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„Female Identity Construction in Selected  
Anglophone African Novels“

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*“It is about time we start singing about our own heroic deeds”  
(Buchi Emecheta qtd. in Nnaemeka 1994: 137).*

*I dedicate this thesis*

*to my parents, Helmut & Brigitte Helmberger  
to my sister, Claudia Helmberger  
and to Klaus Forstner*

*Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your support that has made it possible for me  
to accomplish my studies.*

## DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I confirm to have conceived and written this diploma thesis in English by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references, either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors have been truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

Andrea Helmberger

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## 1. Introduction

In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity (Erikson 130).

Stated in 1968, this quotation by the American psychologist Erik Erikson marks the beginning of a concept that has been gaining more and more attention in the last decades: the quest for identity. Especially in the Western world, people strive to know who they are, what they are, and what they will be. However, what does identity really mean and why is it ascribed importance in our society? Identity is an ever-changing concept and thus it is not easy to grasp and define, even if it is one's own cultural or personal identity. Therefore, looking at the identity construction of people living in a totally different culture and environment is even more complex. This will be illustrated with this thesis, which examines the construction of female identity in African literature and aims to identify factors that influence the identity formation of the depicted women.

As the title of my thesis, "Female Identity Construction in Selected Anglophone African Novels," shows, the notion of identity constitutes its theoretical centrepiece. Therefore, the first chapters of the thesis discuss this concept and other theoretical approaches relevant for the subsequent literary analysis: What is identity and how is it constructed? What is gender and how does it influence one's identity? Who ascribes a(n) (cultural) identity, to whom and for what reason? Are African women able to choose their identity or is it beyond their control? Which role does identity construction play for African women writers? Those and many more issues will be investigated and addressed in the first part of the thesis.

Subsequently the thesis draws attention to representative texts written by African women authors, focusing on the female characters' identities. This analysis will discuss how the writers construct and project themselves in their works and, moreover, it will

identify factors that coin and form the identities of African women. For this purpose I will examine four representative texts from three different African countries, namely Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (Nigeria), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Nigeria), Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (Zimbabwe) and Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (South Africa).

Looking at the literary landscape in African countries,

women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in the field. Relatively few literary magazines and scholarly journals, in the West and in Africa itself, have found significant space or time for African women writers. The ignoring of African women writers on the continent has become a tradition, implicit, rather than formally stated, but a tradition nonetheless – and a rather unfortunate one at that (qtd. in Nfah-Abbenyi 2).

Hence, by writing their own narratives, the African women writers this thesis is dealing with have proven strength to find their own voice and, as Emecheta puts it in the quote above, found a way to “sing about [their] *own* heroic deeds” [emphasis added].

Therefore, I find it very important to include a generous amount of quotations in order to let these women speak for themselves and give them space to present their personal motivations as well as their works. The novels portray different generations of women living in different African countries, depicting a great variety of different identities. By looking at the four novels in great depth, I want to analyse these identities and the ways they have been constructed. What are the most influential factors in connection to female identity construction in African literature? What is the impact of the African context, historical events and the cultural setting? How and to which extent does African literature reflect social reality? Those and many more questions and issues shall be investigated in the course of my thesis.

## 2. Identity construction – concepts and issues

### 2.1. Identity

The idea of 'identity' as it is currently used is a fairly recent social construct, however, it is difficult to find one pointed definition that captures the scope of its meanings. People are driven by a quest for identity and aim to arrive at an answer to who they are. But where does this ambition come from? And where did the notion of 'identity' originate? In the following, different identity concepts as well as theoretical approaches will be discussed in order to find answers to these questions.

The term identity stems from the Latin *idem*, meaning 'the same', and is given a lot of attention in psychology and sociology. Identity, however, is not just there, but needs to be established and identified in order to classify a person or a thing. When looking for definitions, a big range of different formulations that have evolved in different research traditions can be found. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, identity is "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else." This definition, however, holds a paradox in itself as it is referring to both sameness and distinctiveness (see Gardiner 347). As further examination will show, neither of the two features can be neglected, as they are equally important to the concept of identity.

This thesis is looking at Constructionism rather than at the Essentialist approach, which suggests that identity is naturally given, innate and stable. In contrast to that, the Constructionist approach sees identity as a fluent construction that is "formed through the social conditions in which individuals live" (Müller 8). Therefore, cultural surroundings as well as discourses play a crucial role in the construction of identity.

Erik Erikson was one of the earliest psychologists who took an interest in identity and developed a socio-psychological concept for the personal construction of self-identity.



According to his framework, human beings need to overcome crises in their adolescent stage in order to be awarded with a coherent self, which is further referred to as identity, a feeling of being unique, whole and coherent (see Schwarzfurtner 6). Furthermore, social relationships and the way a person sees him or herself in society play a crucial role in the formation and manifestation of identity as Erikson conceives it (see Gardiner 349). In contrast to this framework, however, Michel Foucault was one of the first who rejected the idea of identity being an inner and fixed essence. This idea coincides with the recent widespread consensus among psychologists that the process of identity formation is never fixed, but always shifting as an active process that continues indefinitely.

According to Foucault's theory, everything, including identity, must be defined as a product of discourse, which is created, kept and reproduced by society. Without identity-discourse, identity would not exist; it is thus socially constructed. Stuart Hall pursues this concept and argues that differentiation in discourse is necessary for identity formation:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation) (Hall 4).

Hall also supports Foucault's idea that identities are constantly changing, "never unified" and "increasingly fragmented and fractured," depending on the discourses, positions and practices they are constructed in (Hall 4). Identity, therefore, is fundamentally relational and does not exist in isolation. Furthermore, individuals are not restricted to one identity only, as Simon argues: "a specific identity that enters into the motivational and regulatory circuit and consequently has motivational bearing and behavioural effects is only one of a person's many possible identities" (qtd. in

Schwarzfurtner 8). In interaction with the environment, the brain elects one identity that is expressed, however, “it is also responsive to new experiences which may lead to its replacement by another identity and the opening of another chapter in the narrative about oneself” (ibid.).

As to the importance of differentiation in discourse, the aspect of power is emphasised by Laclau. He argues that identity construction goes hand in hand with “excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles – man/woman, etc” (Laclau qtd. in Hall 5). The second term, woman, is therefore seen as the peculiar one, which differences are reduced to the abnormal as opposed to the quality of the first, man. Similarly, the black/ white relationship is seen as imbalanced as white, just like ‘man’, is seen as the “unmarked” term whereas ‘black’ and ‘woman’ are “marks (i.e. marked terms)”, which leads the discussion to power and dominant discourses linked to cultural identity (ibid., see Clarke 510).

## **2.2. The construction of cultural identities**

After having examined the personal construction of self-identity and the social construction of identity through discourse, the discussion is now approaching one of the core concepts when examining African narratives: the construction of cultural identities. What constitutes a cultural identity? And what importance is this concept ascribed to?

As it has been discussed above, power relations play a crucial role in the construction of identity. Through the changes and developments caused by globalisation and modernisation, civilisations worldwide seem to converge and struggle to preserve, regain or redefine their cultural identity (see Schwarzfurtner 9). The quest for identity of individuals can therefore be transferred to a culture:

Cultural identities are marked by a number of factors – ‘race’, ethnicity, gender and class to name but a few; the very real locus of these factors, however, is the notion of difference. The question of difference is emotive; we start to hear ideas about ‘us’ and ‘them’, friend and foe, belonging and not belonging, in-

groups and out-groups, which define 'us' in relation to others, or the Other (Clarke 510).

As soon as people belonging to a certain culture define themselves in relation another group, the "cultural Other", the conception of cultural identity becomes stronger and firmer. This is the moment when racism, hatred and exclusion arise due to the fact that one culture restricts the right way to act and live (see *ibid.* 511). Decisive factors that define a nation or national culture are language, religion and geography; however, a superior group can formulate other values such as ethnicity, resulting in a segregation of a homogeneous population into a "we" and "they" (Schwarzfurtner 9). Here, it is important to acknowledge that while many people are privileged to be able to choose their identity, others are not (see Clarke 528). Having the power to choose which features are worthy and which ones need to be rejected often involves a process of elimination and selection. This aspect will, among others, play an important role when analysing the narratives of African women writers.

Like identities of individuals, cultural identities are not only fluid and conditioned in relation to historical and cultural circumstances, but they are also pluralistic. Especially in Africa, a continent with a vast variety of peoples, traditions and cultures that are ever-changing, it seems unthinkable to reduce a culture to having one single, fixed identity.

Finally, living in a culture that has established its traditions and cultural identity also asks for understanding, valuing and most importantly accepting other cultures the way they are (different). Discovering and trying to understand the other is a crucial step to comprehend that "the other is part of the self", as the self is only constructed through the difference to the other (van Alphen, *qtd.* in Schwarzfurtner 10).

