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Digital cities and villages: African writers and a sense of place in short online fiction

ABSTRACT

This article analyses how young African writers challenge stereotypes about the continent through their imagination of places in online short stories. These stories appear on the literary websites Brittle Paper, Jalada, Saraba, Flash Fiction Ghana, Adda and African Writer Magazine with a focus on cities and villages. Authored by ten writers from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi and Egypt, the stories contain elements of fiction that risk perpetuating negative stereotypes about Africa as they imagine their respective settings. However, textual analysis supported by an appreciation of context reveals how the writers use these stereotypes as basis to craft strong African narratives. By doing so, the writers emphasize the effect that places have on characters, theme, setting and the image of Africa. Ultimately, the roles that urban and rural spaces play in online fiction are multifaceted and enhance the African narrative in complex ways.

KEYWORDS

online literature
urban spaces
rural communities
African narratives
literary platforms
stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

'The Hour of Judgment' is a short story full of anxiety. Set in an unnamed Kenyan village and written by the creative writer Edith Knight Magak, a young woman and an older man are supposed to consummate their forthcoming marriage in line with customary practices. However, there is a catch for both characters: while the woman is not a virgin because she gave herself to a 'puny

pimpled-faced idiot' who eventually changed his mind about marrying her, the man has a 'powerless' manhood due to the fact that he is unable to sexually satisfy his other three wives. Both situations – female promiscuity and male impotence – are taboo in their village, and the story ends with both characters separately plotting to cover up their flaws in order to avoid communal disgrace. Angst fuels the plot through the perspective of the main characters, as the village serves as a backdrop for the gendered traditional expectations that torment the soon-to-be couple. This angst plays out otherwise in another short piece of fiction with a different setting.

In this case – the Malawian creative writer Wesley Macheso's 'Where we live' – a protagonist recalls events in his life after he moves to the capital city of Blantyre with his mother at age 7. She abandons him there, and he joins other street children in a life of crime. Growing up in the underbelly of a slum called Limba, the protagonist makes two friends who become a prostitute and a drug smuggler. At the end of the story, the drug smuggler dies while in transit in Brazil after cocaine pellets burst in his stomach. As the protagonist watches news of the death on television, he bemoans the fate that tends to befall people like him and his friend due to their volatile relationship with the city.

While the depictions of the village and city in the respective stories contain elements that risk perpetuating negative stereotypes about Africa – backward practices on the one hand and crime on the other hand – the two writers are careful to traverse the mere portrayal of these stereotypes to show how rural and urban spaces enhance a complex and more thorough understanding of African narratives. In other words, Magak and Macheso are not afraid of imagining places in ways that risk entrenching undesirable images of Africa. One objective of this article then is to address the ways in which the African city and the African village complement and contrast each other in literary work: the stories project ordinary characters who, in the thick of what may seem like gratuitously negative imagery and actions, combine perspective, resilience and depth to underline the nuances needed in framing African stories.

The article will also show that African short story writers do more than pit two contrasting sites – the rural and the urban, or the agrarian and the metropolis – against each other. The postcolonial city itself in many ways still reflects the dual structure of the colonial city. As Franz Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the city is by nature compartmentalized, if not segregated: '[t]he "native" section is not complementary to the European sector. The two confront each other, but not in the service of a higher unity' (1968: 4). At the same time, cities draw in rural migrants, thus showing the fluctuating nature of rural and urban spaces, which can be antagonistic and complementary on different levels. This relationship forms the basis of how the description of place is integral to the image of Africa, not least because the city and the village tend to overlap concerns that suggest that the two are not always diametrically opposed. In this article, this interest in improving the image of the continent is seen through an exploration of theme, character and storyline in a selection of stories.

