scorn me and whip me but (p. 235).... ¡¡¡Ekomoooooooooooo!!!... I'm kicked in the ribs and a voice orders me: Shut up, bitch! Who gave you permission to shout?]. (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 239).

Nnanga notes how some women quietly look on as she is tortured: "las mujeres, desde la puerta de sus cocinas, escuchan y aguardan silenciosas [The women listen and wait silently from their kitchen doors]" (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 240); while others actively take part in her torture. She laments how alone she feels and cries out for female bonding—for *all* women to resist these traditions in sisterhood: "¡Que lloren las madres de las hembras, porque las hembras nacen para ser madres y esposas!... ¡Qué sola! ¡Qué tremendamente sola estoy! [Let the mothers of females weep, for females are born to be mothers and wives... how lonely! How terribly lonely I am!]" (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 247-248). Not only does Nnanga call out to women, but she repetitively does the same with her dead husband, Ekomo. The repetitive use of the words "amigo" and "hermano" echoes the call on men (as well as women) to make that change. Likewise, in *Efuru*, the female character, Omirima, makes it her mission to destroy other women's peace by gossiping and prodding into their private affairs and thus, proclaiming

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herself the custodian of female gender roles. The call for sisterhood equally resonates in *Une si longue lettre.* Binetou's mother encourages polygamy by using her daughter as a bait for materialistic gains. Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter criticises her for her role in the destruction of Ramatoulaye's marriage: "Comment une femme peut-elle saper le bonheur d'une autre femme? [How can a woman ruin another woman's happiness?]" (Bâ, 1979, p. 100). Moreover, like Nnanga, Ramatoulaye is taken through the widowhood rites by fellow women. She however finally survives the shock of her husband's abandonment and the aftermath of his death thanks to the support of her childhood friend Aissatou.

Thus, Bâ, Nsué Angüe, and Nwapa explore the interplay of factors such as age and status in female-to-female oppression and their contribution to patriarchy in African societies. They examine the abuse of unequal power relations among women, e.g., mothers-in-law versus daughters-in-law, senior wives versus junior wives and elderly women versus young women. However, we also see some exemplary demonstrations of sisterhood between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre,* Nnanga and her mother-in-law in *Ekomo* and Efuru and her neighbour (Nnona) in *Efuru*. When Efuru helps Nnona find a cure for her ailment, one of the characters tells her: "Thank you, my daughter. That's how sisters should behave to sisters, thank you" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 168).

Although first-generation African writers wrote about the role of adverse traditional practices such as widowhood rites in the perpetuation of female oppression, many of them sought to protect the "African culture" and identity. In her submission on nego-feminism, Nnaemeka notes that "African women working for social change build on the indigenous by defining and modulating their feminist struggle in deference to cultural and local imperatives" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 380). Thus, African feminism(s) "*cautiously* questions African cultural traditions" (Akinbobola, 2020; my emphasis). Ardnt (2002) explains that this paradigm has much to do with "the position of many African feminists that the criticism of African societies inherent in the criticism of African gender relationships weakens Africa's position with respect to the West, as well as African resistance to Western cultural imperialism" (p. 32).

In line with this, some African female writers, such as Nwapa, navigate the complex balance between denouncing traditional factors that perpetuate the subjugation of women and protecting their cultural identities. In *Efuru,* female genital mutilation, a practice that has been the focus of most feminist scholars, is not overtly criticised. When Efuru's mother-in-law suggests that she has her "bath" before she becomes pregnant, the protagonist readily agrees.

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Rather than emphasise the noxious effects of female genital mutilation, both Efuru and the woman who performed the practice are praised—the former for her bravery and the latter for her skill at the operation. Fongang captures this succinctly: "Although Nwapa in her novels touches on some fundamental patriarchal ideologies impeding women's self-assertion, she fails to overtly criticise or reject some traditional practices such as female circumcision and polygamy and does not present powerful female characters who establish their independence as progressive women will do" (Fongang, 2021, p. 1906).