### 2.3. Gender

What is particularly crucial about the power relation in connection with personal or cultural identity construction is the aspect of gender, its definition and role in society. 'Gender' as a category of analysis "had come to distinguish the biological, which initially referred to male and female, from the cultural, which was associated with masculine and feminine" by the early 1980s (Boris 192). Gender was thus seen as a social construct of sexual difference and not as a fixed, essential characteristic of a person (see Schleicher 151). Nfah-Abbenyi elaborates on the difference between sex and gender in the following:

Sex is understood as a person's biological maleness or femaleness, while gender refers to the nonphysical aspects of sex, a group of attributes and/or behaviours, shaped by society and culture, that are defined as appropriate for the male sex or the female sex. Gender is not given at birth; only the actual biological sex is. Gender identity then begins to intervene through the individual's developing self-conception and experience of whether he or she is male or female (16).

Together with Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and others, Butler has strongly influenced feminist theory and criticised power relations occurring between men and women due to the construction of gender identity. This discussion was initiated by Foucault, who has already drawn attention to the social construction of sexuality when claiming that sexuality was not naturally given but constructed through discourse (see Clarke 516). In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir examines the long-standing tradition of oppression of women and discovers that the woman is always defined as the Other by men who see themselves as the Subject. She argues that "one is not born, but, rather becomes, a woman" (301), and receives a lot of attention with her theory. Thus, women are ascribed certain roles that influence the way they act and live, meaning their identity.

Butler, who is stimulated by but still critical of Simone de Beauvoir's assertion, claims in her works such as *Gender Trouble* (1990), "that gender dispositions are constituted through a set of acts that constantly inform gender identity" (Ebron 175). She further argues for a performative understanding of gender and subject formation through

power discourse and performative acts: “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 140).

Other feminists see gender as a social and cultural process that involves a complex set of relations, including age, race, class, ethnicity, ideology, et cetera. The notion of identity is therefore combining various features and can, according to Butler, also be linked to performance and sexual power (see Nfah-Abbenyi 17). Of capital importance, however, is the fact that all human beings are part of a society that shapes their identities and therefore, the context of social circumstances, as variable as they may be in different cultures and parts of the world, defines gendered subjectivity:

Collective beliefs, the power of institutions and the influential opinions of others aid the shaping of individual selfhood according to the conditions set by this system. Transforming maleness into masculinity, femaleness into femininity, this system delimits the possible spectrum of human experience according to the two biological sexes (Müller 38).

Consequently, children and adolescents learn social roles and identify with certain groups around which their sense of identity consolidates. The crucial problem is, however, that the general gender system suggests the classification of the masculine and feminine as two opposite and disconnected forms, which is highly criticised by feminists. This gender binary results into a framework in which boys are more privileged than girls. Traditionally, the two main roles available to women are those of wife and mother whereas men are given a broader variety of options (see Gardiner 353-354).

Owing to feminist movements and women fighting for equality, there have been considerable changes in the Western conception of gender roles in the last decades. Moreover, the discussion has become increasingly internationalised and consequently, feminist struggles have been pursued not only by local but also by international organisations and networks. An example for this is transnational feminism: “The

‘transnational’ emphasis is what allows us to move beyond narrow, localised feminisms or Third World feminisms that depend upon a centre-periphery model claiming subversive potential for ‘marginal’ positions, and beyond world-system theories that depend upon ‘inadequate and inaccurate binary divisions’” (Richards 2000: 13). The intention is to view women and their experiences more broadly than it had been done before, and also, transnational feminism tries not to “homogenize experience” by recognising “the limitations of a global perspective” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the concepts of identity and gender are not seen without criticism in Africa, a typical Third World country, as is it seen by Westerners. The next chapter is going to discuss this issue from the perspective of African women, which will reveal reasons and motivations for their attitude towards Western theories.

### **3. Identity and gender in the context of African women’s literature**

#### **3.1. Assignment of Western theories on African novels**

What is this business about finding out who you are?

Why have we turned this into a problem?

When is it not a problem then?

When you’ve got “pure blood”?

[...]

I can’t understand why they suddenly invented this discomfort with the notion  
(Wicomb & Willemsse 2002, 147).

At this point it is to be noted that all the theories discussed in the previous chapter are Western concepts, meaning that identity and gender theories have been read from a Western perspective. Therefore, in order to analyse African novels, one cannot appropriate all these theories for the purpose of the analysis of African literature. Nfah-Abbenyi points out that “gender and feminist theory [...] has not been formulated in ways that are wholly adequate and appropriate for African, ‘Third World’ women’s lives

and literature” (18, see Newell 2). In her work, Nfah-Abbenyi includes interviews with African women writers such as Buchi Emecheta, who defines her position in the following way: “I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. [...] I don’t like being defined by them... It is just that it comes from outside and I don’t like people dictating to me... (Buchi Emecheta in a 1989 interview qtd. in Nfah-Abbenyi 7). African women such as Emecheta thus refuse to be dictated by Western people, who generally see themselves as being more advanced. And indeed, the First and Third Worlds are not monolithic and possess political and historical differences. As Richard argues, “posing one against the other ignores issues of race/ethnicity, economic class, and gender/sexuality which affect power relations within both worlds” (3).

Mama addresses the problem of the imposition of identity conceptions on Africans by referring to her own experiences:

I seem to recall that I ‘grew’ a more specifiable ‘identity’ only when I was sent away to school in Europe [...] I developed an awareness of my difference, my Other-ness, when I was far away from home, family, and the cosmopolitan community I had known. It was in an English boarding school that I was first compelled to claim and assert an identity [. Back home,] we had been raised to assume that we were ‘citizens of the world’ in a world that now turned out to be deeply divided. [...] I was now reduced to being a ‘coloured girl’ or a ‘black’, to be treated variously as though I was an orphan, a refugee or an immigrant. Furthermore, I was assumed to have an ‘identity problem’ (Mama 2001: 10-11).

This passage depicts the problem of power relations that have come into existence through the idea of identity construction Mama experienced as a coloured girl in Europe. She thus criticises the conception of (cultural) identities and refers to it as a system for differentiating “‘the deserving’ from the ‘undeserving’ poor, as a means of determining whether individuals would be entitled to work, welfare, education, health, residence, permits, or not” (2001: 10).

As it has been stated above, factors that define a cultural identity can be language, religion or geography. However, looking at a country like Nigeria, for instance, defining

the culture does not work smoothly: there are over 350 different ethnic groups whose members do not only have different cultural traditions but also speak different languages (see Achebe & Teboh 66). This situation reflects the vast majority of African nation-states: there is not one single language that everyone learns, but a huge diversity in languages as well as clan origins, beliefs and traditions. Mama therefore calls the Western conception of identity a “gross simplification of selfhood, a denial and negation of the complexity and multiplicity at the roots of most African communities” as it only implies a “singular, individual subject with clear ego boundaries” (2001: 9, 11). Nyamnjoh strengthens this opinion by claiming that

most people in Africa refuse to be fenced in by particular identity markers, choosing instead to draw from the competing influences in their lives as individuals and communities, in order to challenge parochial notions of identification that deplete those they are expected to enhance by denying them the negotiability and creativity that comes from encountering diversity. Africans refuse to be confined by the simplistic logic of dualisms, dichotomies and ‘winner takes it all’ that has characterised meta-narratives of modernisation on their continent (25).

Mama and Nyamnjoh are not the only ones who have questioned the relevance and the utility of gender categories for analysing men and women in Africa (see Hodgson & McCurdy 4). But even though these controversial opinions and arguments seem to be very profound and convincing, other African women perceive the Western conception of identity differently: with on-going gender debates in Africa through various projects and programmes, “African women define their own problems and promote their own economic, political and social demands” (ibid.). They understand that Western theories do not define gender as one universal concept but emphasise the fact that identity and gender are concepts constructed by a certain society. Still, what Mama criticises is the fact that African women are different in a way Western society cannot relate to and therefore they can neither analyse nor define them or their identity.

Hogdson and McCurdy focus on “wicked” African women who do not adapt to their culture and stick out for various reasons, which will be discussed later in great detail.



They perceive the study of gender in Africa as highly important and enriching as it has “made significant contributions to [their] understanding of gender roles and relationships as culturally diverse, historically dynamic, and inflected by difference of age, class, race, ethnicity, and nation” (Hodgson & McCurdy 5). Nowadays, the situation seems to have eased: critics are less openly dismissive of feminism than they were twenty years ago (see Andrade 2007: 88). Still, it is recommended to keep this conflict of opinion including the vast cultural differences in mind in the subsequent literature analysis.

As it has been outlined above, identity theories and gender construction in Africa are different from Western frameworks due to various different factors. Thus, one can speak of a reconfiguration of gender identity in Africa, which will be discussed in the following.

### **3.2. The reconfiguration of gender identity in Africa**

Compared to Western women, Third world women carry an even heavier “chain of otherness” with them, as Nfah-Abbenyi argues:

If women have been excluded from the real of ‘the subject’ in Eurocentric discourses, then Third World women have been ‘objects’ of discourses [...] even more so than Western women. Being the Other of man, the Other of the West, the Other of other (Western/ non-Western) women has been as problematical as the place(s) of post-colonial women ‘as writing and written subject’ (31).

So, what does this chain of otherness cause for African women? What does it mean to be an African woman? And how do African women choose to locate and name themselves? Nwando Achebe and Bridget Teboh, two Nigerian gender historians, pursue these questions.