'The Hour of Judgment' and 'Where we live' are among ten selected short pieces of fiction that are either set in a village or city, and appear on the literary platforms Brittle Paper, Jalada, Saraba, Flash Fiction Ghana, Adda and African Writer Magazine. African digital writing platforms have proliferated over the last two decades, with young writers harnessing the potential of the internet

to share their creative writing with wide audiences. As Shola Adenekan (2021) notes in *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya*, African writers are able to publish their work without the encumbrances that were associated with the era of print, when printing presses denied many writers the leeway to freely explore themes and topics of their choice. In this digital age, it is much cheaper and easier to publish stories online, and these selected stories represent a growing body of online fiction that contributes massively to creative writing in Africa. And while some research has been done on African digital fiction, almost nothing has been deliberately linked to setting – specifically, place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is true that the field is relatively new; Adenekan's monograph is one of only two that have been published so far. The other book is James Yékú's (2022) *Cultural Netizenship: Social Media, Popular Culture, and Performance in Nigeria*, which examines the ways in which Nigerian internet users harness the potential of viral memes, videos and other aspects of social media to engage with the world around them. These two monographs bolster a field that is still dominated by shorter works such as book chapters and journal articles. Some of this scholarship addresses other concerns related to negative African stereotypes.

Such research explores creativity and authenticity, especially because of the problematic notion that digital technology is alien to Africa. Rather than simply respond to such an assertion that Africans use digital technology, these scholars go further. Meg Arenberg (2016) for instance finds a complex relationship between traditional forms of expression and new media equivalents. Using WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages as her data, her research interrogates the credibility of new media forms and highlights the challenges that allow traditional poetry in Tanzania and Kenya to flourish in digital spaces, with implications on the identity of these traditional poets.

Yékú (2017) similarly problematizes the implications of adapting conventional forms of African literature into the digital space. He looks at how the Nigerian writer Kiru Taye adapts potential romantic relationships in Chinua Achebe's seminal novel *Things Fall Apart* through a fanfiction piece named *Thighs Fell Apart*. Yékú posits that the adaptation undercuts canonized work, thereby making it more approachable to generations after Achebe. Working online also allows the writing to be critiqued by audiences through comments and thus bridges different generations of African writers, readers and genres. Since her first piece, Taye has written subsequent fanfiction pieces about other romantic relationships in Achebe's novel, including a possibly queer relationship between two male characters. Future scholarship into such creative work has the potential to extend the arguments made by Yékú.

Beyond questions of identity and heritage, there is a more logistical interest in the potential of new media technology to overcome existing barriers that hamper the production, circulation and distribution of digital creative expression in Africa. Stephanie Bosch Santana (2018), for example, is interested in the relative ease with which African writers and poets use new media to reach wide audiences, whose engagement and reaction influence the nature of the work they read. Santana uses *Diary of a Zulu Girl*, a novel created out of a series of viral Facebook posts in South Africa, to reveal networks that are created across real-life and virtual communities in a localized manner. The

male author of the novel started the Facebook posts pretending to be a female Facebook user. Again, the tendency of the author to incorporate the perspectives of Facebook users (through their comments and reactions to his work) meant that the work was – in a way – the joint effort of the Facebook users and the writer, leading to questions regarding identity and ownership in an age of digital media.

Santana's claims are preceded by a contention from Adenekan about the implications of internet access. Adenekan (2014) makes the argument that the internet allows writers to overcome publishing barriers that hitherto stifled creative output. For decades, the well-known *African Writer Series* published by Heinemann, for instance, was one of very few outlets for African writers to share their work; the attendant gatekeepers largely determined the content that was allowed onto the page. Adenekan identifies the internet as the space that has created a multitude of avenues for newer forms of work. These forms of writing are innovative not only because of the new technology – more crucially, writers who publish online are unencumbered by the idiosyncrasies of traditional publishers.

The implications of Adenekan's contention are adopted by Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang (2020), who carries out thematic studies of flash fiction in Ghana. Flash fiction enables creative artists to tackle transgressive themes that critique conventional societal relationships, which ultimately speak to nation-building. Likewise, Dina Ligaga (2020) is interested in transgressive behaviour, but on social media. Using as case studies three Kenyan female public figures popularly called 'slay queens' (young women who are usually active on social media and who gain attention by valorising flashy lifestyles), she demonstrates the potential of their transgressive behaviour to extend conversations on sexuality, women's bodies and female agency. Ligaga underscores the importance of Instagram's visual rhetoric to influence societal expectations regarding gender constructions. While the internet provides an avenue for women to self-express, patriarchal structures both online and offline present dangers that must be acknowledged, to attempt progress.