One significant difference between the works of Nwapa, Bâ, and Nsué Angüe is their approach to criticising patriarchal culture. *Une si longue lettre* is an epistolary novel combining letter and diary genres. By using the first-person narrative, it explicitly reveals the minutest details of Ramatoulaye's pain and emotional struggle for survival after her husband's betrayal: "Les murs qui limitent mon horizon pendant quatre mois et dix jours ne me gênent guère. J'ai en moi assez de souvenirs à ruminer. Et ce sont eux que je crains car ils ont le goût de l'amertume [The walls that have limited my horizon for four months and ten days don't bother me. I have enough memories to brood over. And these are the ones I fear because they are bitter memories]" (Bâ, 1979, p. 15).

Very similar to Bâ's approach, Nsué Angüe employs the first-person narrative technique and monologues which contribute to unveiling Nnanga's innermost feelings regarding her concerns about patriarchy. These techniques allow the characters to frankly express their emotions and thoughts and confess their flaws in cases where their (in)actions contributed to their dilemmas. Unlike Bâ and Nsué Angüe, Nwapa's novel is written in the third-person narrative, and this reduces the emotional effect that is achieved by the first two authors in their protagonists. This is in line with Nwapa's characterisation of Efuru as an exceptional female character: "Efuru hissed when Ajanupu mentioned Gilbert. … She was very sad. … It was a disgrace and Efuru felt like killing herself. She cried as she had never cried before. *But she did not altogether break down, as people thought*" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 259; emphasis mine).

Compared to the approach of Bâ and Nsué Angüe, it becomes evident that the third-person narrative has a comparatively lesser effect on the attempt to expose gender injustice. Additionally, in contrast to the sense of unhappiness that one perceives in *Ekomo* and *Une si longue lettre*, Nwapa's concerns about women's emancipation are projected in a somewhat comparatively lighter tone because she infuses her novel with humour especially through the character Ajanupu. This also strengthens *Efuru's* characteristics as a nego-feminist/ snail-sense

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feminist novel. The use of humour and the third-person narrative enable the protagonist to distance herself from her sorrow and pain and contribute to her portrayal as a strong female character. In comparison with *Ekomo* and *Une si longue lettre, Efuru* depicts the characteristics of reformist African-feminist literature. Arndt (2002) explained that in reformist African feminist texts, the "criticism is only partial, and is usually brought forward in a differentiated way. Reformist African-feminist writers want to *negotiate* with the patriarchal society to gain new scope for women but accept the fundamental patriarchal orientation of their society as a given fact" (p. 33; my emphasis). Despite the differences in the intensity with which these first-generation authors projected their ideological positions, they all gave their protagonists a voice that promoted their female agency.

Female agency was another primary focus of early African feminist literature. In 1995, Terborg-Penn described the resistance to oppression, the definition of female leadership, as well as the redefinition of economic and political roles for women as the "most dominant values in African feminist theory, which are traceable through time" (p. 4). These values were reflected in the works of first-generation writers in diverse ways. The heroines of Nsué Angüe, Bâ, and Nwapa (i.e., Nnanga, Ramatoulaye and Efuru, respectively) depict self-determination in marital choices by defying their families and tradition and marrying the men of their choice. By so doing, they subvert discriminatory female stereotypes and normative perceptions of women as the passive gender in the marriage market and dismantle the hierarchical structure enabled by the payment of the bride price (dowry). Throughout her novel, Nwapa emphasises the self-sacrifice in this act and how men often fail to show appreciation for their partner's self-abnegation. The characters repeatedly describe Efuru's first husband as a fool. The doctor tells Efuru: "Adizua is a fool. You were a gift given to him. He could not appreciate what he had. He did not know the value of what he had. We men are like that sometimes" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 160). Another of her male characters affirms: "We men are fools sometimes. What didn't Efuru do for that man?" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 155). Likewise, Nsué Angüe criticises Ekomo through the '*curandero'*. When Nnanga tells him that she left her life of stardom because she got married, he says:

> Eso es lo bueno y lo malo… que tenéis las mujeres cuando os enamoráis. Cuando una mujer ama es capaz de hacer los mayores sacrificios y las mayores tonterías. Las mujeres… hacéis, a veces, cosas impresionantes; y lo malo es que muchos hombres nunca se dan cuenta de ello [That's the good thing and the bad thing... about you women when you fall in love. When a woman is in love, she is capable of

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> making the greatest sacrifices and doing the most foolish things. You women... sometimes do impressive things; and the unfortunate thing is that many men never realise this]. (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 140).