I am first and foremost Igbo, then I am a woman, and third I am African. Only last do I name myself Nigerian. Being black does not even enter into the equation, since race has never been a distinguishing category in Africa. [...] For an Igbo woman’s world is vastly different from an Igbo man’s – her mannerisms, the way she carries herself, the expectations society has on her and she of herself, the

way in which she is socialized – all make her uniquely female (Achebe & Teboh 63).

One can hear a certain pride when reading these lines, and this is also one reason why Achebe feels that her research and work on gender are crucial for African women. Teboh further explains why she sees herself as an African and argues that there is a close bond with all “sons and daughters of Africa – a connection that is even more binding for Africans living outside continental Africa” (ibid. 64). This statement is even more meaningful when thinking of the great diversity in Africa.

The aim of African women working in female gender identity research is to analyse and explain African history and its culture from within, on its own terms. Thus, one can speak of a reconfiguration of gender that is defined by insiders, African women themselves: “As Africans we should and must speak in order to get out of the web of colonial subjugation and subjectivity that is evident everywhere, especially in academia” (Achebe & Teboh 75).

Looking at some native peoples in West Africa, gender has always been “formally performed through age-grade systems” that turns unmarked children into men or women (Ebron 177). Among the Suku, a people of south-western Congo and north-western Angola, the process of ‘becoming’ a man and a woman works similarly: only immanent roles are specifically linked to the woman or the man, constituting their identities (see Kopytoff 131). Consequently, the ‘making’ of gender is not a newly established idea by philosophers but a local system that has been applied for a long time. Herbert mocks American feminist by claiming that “Africans have known all along [...] that gender is socially, not biologically, created and that it evolves over the life cycle” (qtd. in Boris 193).

One African country that is actively working on gender and the problems connected to it is South Africa: After the first democratic elections in 1994, gender equality has been

viewed as one of the key goals next to addressing racial inequalities as a result from apartheid and centuries of white domination (see Seidman 30). Nelson Mandela called for a democracy that would give all citizens equal representation in the state and so, the South African Commission on Gender Equality, “an innovative institution, designed to allow feminist activists simultaneously to represent ‘women’s interests’ within state policymaking and to press for new gender relations in society at large,” was founded (ibid.). By drawing on international experience and feminist scholarship, South African Activists managed to build an institutional framework that could “empower feminist voices in the state” into the 1996 Constitution and thus created an autonomous body to “monitor new policies, represent women’s concerns, and offer alternative understandings of gender in the public arena” (ibid). However, the first problems occurred when the Gender Commission tried to define women in order to represent their interests. South Africa is a country with a huge diversity of race, class, culture and politics that had been reinforced by the legacies of apartheid (see ibid. 36). Therefore, women face very different problems and challenges, depending on class, race and urban or rural locations and so it soon became clear that fighting for all groups of women would be impracticable. The Commission thus focused on the “people living on the periphery, especially women in rural areas, on farms, in peri-urban areas, and in domestic employment”, meaning poor African women who had been marginalised for a long time. Nevertheless, the Gender Commission has faced a lot of struggles in its first years and is still trying to improve by engaging new feminists.

Slowly but steadily, African women have achieved to produce, reproduce and transform gender relations, as Hodgson and McCurdy argue (see 16). Women are starting to take risks and opportunities and embark on new lives, however, those who succeed and “disrupt the web of social relationships that define and depend on them as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and lovers” are referred to as “wicked” and are often despised (Hodgson & McCurdy 6). Nonetheless, their actions make power relations shift and “thereby, reconfigure gender relations and representations (ibid. 16).

Yet, the core aim of this thesis is not the analysis of African women and their conceptions of identities but the identity construction in literature. Therefore, the next part is focusing on the narrative construction of female identities and its role in African society.

### **3.3. Narrative construction of female identities in African novels**

According to Schleicher, authors do not only see their work as a tool for giving coherence to their lives or understanding and remembering experiences better, but they also benefit from the writing process to construct their sense of self – their identity. What kinds of narratives are possible and imaginable in a culture determine how people live their lives: “[n]arrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. ‘Life’ in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as ‘a narrative is’. Narratives become us” (qtd. in Schleicher 150). Clarke also claims that imagination is central for identity construction as it has, according to him, “very real consequences for the world we live in” (528).

Hence, literature, which is inevitably connected to the writer’s imagination, provides models for (female) self-realisation and affects the author as well as the readers. Furthermore, narratives are, similar to the idea of identities, changeable and fluid rather than constant as, for instance, biographies and stories can be rewritten and retold in many different ways and thus, “in different contexts, we can construct different identities, for different purposes” (Schleicher 150). This unfolds a strong interdependence between culture and life narratives, which is crucial when analysing literature within a certain culture. Looking at African literature, however, it is first necessary to examine the history of the literary tradition.

Lyric, narrative poetry and drama have had a long history in Africa, but the novel as a literary form has only been taken from the colonizers. By the late 1950s and 1960s

period of transition to independence, a wealth of novelistic writing, which mostly engaged with anticolonial nationalism, had been produced (see Andrade 2007: 86). As this can be seen as the start of the writing of novels in Africa, one can figure that, in comparison to European cultures, Africa only had a relatively short time to develop its history of novel writing.

One factor that is crucial when discussing the narrative construction of identities is the sex of the author as, in fiction, gender roles can be imagined, examined and tested. Thus, the fictional definition of gender roles is dependent on whether the writer is male or female (see Kauer 108):

[W]omen writers and readers tend to approach texts differently from men. [...] That is, the woman writer uses her text, particularly one centring on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character. [...] Thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero. This can be a positive, therapeutic relationship (Gardiner 357).

This therapeutic relationship between writers and their works is not uncommon. In South Africa, literature is seen as a means to redefine national identity and also deals with the question of gender, presumably because it is another stable aspect of self-definition (see Kauer 107-108). Another remarkable aspect of contemporary South African literature is that male authors often deal with strong women in their works, such as Zakes Mda in *Ways of Dying* and J. M. Coetzee in *Disgrace* (see *ibid.* 108-109).

However, this thesis solely examines female writers and the female identities they create within their narratives. In the following, the power of these women writers and their works, which are often seen as mouthpieces for African women, will be further examined.

### **3.4. How African woman writers (struggle to) give a voice to their people**

As the previous chapter has shown, literature can provide models for female self-realisation and can therefore help readers to find and deal with their identity. Female protagonists can function as heroines or role models as they can represent emancipated, strong women who are not subjected to the restrictions of the African society. However, how do African women writers give a voice to their people?

In African oral tradition, women were not only “active, powerful, and socially relevant” performers but also producers of knowledge especially in the field of oral literature of didactic relevance and pedagogical foundations (see Nnaemeka 1994: 138-139). Today, however, the field of African novelist literature is strongly dominated by men and significant female writers have long been ignored, excluded or forgotten. What are the reasons for this transformation of the significance of women in the literary field? In her works, Nnaemeka is dealing with the fate of the once powerful African women who “were not only performers and disseminators of beliefs, cultural ideals, and personal/collective history, but also composers who, sometimes, transformed and recreated an existing body of oral traditions in order to incorporate woman-centred perspectives” (1994: 138). She argues that, as the tradition changed from oral to written literature, the former speaking subjects have been transformed into written objects through “the collusion of the imperialistic subject and the patriarchal subject” (ibid.). Connected to this, new imperatives for mastery such as the knowledge of the colonizer’s languages<sup>1</sup> evolved and thus, Victorian ideals of colonial education and sexual politics created a hierarchy that explicitly privileged men (see ibid. 139).

As the field of formal education was for a long time predominated by men, fewer women were able to attend school or receive university education that would have paved the way for a career as a writer (see Nfah-Abbenyi 3). Women simply did not have access to or learn how to write in the colonizer’s languages that were seen as

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<sup>1</sup> English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese (see Nnaemeka 1994: 139)

literary in Africa (see Achebe & Teboh 76). Therefore, despite “the enviable position women have occupied as oral artists”, they were powerless and not given the attention they deserved in the newly established literary tradition (Nfaah-Abbenyi 2). Nnaemeka, referring to this development as a “conspiracy of African writers”, strongly criticises the exclusion of ‘uneducated’ women whose relevance and existence have always been of an immense importance for African reality (1994: 141). The loss of vital knowledge and literary wealth is exemplified by Achebe and Teboh in connection to Pidgin English:

Pidgin English is the most popular, most understood, and most spoken language in all of English-speaking West Africa. Yet because this language is unknown and therefore unacceptable in academia and to the West, users of Pidgin English, no matter how brilliant their ideas are, seem doomed to remain unheard, to be (re)presented wrongly, or to have their voices muted (76).

In 1966, the first novel written by an African woman was published: Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (see Nnaemeka 1994: 140). By that time, the literary tradition has developed into a uniquely male field, strengthened by the ‘masculinist’ nationalism (see Newell 7). But still, the “[t]he very entrance of female authors in the public sphere in itself is a political success [as] women had been educated at a significantly later moment and in smaller quantities” (Andrade 2007: 88). In a masculinist literary culture, African women writers are aware of the powerful gaze of (usually male) critics and readers and have learnt to deal with this demanding observation by adapting their work to the conventions and expectations, as Nnaemeka claims (see 1994: 142): “many African women writers have restricted themselves to what I would call ‘domestic literature,’ or more specifically ‘motherhood literature’ (defined in terms of the role that female characters are expected to play)” (ibid. 150).