As yet, none of the existing research pays adequate or direct attention to the sense of place that is imagined in this emerging form of creative expression. Focusing on the role of place highlights the ways in which the treatment of setting functions as a vehicle to debunk stereotypes about Africa. Negative stereotypes about Africa tend to freeze the continent in a backward frame, with a history of being depicted as lacking agency, backward and problem-ridden. These portrayals spill into the twenty-first century when digital technology theoretically makes the world smaller through the flow of information via the internet: one would have assumed that the proliferation of information would undercut ignorant portrayals of Africa. Despite these developments, the continent is typically spoken about as an underdeveloped monolithic entity. In this digital age, such sentiment is heralded by scholars including Terry Harpold (1999), who made the bold but ultimately fake prophecy that Africa would be the heart of digital darkness. Africa showcases spectacular diversity in its digital space, and building on the prior scholarship, this article is interested in urban and rural spaces as imagined in creative writing online. This article, therefore, fills a gap by focusing on the literary aspects of stories that relate to a sense of place. With these thoughts in mind, how do writers imagine cities and villages in their short digital fiction?

CITIES AND VILLAGES: METHOD AND SCOPE

The methodology that undergirds this article is informed by analysing purposively sampled stories from the below-mentioned websites (see Table 1). These stories are authored by writers that ensure a modest attempt at a representative sampling of online fiction from West (Ghana and Nigeria), East (Kenya), Southern (Malawi) and North Africa (Egypt) – Central Africa was the only major region not covered in this selection. There is the potential limitation in picking two stories per country: each story cannot be fully analysed due to the lack of space needed to adequately examine the various issues related to setting. Nevertheless, this limitation is counterbalanced by attempting equilibrium, not only through regional considerations, but also via gender representation.

The selected writers are five women writers and five men writers, all of whom authored their respective texts between 2018 and 2020. It must be noted quickly that the selection of writing is not intended to arrive at an overarching argument about how all African writers imagined a sense of place within the time period. Nonetheless, sourcing information from an equal number of men and women from regional pockets of the continent allows for a medley of voices that highlight patterns in relation to cities and villages in Africa. This medley is further complemented by the diversity of digital platforms that host the stories.

The websites are chosen to reflect different identities of digital platforms in African literature. Founded by the young Ghanaian writer Daniel Dzah, Flash Fiction Ghana is circumscribed by nationality, as its submission guidelines specify that all writing requires some connection with Ghana. Saraba on the other hand is Nigerian in ownership and has a more continental outlook. It was formed by young Nigerian medical students who initially started publishing Nigerian work, and currently welcomes submissions from African writers. Jalada on the other hand was formed by young Africans from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Nigeria and Kenya. Spearheaded by the Kenyan Munyao Kilolo, the website publishes writing from both Africa and its diaspora. Both Brittle Paper and African Writer Magazine were founded by Nigerians who live and work in the United States. They both publish work from writers

Table 1: Purposive texts sampled.

Story	Author	Nationality	Gender	Website
The Hour of Judgment	Edith Night Magak	Kenyan	Female	Brittle Paper
A Woman's Body Parts	Sitawa Namwalie	Kenyan	Female	Jalada
Where we live	Wesley Macheso	Malawian	Male	African Writer Magazine
Meeting Oprah Winfrey	Pemphero Mphande	Malawian	Male	African Writer Magazine
Call Me an Infidel	Hajara Hussaini Ashara	Nigerian	Female	Saraba
We Wait for You	Femi Ayo-Tubosun	Nigerian	Male	Brittle Paper
A Story That Ends in Light	Fui Can-Tamakloe	Ghanaian	Male	Flash Fiction Ghana
Balancing Fear	AJ Asomani	Ghanaian	Female	Flash Fiction Ghana
In the Cities of Central Cairo	Mohamed Matbouly	Egyptian	Male	Adda
Running in Circles	Hend Ja'far	Egyptian	Female	Adda

both on and off the continent. Adda is the outlier in the set and is run by the UK-based Commonwealth Foundation. Even though it is not African in terms of ownership or outlook, it still publishes stories from Africa and is the website from which the Egyptian stories are culled – these stories are originally in Arabic but appear on Adda in English. Each website thus presents a different dimension through its identity and highlights the versatile nature of African writing in this digital age.