Not only do Efuru and Aissatou resist the oppression of their patriarchal societies by subverting the stereotypical image of women as submissive, but they also redefine their economic roles. Efuru does so through trade and Aissatou achieves this by relocating to America and obtaining employment at the Senegalese Embassy. Steady's (1980) differentiation between formal and real power can also be observed in *Efuru*. According to Steady "in societies where most of the activities are geared towards survival and where women's roles are pivotal to this survival, it is women who have the real and relevant power" (p. 31). For Efuru, this power resides in her trading skills and ability to provide food in her household while Adizua lazed around: "In the morning [Adizua] slept while others went to work. When they had done more than two hours' work, he came to work, and left the farm before everybody else. He was so lazy that his neighbours gossiped" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 18). Furthermore, by taking on the role of the fetish priestess for Uhamiri, the sea goddess, Efuru also assumed the role of a female spiritual leader.

Thus, although Gilbert (Efuru's second husband) seemed to enjoy patriarchal dominance, she became powerful as a fetish priestess and was able to assert her autonomy since, on the sacred days, for instance, he could not approach her. Indeed, Efuru could be described as the epitome of female agency according to the standards of first wave African feminism. Ajanupu, another powerful female character, expresses her deep admiration for her while describing her as "a woman among women" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 107). Efuru is hardworking, industrious, prudent, strong-willed, and although she plays very well the traditional role of an African wife, she still manages to exhibit to some extent the agency and leadership roles often associated with masculinity. After she helps Nnona to find a cure for her ailment, the latter's daughter says: "You have done what only men are capable of doing and so you have done like a man" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 164). Nwapa highlights Efuru's strength of character by contrasting her with Ossai, her docile mother-in-law, who submits herself to the whims of societal norms. Likewise, the author underscores the importance of female agency by contrasting the characters of the two sisters—Ossai and Ajanupu. Efuru's resistance of oppression and her assumption of economic and religious leadership exemplify two characteristics of female agency in early African feminism.

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In the case of *Ekomo*, Nnanga manifests some feminist subversive strategies despite the limiting gender roles of the society she finds herself in. Not only does she acquire the courage to rebel, albeit inadvertently, against the taboo that prohibits her from burying her dead husband, but her narrative also denounces her experiences and those of the members of her community. The story is set in the highly patriarchal traditional fang society where decisions are taken by men in the communal place known as the "*abáa*" and women are expected to be voiceless: "los hombres hablan, las mujeres callan, los jóvenes escuchan y los niños juegan [the men talk, the women keep quiet, the youth listen and the children play]" (Nsué Angüe, 1985, p. 20). Nsué Angüe subverts this by naming the novel after the protagonist's husband and thus, giving Nnanga a voice. Rather than endure passively the sociocultural norms that subjugate women, she questions the norms and practices of her people through her commentary.

On her part, Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre* is the character foil of her bosom friend Aissatou. The former is subservient and lacks independence, unlike the latter, who embodies resistance and agency. Whereas Ramatoulaye unhappily remains in her polygamous marriage, Aissatou decides to divorce Mawdo. Ramatoulaye's realm of agency is limited to her home and her identity remains constrained to her role as a mother, an abandoned wife and finally a widow. However, in addition to motherhood, Aissatou succeeds in finding fulfilment in her work as an interpreter at the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. Indeed, in the earlier part of the novel Ramatoulaye reveals her initial lack of independence by confessing that: "Je suis de celles qui ne peuvent se réaliser et s'épanouir que dans le couple. Je n'ai jamais conçu le bonheur hors du couple, tout en te comprenant, tout en respectant le choix des femmes libres [I am one of those women who find fulfilment and happiness only in a relationship. I have never conceived of happiness outside a relationship, despite understanding you, despite respecting the choice of independent women]" (Bâ, 1979, p. 79). Ramatoulaye's confession provides further evidence of the ramifications of the ideology that marriage is the ultimate achievement for women. Nonetheless, despite her passivity and her complicity in her own victimisation through her (in)actions, she does show some degree of agency, however small, by rebelling against the traditional custom of levirate and also by refusing Daouda's offer of marriage because she does not want to intrude in another woman's marriage by accepting to be a second wife. By the end of the novel, Ramatoulaye reflects upon her experiences and grows in character. She shows that woman-to-woman victimisation through polygamy can be overcome through sisterhood if women choose to be considerate of the feelings of other women. Moreover, like Nnanga,

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Ramatoulaye also subverts normative voicelessness in women by pouring out her innermost thoughts and sentiments and questioning the norms and practices of her people.