Female African writers thus place the representatives of tradition at the centre of the narrative and in case there are less conformist, “deviant”, characters, they remain marginal figures. Nnaemeka compares this marginalisation of the non-conformist characters with the dilemma of women writers who are driven by a quest for their identity, especially in relation to feminism and liberation. In addition, the

marginalisation may reflect an expression of cultural solidarity (see Nnaemeka 1994: 151). Recent novels by African women writers, however, portray female characters with a strong self-awareness and challenge “the norms of some of the most restrictive strata of society, those of novel writing and novel publishing [. Thus,] they gradually succeeded in reconfiguring those norms in order to be able to gain access” (Andrade 2007: 91).

However, when analysing the novels in the second part of the thesis, it is important to consider the history of African women writers, their struggle to recapture space in the literary field and, last but not least, their own position in the discourse: How did the women manage to give a voice to a feminine subjectivity? Where did they grow up and how did they experience their role as African women? Moreover, have they been living in Africa for their whole lives or did they write the novels in a Western environment? By posing these questions, I want to emphasise the fact that African women (writers) do not speak with one voice only (see Newell 7). There is a great variety of different women pursuing different goals and having different interests and conceptions of life, which is why I decided to work with women writers from three different countries, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Therefore, the diversity existing within African womanhood will certainly become obvious in the course of this thesis.

#### **4. Female identity construction by selected African women writers**

The theories and ideas presented in the first part of the thesis will now be exemplified with four novels written by African women writers. This will be realised by examining the women’s roles, behaviours and histories as well as the society’s demands on them. African literature is full of complexities and ambiguities that are caused by oppositional binaries such as traditional and modern, male and female or agent and victim (see Mamacos, Nnaemeka 1997a: 2). These opponents can be found in most central issues in African literature such as motherhood, victimhood, subjectivity, speech, silence, agency,



power, knowledge and nation, which all influence women and their respect in Africa societies (see Nnaemeka 1997a: 3).

As the situation of women in African societies has changed in the last decades, the novels under discussion not only depict women in different countries but they also present different generations in order to establish a general and therefore preferably unrestricted picture of African women. Nfah-Abbenyi argues that female writers “(re)construct their [characters’] identities and subjectivities in a changing African socio-political and literary scene” and want their readers to learn from these characters (37). She differentiates between three groups or generations of women, which will all be dealt with in the analysis of the novels:

The first group or generation of women are those whose lives extend from the pre-colonial period to the end of colonialism. They are illiterate women [...] whose lives have been shaped solely by their traditions and cultures, or women [...] who are trying to make the transition from traditional, rural life to modern, post-colonial life in the cities (Nfah-Abbenyi 36).

The second group of women are the children of the first generation who are receiving “Western education that their mothers never had” and lastly, young girls growing up in wealthy homes and families in which at least one family member is well educated constitute the third group of women (ibid.).

Obviously, each generation is facing different demands that strongly influence their identity construction: What are women and girls supposed to, or even forced to do? What do their culture and traditions command? Quite often, women find themselves in a constant struggle against expectations, which impedes their quest for identity. However, the selected novels present women who find their way through suffering, fighting or rebelling. This mirrors the reality of women writers who, according to the writer Mariama Bâ, are obliged to “use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon” in order to be allowed the place they deserve in African society (qtd. in Nfah-Abbenyi 36). Buchi Emecheta, the author of *The Joys of Motherhood*, agrees with Bâ and also

emphasises the importance of writers sharing their stories and memories with their African compatriots:

In my own case, I might say, 'I'm all right in England; I have everything I need, my children are here - why should I go back?' [...] I feel there is this thing inside of me, which says, I must go there, I must share. It's part of you. To completely say 'no' to that culture would be a denial of my own personality, as an individual. I go to the village more often than some people who are in Lagos (Emecheta in Boss 94).

Seeing the importance of sharing stories, it is of great importance to pay attention to the audience: which people do writers intend to address? Here, the language employed is highly significant for the reception of the works: "Most people in Nigeria speak English; even though it is an alien language we speak it. You can't write in a Nigerian language, because Nigeria has something like 249 languages. If you write in one, you just write to a small group of people" (Emecheta in Boss 94). Here, the most important reason for writing in English is named: although the stories are set in Nigeria Emecheta tries to reach a maximum amount of readers, which is only possible when writing in English (see Boss 95). As many other African writers are faced with the same situation there is a wide range of Anglophone African literature.

In the following, the focus will be on the individual authors and their motivations as well as parts of their biographies that are crucial for their determination to become a writer. Moreover, main themes of the novels that will be analysed later will be introduced in order to gain an overview of the different women depicted in the novels. As the works can be analysed from various different perspectives there is no definite order to present the novels. *The Joys of Motherhood* by the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta is, however, by far the oldest work under discussion and thus constitutes the starting point. Staying in Nigeria, I will continue with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* before going south to look at *Nervous Conditions* by the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga. Heading further south, the discussion will arrive at *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* written by the South African writer Zoë Wicomb.

#### 4.1. Buchi Emecheta

Buchi Emecheta, one of Nigeria's prominent female writers, was born to Igbo parents in 1944 and grew up in Lagos (see British Council Literature). In 1960, she married and joined her husband in London, where she has been living since. However, her husband never accepted her writing and so she managed to get a divorce after six years of marriage, in which she gave birth to five children. The young mother worked hard and managed to become an independent woman who processed her childhood experiences and her early time in England in her later novels (see Encyclopaedia Britannia). Emecheta was born in a Nigeria that was still under British rule<sup>2</sup> and therefore, her childhood was strongly shaped by colonial economy, which also influences her works. Until today, she has created a legacy of over twenty novels that is seen as an inspiration for many contemporary Nigerian women writers. At the Second African Writers' Conference in Stockholm in 1986, she addresses the reason for becoming a writer: "I am just an ordinary writer, an ordinary writer who has to write, because if I didn't write I think I would have to be put in an asylum. Some people have to communicate, and I happen to be one of them" (Emecheta qtd. in Nnaemeka 1994: 150). However, the tradition of the storyteller is also important for the writer:

[T]he Ibo storyteller was different. She was always one's mother. My Big Mother was my aunt.... It was a result of those visits to Ibuza, coupled with the enjoyment and information those stories used to give us, that I determined when I grew older that I was going to be a storyteller, like my Big Mother (ibid. 143).

Like her aunt, Emecheta tells stories "about the little happenings of everyday life" of African women she knows and thus "see[s] things through an African woman's eyes" (ibid. 150).

Critics such as Umeh see Emecheta's novels as valuable feminist work, which censures many traditional conventions (see 44): "Emecheta is a fiercely feminist. As a woman, a

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<sup>2</sup> Nigeria achieved complete independence on October 1st, 1960 (Mamacos 3).

mother, and a sociologist, she advances insightful perspectives on social and political realities” (Yongue qtd. in Nnoromele 180). However, Emecheta sees the concept of feminism as a Western idea and agrees with the criticism stated by Mama<sup>3</sup>. She thus refuses to be called a feminist as she does not want to be defined by Western concepts (see Nnaemeka 1994: 150).

Looking at Emecheta’s work, she mostly portrays African women who struggle with motherhood, independence or freedom through education. Furthermore, she shows and, at the same time, criticises the reality of African women and “looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children may sometimes be the only way by which femininity and womanhood are defined” (Akujobi 4).

Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, published in 1979, offers an exploration of the African women’s experience and is referred to as the writer’s “most outstanding novel” (Nnoromele 178). In *Nnu Ego*, the protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta presents a “well-rounded and multi-dimensional character,” who blindly adheres to Igbo tradition although she is confronted with a colonial life in Lagos (Umeh 40). Emecheta writes about the problems of polygamy and the expectations women are confronted with in a society that honours fertility. She thus “records the troubled and chaotic moments in a mother’s life” (ibid.). *Nnu Ego* depicts a black woman living in a society that discriminates against women and Africans and thus suffers from the double oppression that has been examined previously (see O’Brien 96).

Nnoromele defines Emecheta’s protagonist as the prototype of an African woman whose experiences are perceived as “ideal representations of African women’s existence” (Nnoromele 178). In the course of the novel, *Nnu Ego* matures and recognises the role in her life, which is why *The Joys of Motherhood* can be seen as a

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<sup>3</sup> See p. 11-12.

Bildungsroman (see Umeh 42). By employing character introspection and the first person plural 'we,' Emecheta creates a bond between the reader and her protagonist as well as a feeling of collective consciousness that captures the reader: "The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die" (JOM 187). In addition to these features, "Emecheta has the gift to individualize her characters by differentiating their speech and utilizing the correct imagery that reflects the time, place and people she is trying to describe" (Umeh 42).

Nnoromele describes Nnu Ego as a woman who "sacrifices her health and selfhood in the pursuit of failed traditions, capsulated in the idea of motherhood", and thus argues that she needs to be seen as a subject of her own actions rather than as an "object on which society heaps its 'unfair' practices and demands" (Nnoromele 182).