While the online space allows for use of multimedia in crafting stories, the pieces of fiction that are selected for this article are made up of text and are typically not accompanied by audio-visuals such as images, sound and video. The outcomes of this research are therefore realized through a combination of textual and contextual analyses. While the former demands an examination of the literary aspects of the stories, contextual analysis involves appreciating the context that informs the creation of a work. This context includes related cultural meanings and significance, the socio-economic and geopolitical context within which the work was created, the ideology that characterizes the work and the purpose for which the work was made, among other similarly pertinent questions.

Textual and contextual analyses are therefore complementary in nature: while textual analysis demands attention to the text, the latter deliberately veers outside the text. As mentioned earlier, the large number of stories does not afford capacious room for analysis. Accordingly, the selected stories are examined through summary and by isolating specific portions in order to arrive at meaning – this is complemented by context where necessary. It must again be noted that while cities and villages are the focus, some of the stories do not explicitly connect with a rural or urban space. This feature allows for extrapolations that are not tied only to the two settings and underlines the versatile nature of the field.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS

The research objective is to better understand how diverse African digital short stories sourced from different authors and digital platforms treat a sense of place, with interest in cities and villages. This objective is explored via the following key questions:

1. How do African writers imagine place – in terms of setting – in online fiction?
2. How do the features of urban and rural spaces impact the stories?
3. What are the implications of stereotypes to the authors' own contexts?
4. How do different literary platforms influence the constituent stories?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The stories examined in this study differ wildly in terms of perspective, theme, setting, characterization and plot. For example, while 'Meeting Oprah Winfrey', 'The Hour of Judgment' and 'Balancing Fear' are rendered in the first person; 'Call Me an Infidel' and 'We Wait for You' are narrated in the second person; the rest of the stories are told from the third-person point of view. Each stylistic choice has its own set of implications: first person stories tend to be subjective and immerse the reader into the viewpoint of the narrator – this choice blocks out what other characters think or feel. As such, in 'The Hour of Judgement' there is the presence of dramatic irony – the case where the reader knows

something that characters do not know – which heightens suspense, as the reader wonders what the two characters would do if they knew that they were both dealing with shame. Second person stories are usually direct, as they rope in the reader as the immediate audience. As a result, a story like 'We Wait for You' makes the character address the reader, who assumes the role of the 'you' being spoken while experiencing the robbery attack. The omniscient third person perspective in 'A Story That Ends in Light' underscores the fact that the villagers are not deceived by the politician who visits them solely for votes. This perspective thus amplifies the agency of the villagers and increases mockery for the politician, as he is characterized as not being genuinely interested in leadership. The diverse perspectives allow for a multifaceted approach to how the various places are imagined and reflect a complex rural-dynamic that is both complementary and contrasting, echoing what Fanon noted decades ago.

The urban population in Africa has ballooned from 285 million out of a total population of 810 million in 2000 to 587 million out of a total population of 1.3 billion in 2020 (Saleh 2021a). This means that the urban population more than doubled in twenty years, growing by 6 per cent per annum. More people are moving from rural areas to cities. In the countries represented in the selection, the rate of urbanization per year is as follows: Ghana 57.35 per cent; Nigeria 51.96 per cent; Egypt 42.78 per cent; Kenya 28 per cent and Malawi 17 per cent (Saleh 2021b). The national average rate of urbanization is 41 per cent per year over the last twenty years; thus, while three of the countries selected for the study have higher-than-average urban populations, two fall far below the average. These statistics do not generally have a strong impact on the construction of place in the stories analysed, as thematic concerns run through the stories to create patterns. Regardless, the implications of rapid urbanization on socio-economic life are captured in some of the stories, which imagine city life differently from village life. Addressing urbanization in the stories is key in shifting stereotypical narratives in which Africa is seen as almost entirely rural; 'rural' tends to be seen as synonymous with 'underdeveloped'. Across the board, the authors simultaneously challenge external stereotypes while addressing internal issues.