### 2.3. Contemporary feminist writings

In recent times, scholars have observed an "epistemic shift" (Pucherová, 2022, p. 1) in the interpretation of feminism and female identity, both on the African continent and globally. Notably, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk "We should all be feminists" (2012) stands out as a pivotal moment in this new African and transnational feminist consciousness. Born in 1977, Adichie has been described as "the most prominent" of a "procession of critically acclaimed young Anglophone authors [who] is succeeding in attracting a new generation of readers to African literature" (as cited in Hassouna, 2024, p. 817). In addition to her seminal essay, *We should all be feminists* (2014), her epistolary form manifesto *Dear Ijeawele: A feminist manifesto in fifteen suggestions* constitutes an invaluable lens for the critical analysis of contemporary African feminist literature. It was originally written in response to a friend's request for advice on fostering feminist values in her daughter's (Chizalum) upbringing. The 15 suggestions captured in Adichie's *Feminist manifesto* are reflective of the thematic concerns of contemporary African feminist scholars and writers—that is, the new face of African feminism.

To start with, in contrast with early African feminists like Nwapa who focused on gender-normative roles, African feminist writers of the 21st century focus more on migration, the diaspora, and transnational exchanges which foster the prioritisation of self-definition. In the words of Pucherová (2022), African feminism now "rejects traditional gender roles that were important for 20th-century Afro-centric feminists" (pp. 9-10). They insist that while motherhood still holds significant value, women should have the freedom to define their identities beyond just being mothers. This is reflected in Adichie's first to third suggestions which touch on motherhood, gender roles and women's self-fulfilment: "Motherhood is a glorious gift, but do not define yourself solely by motherhood… what matters is what you want for yourself … let your focus be on remaining a full person. Take time for yourself. Nurture your own needs" (Adichie, 2017, n.p). In addition to motherhood, Adichie also touches on issues of marriage that constrain a woman's ability to carve other paths for self-definition and empowerment. Particularly, she delves into how self-sacrifice (addressed in suggestion 7; and

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also 13) becomes characteristic of females because of how they are socialized to make themselves likeable and also, to perceive marriage as an achievement:

> Find ways to make clear to her that marriage is not an achievement, nor is it what she should aspire to… We condition girls to aspire to marriage and we do not condition boys to aspire to marriage, and so there is already a terrible imbalance at the start. The girls will grow up to be women preoccupied with marriage. The boys will grow up to be men who are not preoccupied with marriage. The women marry those men. The relationship is automatically uneven because the institution matters more to one than the other. Is it any wonder that, in so many marriages, women sacrifice more, at a loss to themselves, because they have to constantly maintain an uneven exchange? (Adichie, 2017, n.p).

In line with this, contemporary African feminist writers like Mekuy (2011) go beyond simply identifying self-sacrifice in women like Nwapa and Nsué Angüe did. Their novels overtly reject unrequited self-sacrifice and subvert conventional gender roles for women by presenting different paths—apart from marriage and motherhood—for them to attain the social prestige and self-worth they seek. For example, the heroines in Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Mekuy's *Tres almas para un corazón* (2011) are educated, career-oriented, economically independent and prioritise their self-realisation over motherhood. The importance of education is captured particularly in Adichie's fifth suggestion.

Adichie's fourth suggestion centres on what she terms "the danger of … Feminism Lite… the idea of conditional female equality" which she describes as a "hollow, appeasing and bankrupt idea" which should be rejected totally because "being a feminist is like being pregnant. You either are or you are not. You either believe in the full equality of men and women or you do not" (Adichie, 2017, n.p). Contemporary African feminist writers and scholars are not held back with negotiations and compromise, and they are unapologetically feminist. As can be observed in the following words from Adichie's manifesto, they embrace the label 'feminist' with all its connotations without engaging in the terminological war which characterised early African feminism in the bid to carve out an 'authentic African identity' and repudiate Western feminism: "Of course I am angry. I am angry about racism. I am angry about sexism. But I recently came to the realization that *I am angrier about sexism than I am about racism*" (Adichie, 2017, n.p; my emphasis). It must be emphasized that this is not to say that contemporary African feminists discount the importance of their African identity. In her ninth suggestion, Adichie emphasizes the importance of identity and advises Ijeawele to teach her daughter to be proud of her Igbo origins, the history of Africans, and the black diaspora. But

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the acceptance of culture, she points out, must be done objectively and selectively: "teach her to embrace the parts of Igbo culture that are beautiful and teach her to reject the parts that are not" (Adichie, 2017, n.p).