Albeit, Emecheta first and foremost uses the theme of motherhood to construct her female protagonist's subjectivity and also, to reconstruct women's sexual identity. She introduces the idea of gender identity "portrayed as biologically achieved through birth and nurturing" and presents a picture of motherhood that is neither idealised nor romanticised but simply depicted within the context of sexual politics (Nfah-Abbenyi 37). The novel shows the reality of a mother who sacrifices everything for her children, as it is stated in *The Joys of Motherhood*: "the joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children" (219). The theme of motherhood as well as other factors that influence Nnu Ego and the other women in Emecheta's novel will be discussed in detail later. Before, we are turning to another Nigerian woman writer who depicts a society that is different from Nnu Ego's world in many respects.

#### **4.2. Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche**

Like Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian woman writer. However, born in 1977, she grew up in a Nigeria different to that Emecheta experienced in her childhood.

Adichie grew up in Nsukka where her parents both worked at the University of Nigeria. Her father “was Nigeria's first professor of statistics, and later became Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University” and her mother worked as the first female registrar (see The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website). Growing up in a highly educated class, she was sent to excellent schools and completed her secondary education in Nsukka before she started to study medicine and pharmacy at the University of Nigeria (see *ibid.*). However, at the age of 19, she left Nigeria to study in the United States and completed a degree in communication and political science as well as a master’s degree in creative writing. During her senior year she started working on her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which received critical acclaim. Today, Adichie regularly teaches writing workshops in Nigeria and so divides her time between her hometown Nsukka and the United States (see The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website).

Adichie describes her first experiences with books and writing in the following way:

I [...] started reading when I was perhaps four years old. I read a lot of British children's literature, and [...] thought that all books had to have white people in them, by their very nature, and so when I started to write, as soon as I was old enough to spell, I wrote the kinds of stories that I was reading. All my characters were white and had blue eyes and played in the snow and ate apples [...] This, by the way, at a time when I had not been to England and had never seen snow and was more familiar with mangoes than apples. [...] Then, when I was perhaps eight or nine, I read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). It was a glorious shock of discovery. Here were characters who had Igbo names and ate yams and inhabited a world similar to mine (Adichie 2008: 42).

Thus, as a young girl she perceived literature as a world restricted to white people and their living environment. Only by reading Achebe, Adichie realised that her African world, too, was a “worthy subject to literature” (*ibid.*). However, when she came to the United States, she soon discovered that Westerners had a totally wrong and dated concept of Africans in their minds; a concept that had developed through a lack of correct and contemporary information. Adichie criticises the development of stereotypes “that originated from the need to colonialism” and claims that Africans

have been regarded with contempt for a long time as wrong pictures have been transmitted via “popular imagination and literature” (Adichie 2008: 44).

Having grown up in a totally different world to that the Westerners think to know, Adichie tries to emend the picture of Africans by writing novels, plays and short stories of modern Nigerians such as the protagonists Olanna and Kainene in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006): The twin sisters, who will be analysed in detail later, grew up in an educated middle class similar to Adichie herself, which brings the discussion to the author’s main focus, which is the role of women in Africa. Different to Emecheta, Adichie embraces the concept of feminism as it “helps women to relentlessly struggle to lift themselves from their subordinate state and to carve out new roles and identities for themselves” (Azuike 80). When listening to her talks<sup>4</sup>, one can feel her persuasive power and passion behind her mission to fight for equal rights and to encourage African women to speak up. Adichie is a modern writer, portraying women who are in many respects very different to Emecheta’s characters:

In Adichie’s works, women relentlessly struggle to achieve the much-desired freedom from the clutches of tradition, from socio-political and economic disempowerment of women as well as from male oppression. [...] In the Nigerian society which Adichie’s novels realistically portray, more and more women are banding together in order to put an end to many years of deep rooted oppression and senseless subjugation of women. Today, Nigerian women are perceived as articulate, forthright, fearless and well-respected people (Azuike 80).

In her works, Adichie identifies and presents various sources of oppression like “polygamy, marital incompatibility and extremely harsh patriarchal laws and conditions” (Azuike 82). Although these forms of oppression often leave women devastated and

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<sup>4</sup> Adichie has held two talks on Ted Ex: “We Should All Be Feminists,” 2011: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU\\_qWc&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc&feature=youtu.be)> (21 July 2014) & “The Danger of a Single Story,” 2009: <[http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)> (21 July 2014).

weakened for life, Adichie's characters have learnt to take charge of their lives (see Azuike 82).

*Half of a Yellow Sun* is a historical novel set in the time of the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-1970, which creates a suffocating and destructive atmosphere (see Andrade 2011: 92). Azuike rightfully points out that in times of war, women and children have always been the most vulnerable group, which is also true for this novel, where "sexual violence against women remains the most traumatic and the most shameful of women's experiences" (86). Adichie experienced the Biafra war herself, "suffered losses and lived with painful memories" (Palmberg & Holst Petersen 100). Hence, she stresses the importance of remembering and aims to share her images of the war and Nigeria in general not only with fellow Nigerians but also with the West (ibid. 95).

As the analysis will show, Adichie's protagonists Olanna and Kainene are very different to Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, which is connected with the different time the story is set in and, moreover, with the different social background of the women. These two novels show that female identities can be constructed in very different ways within one single country in Africa.

### **4.3. Tsitsi Dangarembga**

Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in 1959 in Zimbabwe, which was colonial Rhodesia<sup>5</sup> at that time, and spent her formative childhood years in England as her parents had moved there for higher education. The family returned when Tsitsi was six and she was sent to a mission school and later to an American convent school where she completed her secondary education before she went back to England in 1977 to study for a medical degree. There, however, she experienced racism and isolation and returned home again shortly before independence was established with Mugabe's decisive win at the election

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<sup>5</sup> The successor state of the British Colony of Southern Rhodesia (self-governing British colony) was known as Rhodesia from 1965 to 1979.



to be held in Zimbabwe in 1980 (see George & Scott 309). Dangarembga later continued her studies in Berlin and now divides her time between Europe and Zimbabwe.

Her drive to become a writer can be seen in the following quote from an interview in 1990: “the writers in Zimbabwe were [...] basically men at the time. And so I really didn’t see that the situation would be remedied unless some women sat down and wrote something” (qtd. in Thompson 50). This is not completely right as there was one woman writing in Shona before: Joyce Simango. Yet, Dangarembga was the first black Zimbabwean female writer to publish a novel in English (see Thompson 49). However, this had to be done in England as she struggled to find a publishing house in Zimbabwe (see Mokry 31). The woman writer’s voicing was not well liked although the percentage of Zimbabwean women who were able to read English stories was marginal as the “rate of illiteracy was higher amongst women due to the sexist attitudes towards education” (see *ibid.*). Having experienced this oppression of women in the field of education and various other areas, Dangarembga perceives the western concept of feminism as help for African women. In an interview, she explains that a lot of African women need a theory like this as a guide. Thus, she sees it as positive help for African women, however, she adds that African women “need to move beyond that and find [their] own point of departure” (Dangarembga in George & Scott 315). By writing and sharing her stories, Dangarembga wants to function as a role model, which young black Zimbabwean women have been missing for a long time. She wants to raise ambitions in young women in Zimbabwe, but her intended readership exceeds the country’s borders as she writes in English (see Mokry 32).

*Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga’s first novel, was published in 1988, but the story is set in the 1960s and 1970s when the territory of the Republic of Zimbabwe was still known as Rhodesia. In the novel, she captures “a moment of female consciousness in Zimbabwean history” and depicts a Shona family that is torn between their traditional culture and Western influences (*ibid.* 37). Furthermore, *Nervous Conditions* depicts

contradictions within Rhodesia's society at that time, the complex ways in which women were colonised, racism, the problem of classes and the conflict between generations (see Mokry 68).

Although *Nervous Conditions* is about young women suffering from male hegemony, Dangarembga does not focus on the suffering but rather presents forms of negotiations and resistance. The story can therefore be seen as "a pioneer for female emancipation in African literature", in which the writer gives a voice to the young rural black girl, Tambudzai, who personifies the lowest strata of African society (Mokry 1). The girl achieves voice through narration, "an act that gives her liberation from patriarchal-imposed silence and offers hope in the resilience and success of female challenge," as Uwakweh points out (78). Tambu tells the story of her formative childhood years from the perspective of an adult, and so she looks back and gives the reader hints and flashbacks about her experiences as a young girl that grows into a teenager. The reader does not know anything about the adult narrator's location or how much time has passed; the only thing known is that she became the author of the story, which she tells the reader when the novel comes to an end:

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years (NC 208).

One can interpret this development as a sign for freedom from oppression through her status of authorship (see Mokry 77): "Tambudzai, the compromised character has become Tambudzai, the conscious narrator" (Sugnet 47). However, as Sugnet further notes, "Dangarembga is writing a colonial novel from a postcolonial perspective", which constitutes another important change that might explain Tambu's actions and ambitions (ibid. 34). By writing down her story, the protagonist manages the crucial move to "use the tools given by colonial education to make her own account for herself. By becoming narrator, teller, writer, finding the language to nudge her symptoms toward articulate

consciousness and resistance, she breaks out of those discourses [...] and reclaims agency for herself” (Sugnet 47). However, Tambu is not the only woman playing an important role in *Nervous Conditions*: Dangarembga depicts many different kinds of women and therefore, she does not produce one univocal picture of a woman.