For example, Pemphero Mphande's 'Meeting Oprah Winfrey' is set in a village in Zambia, which has an annual urbanization rate of 44.63 per cent (Saleh 2021b). Media personality Oprah Winfrey is fictionalized as having travelled from America to Zambia to live in a village for three months to better understand the nature of poverty. She succeeds in being anonymous until she is accosted by the protagonist. The whole story is a dream, and the protagonist wakes up right after he is offered a million dollars. He is thoroughly disgusted with the realization that he has not left Malawi, and ends the story by telling his audience, '[s]ome dreams can make you want to commit suicide' (Mphande 2018). While this point can come across as a joke, the protagonist seems to grapple with a deeper frustration about Malawi being a difficult place for young people to thrive.

Malawi is placed in stark contrast to America, which is imagined as a desired destination, reflecting a larger sentiment of Africans who apply for visas, or in some cases, attempt to illegally migrate to western countries for better opportunities. While this contrast could be seen to perpetuate a stereotype, Mphande appears to be more concerned with pointing out the need to navigate away from the implications of the stereotype, not least through how he imagines America. The perception of America as a place of opportunity is critiqued by the million-dollar offer, which can literally happen only

in a dream. The story thus satirizes the intention to go abroad. It needs to be emphasized that the author, while mocking the desire to travel, is also unhappy with the factors that make staying at home undesirable. Making an apparently near-perfect America attainable only through a dream is a means through which the West is depicted as an unreal place, contrasting sharply with an African rural reality that is harsh for many young people despite the village being present only in a dream.

'Running in Circles' by Hend Ja'far also revolves around dreams, but with a darker theme. A young woman has a recurring dream full of confusion, and after she informs her mother about it, the dream is transferred to her mother. Her father is also informed about the dream, at which point the dream is promptly transferred to him as well, creating anxiety in the family. The three characters circulate the dream among themselves until they decide to break the chain by choosing one of them to be killed while the dream is attached to them. The story ends with no such decision made; the narrator states, '[a]ll we knew was that the circle would break open for the unluckiest of us' (Ja'far 2019).

This story is set in Egypt, without an explicit connection to a city or a village. The dream keeps taking place in a forest, a popular choice for magical realism in texts ranging from traditional folktales (such as Ananse stories) to stories by modern writers such as Amos Tutuola. By connecting suffering with possessing (or being possessed by) a dream that is set in a forest, the author plays on the difficulty with dealing with burdens, and at the same time highlights the potency of forests in fuelling concerns of the plot. The ordinariness of the characters highlights a quotidian feel, where the everyday nature of their actions makes their lives appear 'normal' and not 'spectacular', as tends to be the case in stories about Africa that appear in western outlets.

The theme of magic realism is again strong in Sitawa Namwalie's 'A Woman's Body Parts' and Mohamed Matbouly 'In the Cities of Central Cairo'. 'A Woman's Body Parts' has a domestic setting, and the protagonist's grandmother advises her to have detachable body parts to deal with difficulties; a women's community is built as the grandmother–granddaughter relationship is complemented with aunties and a mother who share their experiences. The elder lady explains to her younger relative that the need to attach body parts arises when a woman is threatened, disregarded or attacked by a man. The protagonist watches as her mother reattaches body parts, because women do not have the luxury of permanent body parts. The magic realism that stems from having detachable body parts figuratively highlights gender-based attacks. In a mocking tone, the grandmother reminds the protagonist not to attach lips upside down to avoid looking like a strange bird with a beak. The absurdity of the scenario is intended to eventually point to the ridiculous obstacles that women face just because they are women – the impression created here is that victims of physical abuse have their faces disfigured. Ultimately, the author reminds the reader that regardless of the magic realism and satire, the tears that follow from these challenges have to flow. This is the only way a woman can avoid 'damning her soul' (Namwalie 2019). In other words, the reality of many women being unable to escape from violence and difficulty has to be accepted and dealt with by venting the frustration through tears. Through the address to the protagonist, the narrative helps the audience understand the ways in which women cope with these problems.