Although the legacy of colonialism continues to shape African women's gender politics, contemporary African feminists recognize that early African feminists' portrayal of white women as the primary adversaries of African women (see Terborg-Penn, 1980), along with their focus on shared oppression between African men and women, overshadowed the specific sexist challenges faced by African women. Likewise, as Adichie's 10th suggestion illustrates, contemporary African feminists deconstruct the myths associated with Western feminism, such as the belief that feminism and femininity are mutually exclusive.

As Pucherová (2022) observes, there is also an unprecedented focus on sexuality in the African feminism of today: "for contemporary African women writers and theorists, sexuality is the primary arena of women's negotiation of their rights, framed as human rights" (p. 10). This is reflected in Adichie's *Feminist manifesto* as her 12th suggestion encourages her friend to talk to her daughter positively about sex: "The shame we attach to female sexuality is about control. Many cultures and religions control women's bodies in one way or another ... Do not ever make 'virginity' a focus ... Teach her to reject the linking of shame and female biology" (Adichie, 2017, n.p). 21st century African feminist writers like Shoneyin thus represent female characters who dismantle the negative imagery associated with female sexuality. In her novel, *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives* (2010), the first three wives of the patriarch, Baba Segi, take delight in their sexuality as they engage in adulterous affairs to resolve the problem of their husband's impotence, which he is unaware of. While they affirm their agency through their sexuality, their characterisation also supports Adichie's 14th observation to the effect that there is an "assumption that women are supposed to be morally 'better' than men", but "they are not" because "Women are as human as men are" and "female goodness is as normal as female evil" (Adichie, 2017, n.p).

Much of the changes that have occurred in African feminist thought can be attributed to the effects of globalization. In her development of her *Feminist manifesto,* Adichie constantly refers to current tendencies in "our world" instead of focusing on an African authenticity. She advocates being "broad-minded": "Make difference ordinary. Make difference normal… Because difference is the reality of *our world*. And by teaching her about difference, you are equipping her to survive in a diverse *world*" (Adichie, 2017, n.p ; my emphasis). In tandem

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with this, her 15th suggestion alludes to contemporary trends in gender and sexuality—the new normal—and destabilises the association of African identity with heteronormativity: “Tell her that some people are gay, and some are not. A little child has two daddies or two mummies because some people just do… It’s just the way the *world* is” (Adichie, 2017, n.p; my emphasis). Indeed, Adichie is not the only contemporary African feminist who denies the normalcy of homosexuality and lesbianism in Africa. In her novel *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives*, Shoneyin presents a female character, Iya Segi, who has a gay sexual orientation: “I could not stop looking at her. Her walk, her filthy tongue, her short-cropped hair, her bare feet—everything about her fascinated me. I was awash with lust” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 98). As Eze (2015) points out, by initiating a conversation about gay sexual orientation among her fellow citizens, Shoneyin introduces “new ways of exploring the African experience beyond the conventional postcolonial discourse that presumes a monolithic African identity and culture…She urges us to engage people as individuals who make up the cultures identified as African” (p. 323).