Having internalised the novel as well as Dangarembga’s autobiography, one can notice a lot of parallels between the author and the female protagonists Tambu and Nyasha. Thus, many critics argue that there are autobiographical elements in *Nervous Conditions* as, for instance, several events in the novel reflect the ones in Dangarembga’s childhood (see Mokry 78-79). Yet, the writer does not give any information about this connection (see George & Scott 318). Be it partly autobiographical or not, *Nervous Conditions* is a story coming from the heart of African experience and is, therefore, of high value when analysing the construction of identity of African women.

#### **4.4. Zoë Wicomb**

Born in 1948 in a small, remote town situated in a hot and dry region in South Africa, Zoë Wicomb grew up in an Afrikaans-speaking Griqua<sup>6</sup> community and was encouraged to speak English. In times of apartheid, the knowledge of English allowed her, being a so-called Coloured, access to good schooling in the racially segregated education system (see Richards 2000: 92). In order to attend the English speaking school, Wicomb moved to Cape Town and later went to the University of the Western Cape. 1970, after graduating, she went to England where she continued her studies at Reading University and returned to South Africa in 1990 where she taught for three years before she went back to Europe to live and work in Glasgow.

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<sup>6</sup> The Griqua are “a little appreciated and heterogeneous subgroup of the Coloureds, originating from interracial relationships between European settlers and the Khoikhoi clan in the 1800s” (Schwarzfurtner 80).

Although Wicomb has been living in Scotland for more than ten years, she still sees herself as a South African writer:

I live abroad because after some years of being away I acquired my own family in Europe and in spite of my efforts to return permanently, the ties here make that impossible. In a sense, writing about South Africa could be a form of protesting about being stuck here, a perverse unwillingness to accept that I don't live there. In a fundamental sense I don't feel part of this culture and have no desire to write about it (Wicomb in Mengel 25).

Although most of Wicomb's stories are set in South Africa, she has been incorporating elements from her life in Scotland in her recent works. However, a story set in Glasgow, for instance, "is invariably viewed through the eyes of the African character" (Wicomb in Mengel 25). What is also notable is the fact that Wicomb needs to go back to South Africa from time to time in order to be able to write and to refresh her memory (see Wicomb in Meyer & Olver 182-83).

Looking at contemporary South African literature, apartheid is one of the central topics, "be it written before or after the end of apartheid in 1990" (Schwarzfurtner 2). As a reaction to the inequalities of the political system under apartheid, literary works portray blacks and their struggles in times of oppression that have been even more difficult for women. According to Schwarzfurtner, women in South Africa still find it hard to construct their identities and are confronted with social and economic obstacles (see *ibid.* 3). Moreover, a strong influence of colonial languages and Western tradition has been noticeable in contemporary literature, which can also be seen in Wicomb's works in which she tries to elucidate "the fractured reality of national identity and women's struggle to negotiate the complexities of the postcolonial condition" (Richards 2005: 20-21).

Wicomb's first novel *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, published in 1987, is a short story cycle situated between the novel and the short story. The work cannot be seen as a whole, hence, the genre "reflects the lack of coherence and the in-between situation of coloureds in the South African context" (see Schwarzfurtner 100). *You Can't Get Lost in*

*Cape Town* depicts the development of Frieda, who represents racial ambiguity as a South African 'Coloured.' In Frieda, who is a writer, identity is clearly depicted as a relational process that changes with time as the focus is constantly on her and her feelings and development and thus, the novel can be categorised as a Bildungsroman or Künstlerroman but also as a "fictionalised autobiography, a genre which is part of the South African protest/postprotest literature" (Richards 2000: 92).

In Wicomb's opinion, "[r]eading should be challenging. It is supposed to make you rethink your real world, not confirm what you already know" (Wicomb in Meyer and Oliver 197). She thus does not offer a protagonist who the reader can identify with easily and generally demands a politically engaged reading practice (Richards 2000: 73). Another politically important element is the choice of language: It may not seem surprising that Wicomb, who grew up in an English-speaking environment and has been living in Scotland for a long time, writes in English. However, Richards explains why in South Africa, the choice of language is more complicated than for the writers discussed previously:

The imposition of Afrikaans, a colonial language, at all levels of the state has been a major focus of the anti-apartheid struggle. The international and domestic cultural capital of English, also an imposed language, provides an alternative and has been strategically embraced as a tool of a unified liberation movement. Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) rehearses, in the life of the protagonist, the personal import of this political stance. [...] Wicomb's English-language novel of expatriation and return to apartheid South Africa, can be read as a resistance strategy played out on the international literary stage (2000: 10).

Similar to the works of the other women writers discussed, there are compelling parallels between Frieda, the protagonist and writer, and Wicomb, the author. Both grew up under similar circumstances, publish short stories and furthermore, Frieda experiences education and the importance of English in the same way as her creator did (see Richards 2000: 92).

As to the importance of the construction of identity, the following statement by Wicomb is highly interesting: “[I]t may be hard to believe, but I honestly did not know that *You Can't Get Lost* was crucially about coloured identity, not until a critic pointed it out - nobody after all was talking about coloureds in the 80s, the very label had been rejected in the period of resistance” (Wicomb in Meyer & Olver 184). Wicomb represents a “liberatory writing practice” that “complicates identity construction with a matrix of overlapping identities” and thus, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* offers many different ways to look at events and Frieda’s feelings and features (Richards 2000: 29). Hence, the reader is again confronted with a very different African woman who constructs her identity in her very own way.

In the following, the thesis is going to examine factors that influence the construction of female identity by looking at the individual women depicted in the novels. As the discussion has already shown, one cannot generalise to which extent certain factors influence a woman’s identity and, more importantly, it is impossible to identify the prototype of the African woman. However, the analysis will demonstrate that there are certain factors that play a more crucial role than others and factors that become more or less influential under certain circumstances.

## **5. The importance of motherhood**

Whereas for Western women multiple childbirth may seem oppressive and restrictive in various areas such as work, economic well-being and careers, for African women, motherhood has a more existential meaning: having children and families means empowerment, and so women “use their status as mothers to challenge some of the demands their cultures place on them” (Nfah-Abbenyi 24).

Along with other cultural aspects, the meaning of motherhood has changed with time. Before colonialism, various African societies as, for instance, the Igbo people, were

constituted through age and seniority. Reproduction has always been of great importance, however, women had the chance to claim power and were not seen as subordinated to men (see Thomas 49). In general, motherhood in Africa is influenced by religious mythologies and often linked to self-sacrifice, as Akujobi argues: “mothers are revered as creators, as providers, cradle rockers, nurturers, and goddesses, they also inspire awe because they are known to wedge huge powers in their children's lives. The idea of self-sacrifice emphasizes the centrality of motherhood in African society” and it is thus seen as a “God-giving role” which is aspired to by every woman (2-3).

The basis and purpose of marriage among Africans is reproduction and “the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group,” which suggests that the worst misfortune a woman can experience is being childless (Akujobi 3). In the case of infertility, there are several ways to ensure offspring: men can look for an additional wife, as the problem is solved in *The Joys of Motherhood*, or, in case the man is aware of his barrenness, he might find another bed partner for his wife. This compelling drive for procreation arises from a cultural demand, as Akujobi points out:

Children are very important [as], apart from continuing the lineage, they run errands when young and help out in the work. When the parents become old and weak it is the duty of the children, especially the heirs or sons, to look after the parents and the affairs of the family. When the parents die, the children give them befitting burial, survive and remember them (6).

Due to the great importance of motherhood in African societies, it has been repeatedly picked out as a central theme in literary and artistic works through the ages; one can argue that it even represents the dominant framework of identity for women. As Nfah-Abbenyi states, this can be applied to the works of both male and female writers and is strongly linked to “understanding African women's lives and identities within their sociocultural contexts” (35). However, “[w]hereas male writers have been accused of producing an idealized and romanticized picture of the African woman that positions her as “beautiful, nurturing, marginal, and often submissive”, female writers try to

depict women's experiences and their will to unleash from a system of patriarchy (Nfah-Abbenyi 35).

Interestingly, the notion of motherhood can also be associated with the love of the nation, of Mother Africa. However, Akujobi observes that whereas Mother Africa is supposedly declared free, mothers in Africa remain oppressed (see 3). Here, colonialism has, no doubt, played a crucial role in the transformation of the politics of reproduction within Africa by introducing racist and sexist ideologies. Thomas however argues that gendered reproduction is also deeply rooted in the history of Africa and thus, it would be wrong to see it simply as a colonial invention (see 49).

A crucial problem for African women and especially teenage girls is the lack of sex education in school as well as the deeply anchored belief that "modern contraception enhances women's sexuality and is a threat to women's chastity" (Okeke 240). Therefore, it becomes obvious that motherhood in Africa cannot be compared to motherhood in Western societies. Looking at the novels, motherhood is, first and foremost, the dominant theme in *The Joys of Motherhood*, as the title already suggests. However, I will also try to compare the depiction of the mother as well as the importance and the bond to the children to the other novels that portray this theme in different ways.