Using a café doorway in Cairo as a portal to enter major cities around the world, the narrator in 'In the Cities of Central Cairo' is not concerned with his

audience's obvious resultant confusion. He rather understands doorways as enabling unconventional access – either physically or in a more conceptual sense. Accordingly, he calls his love interest a doorway to her magical world where his imagination runs free in relation to 'stories of her African forefathers passed down to her by her grandmother' (Matbouly 2020) and notes later that 'cities roam around downtown Cairo like pedestrians' (Matbouly 2020). This observation could refer to the theoretical shrinking of the world due to the internet or underline the hassle that urban life presents to middle-class workers. The characters in Cairo use the café as a place to unwind from the stress presented by living in the city. The West is yoked with Africa again, but unlike the comparison between Malawi and America in 'Meeting Oprah Winfrey', Matbouly does not valorise Paris over Cairo. The metropolitan/rural divide has often been theorized in studies on world literature in terms of uneven development or a 'centre' against a typically less-desirable 'periphery'. Magic realism helps the African city avoid the typical dead ends, thereby providing room to navigate around stereotypes of African cities and those categories anchored in crime and underdevelopment.

Interestingly, however, other stories embrace these very themes in order to challenge such stereotypes. The city is imagined as rougher in other stories, where a sense of alienation becomes more prevalent among lower-class characters. Femi Ayo-Tubosun ('We Wait for You') and Wesley Macheso ('Where we live') incorporate crime scenes into their narration and portray young people as falling into crime due to a breakdown in socio-economic development. In 'We Wait for You', the narrator is an armed robber who converses callously about his activities. The robbers engage in conversation and banter with their victims, lying about their past and joking when they are exposed. The narrator states:

> We want to exchange stories, but you are not fun at parties. You are still afraid. You think we mean you harm. Why are you afraid of us? Do you think we are evil? We see you nod. We get angry, but not at you. Well, maybe partly at you. You caused this, after all. We try to recycle common tales.
>
> (Ayo-Tubosun 2020)

The mundaneness of their conversations belies the dramatic life-or-death situation. Ayo-Tubosun explores the spectre of violence and crime, which dominate headlines about Nigeria; yet his focus on dialogue between the armed robbers and their victims humanizes the characters and complicates what, on the surface, is a straightforwardly criminal situation.

This tendency to situate crime within a larger context is explored more fully in 'Where we live'. As the protagonist watches news of his drug dealer friend dying in Brazil, Macheso focuses on the implications of the actions rather than the situations that engender these actions. Locating the death outside of Africa is a subtle reminder of the interconnectivity engendered by globalization, and that an action started in an African setting can have international consequences. While the illicit drug trade connects Africa with the world, the case of the smuggler shows how African bodies are cheap collateral for a multibillion-dollar industry in which Africans are the mules for the trade. Macheso underlines the tangential relationship that Africa has with illicit drugs, as the production and circulation benefit from African labour that can result in a ready loss of life. Death also occurs in 'We Wait for You'

even if on a more local level. Additionally, both stories address the problem of youth unemployment, through characters who view social vices as a means of survival – prostitution and drug smuggling on the one hand, and armed robbery on the other hand. Both stories are mainly set in public; the next pair of stories have a more domestic setting.

Where the home is central to the plot, the domestic space is a place where women respond to challenges presented by the patriarchy. In Hajara Hussaini Ashara's 'Call Me an Infidel' and AJ Asomani's 'Balancing Fear', the protagonists deal with a husband and a father respectively. The two stories are a critique of the tendency to construct women in relation to men, as the protagonists deconstruct being a wife and daughter by appropriating agency. These two pieces of fiction challenge stereotypes about African women being submissive and docile. Ascribing agency to both characters rather highlights the power of African women in roles that are historically intended to constrain their potential to control their voice and power. Both writers reimagine the home as a place where these women can reframe power relations to their advantage, echoing earlier African novels such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*.