These works provide evidence for Pucherová’s observation that African feminism “is no longer a culturally self-enclosed feminism, but part of the global movement against sexism” (2022, p. 9). African feminism(s) are currently evolving through the influence of mobile authors, driven by processes like digitalization, globalization, and the exchange of ideas between African and Western feminist perspectives (Pucherová, 2022). Technological mobilization—the use of blogging and other internet tools—has emerged as the platform for highlighting the interconnectedness of women’s shared experiences of global oppression (Fongang, 2021). As Pucherová (2022) further explains, the diasporic migrations of feminists, particularly the movement of African scholars to the United States, create complexities in pinpointing specific regional centres of intellectual production. Simultaneously, globalized networks—facilitated by international conferences, the internet, and commercial publishing—have fostered extensive cross-fertilisation across national and continental boundaries. As a result, “African feminism” has evolved into a more fluid and dynamic concept than ever before. Pucherová (2022) terms this phenomenon the “transculturation of feminism,” emphasising its inclusivity and open defiance of traditional patriarchal norms that have historically affected African women. She observes:

> For these women [21st Century African Women Writers], the “African vs. Western feminism” is no longer the analytical frame of feminist inquiry. This allows them to claim predecessors across continents,

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> acknowledging a history of feminist resistance as a common heritage. They write in a dialogue with Western feminists and protofeminists ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen and George Sand to Simone de Beauvoir, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Naomi Wolf, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, seeing no ideological problem in such allegiances. (Pucherová, 2022, p. 7).

Indeed, reading Adichie's *Feminist manifesto* brings to mind Julia Kristeva's (1966) theory of intertextuality, which "views all texts, not as a closed network but as an open product containing the traces of other texts" (Zengin, 2016, p. 300). Her work resonates with the propositions of several Western gender scholars, such as Bem's (1993) observation that biological essentialism rationalises and legitimises androcentrism and gender polarization "by treating them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of women and men" (Bem, 1993, p. 2). Adichie rejects the "selective use of biology as 'reasons' for social norms" and also the use of "evolutionary biology to explain male promiscuity" (2017, n.p).

Her views on gender also echo Lazar's (2007) identification of gender as an ideological structure that "divides people into two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively" (Lazar, 2007, p. 146). Thus, in tandem with contemporary global feminism, Adichie urges the rejection of the gender binary as "absolute nonsense": "I cannot help but wonder about the clever marketing person who invented this pink-blue binary ... Gender roles are … very difficult to unlearn, and so it is important to try to make sure that Chizalum rejects them from the beginning" (Adichie, 2017, n.p). However, Adichie does not focus on females alone. She also draws on the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, who is renowned for pioneering early men's studies on the social construction of masculinity. In consonance with current trends in feminist studies, she notes that the gender binary can be just as constraining for men as it is for women. This is because masculinity is a "hard, small cage" which limits men:

> We do a great disservice to boys on how we raise them; we stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way, masculinity becomes this hard, small cage and we put boys inside the cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves (…) Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations. (Adichie, 2013; as cited in Paganelli, 2018).

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Concerns about masculinities, just as well as femininities, thus become important for African feminists because, as Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni (2020) explain, the focus on masculinities is a "neglected part of African Literature and Gender Studies" but "it is a conversation that must happen" because "in liberating these men, their female counterparts are equally liberated" (p. 54). Contemporary African feminist writers like Mekuy (2011) and Shoneyin (2010) introduce perspectives on masculinities through dialogism and polyphony.

Adichie's criticism of gender ideologies also comes with the questioning of gender stereotypes. Her observations echo Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Theory which differentiates between hostile and benevolent sexism. Adichie insists that the assumption that "men are naturally superior but should be expected to 'treat women well'" is a characteristic of Feminism Lite which should be rejected outright: "No. No. No. There must be more than male benevolence as the basis for a woman's well-being" (Adichie, 2017, n.p). She adds that the perception of men as providers must equally be rejected:

> Teach her never ever to say such nonsense as 'my money is my money and his money is our money'. It is vile. And dangerous – to have that attitude means that you must potentially accept other harmful ideas as well. Teach her that it is NOT a man's role to provide. In a healthy relationship, it is the role of whoever can provide to provide. (Adichie, 2017, n.p).

Contemporary African feminist writers also focus on 'new' topics such as gender and language. Adichie's *Feminist manifesto* makes references to the interconnection between gender, language and power which dates back to Lakoff's (1975) seminal publication *Language and women's place*. She urges Ijeawele, her friend, to teach her daughter to "question language" since "language is the repository of our prejudices, our beliefs, our assumptions" (Adichie, 2017, n.p). Like Mills (2008), she points out that "misogyny can be overt and misogyny can be subtle and that both are abhorrent" (Adichie, 2017, n.p). An example, is what we find in the asymmetry between the address terms given to women and men:

> "Mrs' is a title I dislike… I have observed too many cases of men and women who proudly speak of the title of Mrs as though those who are not Mrs have somehow failed at something. Mrs can be a choice, but to infuse it with as much value as our culture does is disturbing. The value we give to Mrs means that marriage changes the social status of a woman but not that of a man… I prefer Ms". (Adichie, 2017, n.p).