### **5.1. Becoming a woman through motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood***

In the centre of *The Joys of Motherhood*, there is motherhood and the urgent need for children as well as the sacrifice for the children. Emecheta does not romanticise or "dwell on the perfections of the mother [but i]nstead she draws spirited individuals, not without faults" (Umeh 40). For Nnu Ego, the protagonist in the novel, self-realisation only works "through her ability to bear and raise children" and thus, her identity and validity of womanhood can only be achieved through childbirth, especially of sons



(Nfah-Abbenyi 35). As a reader, one is constantly confronted with the centrality of motherhood and wifhood in the protagonist's life.

Without motherhood, Nnu Ego does not see any sense in her life and feels empty and so she marries the native Ibuza man Amatokwu. As her motivation is not love but the prospective children with her husband, she feels humiliated when she does not get pregnant as, in Ibuza culture, barrenness means that she "is physically incapable of being the traditionally and conventionally gendered woman [and] loses her feminine identity with her maternal identity" (O'Brien 96-97). Amatokwu, who is impatiently waiting for an offspring, cannot tolerate his "infertile" wife and marries another woman who conceives shortly after the marriage. When looking after this baby as Amatokwu's senior wife, Nnu Ego gives "him her virgin breasts" and is sent away after this act of despair was witnessed (JOM 34). Out of shame, Nnu Ego's father withdraws her from the marriage, returns the bride price and takes her home to his house, where his many wives look after and give comfort to her so that she "was putting on healthier flesh" (ibid. 35).

Later, her father marries her to Nnaife, a washer man whom she has never met as he is living in Lagos. Although Nnu Ego is appalled by his ugliness and his belly that makes him look "like a pregnant cow," Nnaife "demand[s] his marital right" (JOM 42) and she becomes pregnant with a male child, which eventually makes her receive "maternal validation" (Nfah-Abbenyi 40). Thus, for the sake of motherhood, she even learns to tolerate her husband:

[Nnu Ego] accepted Nnaife as the father of her child, and the fact that this child was a son gave her a sense of fulfilment for the first time in her life. She was now sure, as she bathed her baby son and cooked for her husband, that her old age would be happy, that when she died there would be somebody left behind to refer to her as 'mother' (JOM 54).

One morning, the protagonist finds her son dead and does not see another option but suicide: she wants to throw herself over a bridge because the death of her child has

robbed her of the only title that legitimises her: mother. Nfah-Abbenyi sees this as an act of total despair as “[m]otherhood is so ingrained in women’s psyche that the alternative to the loss of a child is the loss of self, of gender and of identity” (39): “But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore” (JOM 62). Nnu Ego is stopped by bystanders, who are not worried about the woman, but rather about her husband, son, and family: “What are you trying to do to your husband, your father, your people, and your son who is only a few weeks old? You want to kill yourself, eh? Who is going to look after your son for you? You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood” (JOM 61). The reactions of the bystanders not only express that no one really cares for the subject’s, Nnu Ego’s, life; moreover is she insulted and accused of being selfish and forgetting “the tradition of our fathers” (JOM 62). Reading about this incident, one needs to consider that “infant mortality was an ever-present reality of life for Nigerian women in the 1930s”, the time in which Nnu Ego’s child dies (Nnoromele 183). And indeed, Tambu’s mother in *Nervous Condition* has also experienced the tragedy of every mother: “She was anxious, my poor mother, because four babies, three of them sons, had died in infancy between my birth and this pregnancy” (NC 51).

One can argue that Nnu Ego is a woman who is enslaved by her traditions and culture by her own choice: although she knows that she is captured in her role as a mother she does not change her situation as she does not know “how to be anything else but a mother” (JOM 222). In the course of the novel, Nnu Ego gives birth to seven more children, three boys and four girls, and as Nnaife is often away for work, she is the one who earns and administrates money, raises her children and feels trapped by her obligations to her children, her husband and her father. Yet, she always hopes that, in her old age, her children will give everything back to her and take care of her.

What is also remarkable is the fact that Nnu Ego is surrounded by a reliable network of women in Lagos which would have opened up many doors to help her out of her miserable situation and the prison of her marriage: “We are like sisters on a pilgrimage.

Why should we not help one another?" (JOM 53). However, Nnu Ego only uses these friendships hesitantly and thus cannot grow stronger from talking about her problems and reflecting her situation (see Nfah-Abbenyi 48). Women like Cordelia or Mama Abby still help Nnu Ego when she is ready to accept it, namely when she needs help concerning her children. When Oshia, Nnu Ego's oldest son, is ill because of hunger and malnutrition, the mother accepts help and advice from the women around her (see JOM 105-106). Examining the friendships between Nnu Ego and the other women one can recognise that their main concern is the well being of their children rather than their own happiness and health. Emecheta thus portrays women who are, first and foremost, mothers and so there is no time for friendships in the sense that the women meet each other to exchange stories, laugh together or go out.

When Nnu Ego's sons are old enough to go their own ways and leave their mother, she realises that she had made a bitter mistake by refusing any kind of friendships that had been offered to her by other women:

Nnu Ego told herself that she would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands on friendship; but she had never had the time. [S]he had shied away from friendship, telling herself that she did not need any friends, she had enough in her family. But had she been right? (JOM 219).

This passage precisely depicts that shutting out of the women's network and relying on her children was Nnu Ego's biggest mistake. Even though it happens too late, the protagonist realises what she had done and therefore questions the laws of motherhood: "We women subscribe to the law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build" (ibid. 187).

At this point, one can see a clear change in Nnu Ego: she divorces herself from the traditional African concepts in her quest for identity and craves for female emancipation.

'I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost

my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband - and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build (JOM 187).

However, although she finally learns to affirm agency, it is too late to change anything in her life and so she dies quietly, “with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her” (ibid. 224). When her children hear of their mother’s sudden death, “they all, even Oshia, came home. They were all sorry she had died before they were in a position to give their mother a good life. She had the noisiest and most costly second burial Ibuza has ever seen” (ibid.).

Despite having “so many children that all [of her] resources, and indeed her entire life, are consumed by their care,” Nnu Ego turns out to be a childless mother at the end (Andrade 2007: 89). Ultimately, one can argue that Emecheta depicts a gruel fate of a woman and shows how children, being present or absent, can have devastating and, at the same time, empowering impacts on women’s lives (see Nfah-Abbenyi 24).

## **5.2. The importance of a (male) offspring**

As the role of women within the African society has already been discussed, it is probably not surprising that the preferred offspring is a son and thus women are pressurised because “[m]ale heirs are important to men, not only for the continuation of their lineage, but also as proof of their manhood. [...] Even a professional woman with a secure financial future appreciates the way a male heir secures her marital stability and social acceptance” (Okeke 242).

This inequality between the appreciation of boys and girls is apparent in *The Joys of Motherhood*: “I see you have given your husband a son. It’s not very common for people to have sons for the first baby. You are very lucky,” Nnu Ego is told after giving birth to her first child (JOM 53). Men, too, are seen as fortunate when they have a boy who

secures their lineage. Considering this, the inequality and the discrimination on the basis of gender of the child start at the day it is born, however, it is not only men who reinforce this approach but also women such as a friend of Nnu Ego, who talks to Nnaife's second wife Adaku in the following way:

'Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, [...] are committing an unforgivable sin? [...] Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife has been married only to you, you would have ended his life on this round of visiting earth. I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years' time will go and help build another man's immortality (JOM 166).

Adaku, however, is an exceptional woman who dares to challenge the traditions and sends her daughters to school so that they will benefit from their education in their future (see *ibid.* 168). She furthermore speaks against the gender inequality and is thus far ahead of Nnu Ego, who only cherishes her sons (see Nfah-Abbenyi 45): "I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons. [T]he more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves" (JOM 169).

When Nnu Ego gives birth to twin daughters at the time she already has two sons, she still "would have been happier if they had turned out to be boys instead" (JOM 128) and after having a second couple of twin daughters, the protagonist feels "more inadequate than ever. Men – all they were interested in were male babies to keep their names going. But did not a woman have to bear the woman-child who would later bear the sons?" (*ibid.* 186). At this point, however, she, who used to be the prime example of a woman who is proud to be a mother of sons, slowly realises that she had made many mistakes throughout her life:

The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband – and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? (JOM 187).

As a symbol for this concession, Nnu Ego's last two baby girls are given particularly meaningful names: "Obiageli, meaning 'She has come to enjoy wealth', and Malachi, meaning 'You do not know what tomorrow will bring'" (JOM 187).

Having discussed the way Emecheta depicts the treatment of daughters and the appraisal of sons in her time in Nigeria, it is interesting to see how Adichie deals with this inequality in *Nervous Conditions*.

When Nhamo, the narrator and protagonist's older brother and only son of the family, is sent to mission school to live with his uncle Babamukuru and his family, he changes a lot and becomes alienated from his parents by forgetting his mother tongue Shona. His mother is hurt and frustrated as forgetting his mother tongue "means forgetting his people, his mother, and most of all, his history" (Nfah-Abbenyi 65). When Babamukuru and his wife Maiguru come to tell the family about Nhamo's death, Tambu's mother, "[w]ithout warning [...] keened shrilly through the dark silence. [...] She collapsed on the car bonnet, slipped to the ground, picked herself up again" (NC 54). The mother feels lost and reproaches Babamukuru and Maiguru of taking her son away from her and killing him (see *ibid.*). She is the one who suffers most and thinks that she "cannot endure" the death of her son and that "[she] too [is] going to die" (*ibid.* 56).