By appropriating voice in different ways, the two stories amplify their protagonists. In 'Call Me an Infidel', the protagonist mocks the man for being unable to celebrate his wife's success as a writer and critiques different aspects of patriarchy, including religion. The questioning in 'Balancing Fear' is more personal as the narrator recalls her father's weaknesses, which he attempted to hide from his children. The theme of religion is also treated, as the father is more interested in supporting a pastor than in catering for his family. This challenge to patriarchy is couched in a reflexive context, as the narrator waxes philosophical at the end of the story: '[h]ow do we balance the rightful fears developed from our lived experience with the life we envision for ourselves and those we hold dear?' (Asomani 2020). She appears to understand the impact of difficult societal expectations on the domestic challenges that plagued her father, and thus points to a more nuanced reaction that is needed in such situations.

While patriarchal systems are prevalent in Magak's 'The Hour of Judgment', a more political form of hegemonic structures is present in Can-Tamakloe's 'A Story That Ends in Light'. Both stories are set in villages, with power relations as a central theme. As mentioned earlier, 'The Hour of Judgment' has two characters who are consumed by anxiety related to sexual performance. While the young woman plans to trick the man into believing that she loses her virginity to the man, the man is reliant on a concoction to cure his sexual weakness. The reader does not find out whether either character succeeds, thus placing the social structures that force anxiety on people in focus. The societal expectations here risk perpetuating stereotypes about African villages and backward practices, where women are supposed to remain chaste until marriage, while men are supposed to display sexual prowess. The anxiety that informs the psyches of the two main characters adds a humane element to the situation while also providing a critique of the socially constructed connection between marriage and sex. The hypocritical nature of this connection, in other words, makes the characters appear more nuanced in their awareness of evading exposure. The reaction to hegemonic structures is similarly nuanced in 'A Story That Ends in Light'.

M'Cormack-Hale and Zupork Dome (2021) find that, despite gains made in terms of democracy across Africa, citizens are not enthused by elections.

In 'A Story That Ends in Light' this public apathy is a reaction to corruption, which hampers proper infrastructural development. A politician leaves the city to campaign in a village, knowing that he needs the villagers' votes, even though he does not care to bring the development necessary to improve their lives. The villagers know that their presence is only valued for votes and will not result in development. They therefore play along. On the surface, both villages are imagined as vulnerable to exploitation.

Both stories include characters who are perceptive of those structures that others use to keep them subjugated. As the narrator notes in 'A Story That Ends in Light', the villagers found the politician's visit to be 'an interesting interlude in an otherwise calm existence. They were here merely to observe' (Can-Tamakloe 2020). The amusement removes the perspective from the politician and reveals that the villagers are not only aware of the shenanigans; they are also in control of how they react to the situation. Such characterization challenges the stereotypical narrative that ordinary (and especially rural based) Africans are helpless in the face of corruption from powerful politicians, thus providing a more rounded picture of the situation on the ground.

As noted earlier, the platforms that host these stories have different identities. Their unique identities however do not affect the nature of the submissions, even though one could have easily assumed that stories circumscribed by nation or region might have led to thematic or character concerns that differed from another platform. The brief set of literary analyses reveals that the nature of the platforms has largely minimal influence on the aspects of the stories. It must be admitted, however, that a wider set of data could lead to opposite outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to tease out elements of fiction that can be connected to cities and villages across the continent in African digital writing. Through the treatment of stereotype, this handful of stories suggest ways in which place is constructed in African online literature. As the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie posited in her viral TED Talk 'The danger of a single story', stereotypes in and of themselves are not necessarily untrue. But problems occur when stereotypes become the only associations with a group of people or a place. In response to these risks, the selected stories treat stereotypes as building blocks to construct identities, perceptions and conflicts that reveal the ways in which African stories in this digital age range from the banal to the interesting, while still having deeper implications on plot, theme and character. These implications in turn create the impression that literary constructions of place embrace stereotypes and underline the complex nature of African narratives.

The African narrative is thus enriched by this analysis because place is understood as a complex enabler of social relations. Place has influence on how characters behave and how themes develop. Cities and villages are also influenced by the actions of characters, as well as by the ways in which themes revolve around these places. Place serves as a backdrop for actions and interactions that show how these writers are interested in pushing their continent forward through their craft. Their craft again has implications on digital technology, which has quickly become synonymous with African creativity. By using the internet to reach wide audiences, African digital writers not only contribute to global trends in fiction; they take the lead in shaping how Africa is seen by the world around them through their stories.

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