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These traits of intertextuality in Adichie's work "promote[s]", as Allen (2000) observes, "a vision resistant to ingrained notions of originality, uniqueness, singularity and autonomy" (p. 6; as cited in Dzahene-Quarshie & Omari, 2021, p. 141). They also reflect the effects of globalization, "crosswise contacts," and an exchange of notes with other feminists, which shows, as Morgan (1984) contests, that "sisterhood is global". Adichie's *Feminist manifesto* is indeed an excellent example of Kristeva's intertextuality which posits a "range of links between a text and other texts emerging in diverse forms as direct quotation, citation, allusion, echo, reference, imitation, collage, parody, pastiche, literary conventions, structural parallelism and all kinds of sources either consciously exploited or unconsciously reflected" (Zengin, 2016, p. 300)—and by so doing, Adichie globalises feminism. She "reproduces the texts preceding [hers]" (Zengin, 2016, p. 300) and synthesises the contributions of the most influential international scholars on gender, bringing their works to the doorsteps of a previously "culturally self-enclosed" (Pucherová, 2022) African continent.

## 3. Conclusions: African feminism(s) then and now

The purpose of this study was to examine how first-generation African female writers approach the conditions that oppress women and to discuss how their approach differs from the forms of feminism that are being articulated more recently by African feminist activists. The analysis of the selected texts shows that first-generation African women writers projected images of female characters who resist patriarchy while taking into consideration their African environment and its cultural and ideological idiosyncrasies (Nnaemeka, 2004). Nsué Angüe, Bâ and Nwapa exemplify such writers who, with their works, sought to alleviate the multifarious and multifaceted loads that African women struggle to balance on their heads, while keeping in sight the African identities that make African women's ways of resistance and activism distinctive. Their nego-feminist, snail-sense feminist and womanist texts—*Ekomo, Une si longue lettre* and *Efuru*—thematized factors such as infertility, polygamy, abandonment, the complicity of women in the reproduction of the gender order, and noxious cultural practices (e.g., widowhood rites). However, although these writings reveal the similarities between the discrimination experienced by women in Africa, they also underscore the cross-generational differences in the approaches adopted by African women in their fight against sexism. Nego-feminism, snail-sense feminism and womanism, as well as the other above-mentioned first

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wave variants of African feminisms can be considered as examples of what Adichie terms "Feminism Lite" (Adichie, 2017, n.p).

These selected works give us a picture of feminism in the works of African female writers in the mid to the late 20th century, but as this paper has shown, a different view of feminism exists today. For instance, Adichie's non-fictional works, as well as her fictional texts show that her understanding of feminism does not align neatly with concepts like nego-feminism and snail-sense feminism. Her novel *Purple hibiscus* (2012), for example, exhibits a more sharp-edged criticism of male characters and male-dominated institutions like marriage. Contemporary African feminists of the $21^{st}$ century—the third generation—are unapologetic in their demands for women's rights and unconditionally criticise the role of tradition in the patriarchal subjugation of women. These differences are evident when Nsué Angüe's *Ekomo*, for instance, is compared with Mekuy's *Tres almas para un corazón*, or when Nwapa's *Efuru* is compared with Shoneyin's *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives.* Unlike first-generation African women writers whose central female characters were mostly peasants shackled by tradition in rural settings, the female protagonists of third-generation writers are mostly urban, middle-class, highly educated, professional and sometimes diasporic women (Fongang, 2021), who navigate the complex divides between tradition and modernity and "make[s] choices based on the awareness of [their] rights and dignities" (Eze, 2015, p. 322). Third-generation writers like Mekuy and Shoneyin do not defy patriarchy through negotiations and compromise. Their novels centralise transgressive images of African identity while overtly challenging patriarchal traditional dictates. This contrast between early African feminism(s) and the new African feminist consciousness of the $21^{st}$ century, confirms the evolution of African feminism and the role of African women writers as "agents of change" (Fongang, 2021, p. 1916).

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