Tambu's reaction, however, is different: "I was sad for them rather than anguished over any loss of mine [...] I was not sorry that he had died, but I was sorry for him, because according to his standards, his life had been thoroughly worth living" (*ibid.*) This passage reflects Nhamo's pride and feeling of superiority to his little sister Tambu, who had always been worth less than the male offspring when it came to education and respect. After the burial, Babamukuru raises the delicate topic of the possibility of sending Tambu to school instead of her dead brother:

'It is unfortunate [...] that there is no male child to take his duty, to take his job of raising the family from hunger and need, Jeremiah (Tambu's father).'

'It is as you say,' my father agreed. 'Tambudzai's sharpness with her books is no use because in the end it will benefit strangers.'

'You are correct, Jeremiah [, but] this girl [...] must be given the opportunity to do what she can for the family before she goes into her husband's home' (NC 56).

Babamukuru is the one who opens the door to the mission school for the girl, but still, "[t]hroughout the novel the reader is made aware that male offspring in the family are more important than female offspring" (Mokry 5). Whereas the boys' education is privileged, the girls' is trivialised: Tambu is, for instance, told, that the money her uncle spends after receiving her scholarship for the convent school, "could be better used" for her little baby brother who "is the only boy in [her] family, so he must be provided for" (NC 183). Still, with the help of her uncle and her cousin, who both encourage her at the mission school, she pursues her way and manages to receive the education she had always been striving for.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* depicts a different generation where offspring are not seen as the one and only ambition in the life of a woman anymore. Although the importance of having a child is less crucial, Olanna, one of the two female protagonists, is longing for a baby with Odenigbo, her boyfriend, who she first does not want to marry (see HOAYL 41) as she does not see the urgency. Odenigbo's mother, however, who does not accept Olanna, an educated woman, on Odenigbo's side, makes her son betray Olanna with Amala, a village girl she had brought for "the very purpose of impregnation" (Palmberg & Holst Petersen 94) (see HOAYL 216). However, when the girl later gives birth to a girl, neither she nor Odenigbo's mother want to keep the baby as they had been hoping for a boy who would secure the family line (see *ibid.* 247-249). Olanna's first encounter with the baby reflects her feelings towards having a child: when she is given the baby, "a high-pitched crying began. From across the room, the nurse and the couple watched and Olanna was certain that they could tell that she did not know what to do with a howling infant in her arms, that she was incapable of getting pregnant" (*ibid.* 249). However, as the child is repudiated by its mother as well as its grandmother, Olanna sees a chance for becoming a mother herself and, proving her strong character, decides that she wants to keep the baby of Odenigbo's betrayal:

She could raise a child, his child. She would buy books about motherhood and find a wet nurse and decorate the bedroom. [H]olding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity, a sense that this may not have been planned but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be. [T]he baby had looked like she had always imagined her and Odenigbo's child would, with the lush hair and widely spaced eyes and pink gums" (HOAYL 251).

Here, one can clearly see a different attitude towards a female offspring: whereas the traditional grandmother refuses to keep the baby although she had planned the betrayal perfidiously, Olanna, who is an educated woman who sees the circumstances from a modern perspective, does not mind the sex of the child and accepts and loves it as if it was her own. In times of war, then, her greatest fear is the death of the child, who is simply called Baby throughout the novel (see HOAYL 266). Ultimately, the relationship depicted between mother and child is one that is dominated by love, which is comparable to the Western conception of motherhood.

In *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, motherhood is ascribed a rather negative valuation. Frieda, the protagonist, is a single child and the lack of a male heir does not seem to be a problem for her parents, the Shentons, whose ideology is strongly influenced by the West. However, Frieda's mother does not accept her daughter's way of life and profession as a writer and thus, their relationship is disturbed to an extent where Frieda even kills her mother literally: "You left. Remember? [...] To write from under your mother's skirts [...] you've killed me over and over so it was quite unnecessary to invent my death" (YCGLICT 172). In addition, Frieda is having an abortion after an affair with a white man (see *ibid.* 78), which portrays a picture of a mother that is fundamentally different to Nnu Ego, Tambu's mother and even the modern Olanna. Notwithstanding, one needs to take into account that, under apartheid, having an interracial relationship does not comply with the norm, which can be seen as a motivation for the abortion (see Schwarzfurtner 89). However, from the depiction in the novel, one can suggest that Frieda simply does not want to have a child under any circumstances. After all, the act of the abortion does not seem to affect Frieda in any way.



Although there are various different depictions of motherhood, it is still omnipresent in every single novel, be it in a compulsive, positive or disturbed way. As the analysis has shown, the meaning of motherhood has changed within the last century and so have expectations and demands. Yet, having (male) offspring is deeply rooted in many cultures, which can be seen as one reason for its significance in literature.

## **6. Women trapped in the traditional African family system**

Having discussed the role of the mother, the thesis will now look at the role and position of women within the family system. What roles are, besides that of the mother, ascribed to African women and how are these, then, depicted in the novels? And how do these roles influence a woman's identity?

### **6.1. Polygamy and the importance of marriage**

Looking at African family systems, one needs to consider that African societies have never been static and thus, family structures have changed and vary significantly in different cultures. Nevertheless, they are presented as impositions on women by most Western and feminist discourses and thus, women are often depicted as the victims within the family structure (see Nnaemeka 1997b: 167). However, Nnaemeka criticises these Western stereotypes and argues that "African women who are in polygamous marriages are not morons or powerless, exploited, downtrodden victims [but] intelligent, highly educated, successful, independent women who choose polygamous marriage as what is good for them (Nnaemeka 1997b: 167). She further claims that polygamy is not oppressive but empowering instead as women do not need to worry about their husbands' needs but are able to explore their own potential while co-wives do their conjugal duties (see *ibid.* 166). In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta illustrates how a woman who is a senior wife can benefit from her status. By being not only a

senior wife but also a mother, favourably of a son, Nnu Ego can use these achievements with impunity (see Nfah-Abbenyi 24-25).

However, not all critics see polygamy in Africa from this perspective. Nnoromele, for instance, argues that traditions such as bride price and polygamy “degrade women to the status of goods and chattel” and because “husbands dominate their wives and [...] fathers dominate their daughters [, a] system of perpetual subjugation of women” is ensured (178-79). One can therefore argue that women are not only defined by motherhood, which has already been discussed, but also by the men in their lives, namely by their fathers, husbands and sons (see O’Brien 96). The following passage exemplifies this claim:

Agbadi (Nnu Ego’s father), was no different from other men. He himself might take wives and then neglect them for years, apart from seeing that they each received their one yam a day; he could bring his mistress to sleep with him right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him (JOM 36).

Albeit, the roles, obligations and rights in marriages must be seen as dynamic as they change with time and cultural developments (Hodgson & McCurdy 7). In order to understand the tradition of marriage it is interesting to look back at old traditions. As Byfield explains, all men and women were expected to marry and have offspring in Yorubaland in Nigeria. This was seen as the basis for the “society’s social, economic, and cultural reproduction” and, in addition to that, through marriage, people were able to socialise and “expand the pool of people from whom they could acquire economic resources” (Byfield 28). In Igboland, another area in Nigeria, the situation is similar and marriage is seen as the path to adulthood. However, this belief creates social pressure, especially for women, as

[b]eing single raises suspicions and accusations about a woman’s respectability, health, and suitability for marriage that can become burdensome as relatives and neighbors constantly question a woman about her behaviour, practises, intention, and interests. It is the institution of marriage, however, that actually burdens women” (Okeke 238).

Unmarried women, regardless of their social skills and beauty, are suspected to be different in a negative way and so they are stigmatised in their social environment (see Okeke 240). A woman without a husband does not have a place in society as her traditional purpose of a woman, and thus of a wife, is to maintain the continuity in her husband's family.

Olanna, one of the two female protagonists in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, breaks with this traditional system. Although she does not want to marry her boyfriend Odenigbo, she moves to Nsukka to live with him and justifies this move in the following way: "I don't know about marriage yet. I just want to be closer to him" (HOAYL 41). Other women, however, comment on this move with a critical attitude towards this female independence: "It is only women who know much Book like you who can say that, sister. If people like me who don't know Book wait too long, we will expire" (ibid.). Therefore, one can argue that the roles ascribed to women and the importance of marriage is deeply rooted in the culture and hence hardly questioned or challenged. Surely, there have been a lot of changes in the favour of women, but it is nevertheless considered as indispensable in most African societies (see Byfield 29).

Adichie, however, shows women who dare to fight against the unwritten laws of society. Olanna, who represents the strong, independent and educated woman, experiences a strong opposition from Mama, Odenigbo's mother, who criticises these very characteristics and accuses Olanna of bewitching her son (see Azuike 88): "Tell them (your fellow witches) that nobody's medicine will work on my son. He will not marry an abnormal woman, unless you kill me first. Only over my dead body!" (HOAYL 97). According to Mama, "[t]oo much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of wife will that be?" (ibid. 98). Hence, she harasses her son's girlfriend on every possible occasion and repeatedly calls her a "witch" (ibid. 212). Olanna, however, is supported by her family, especially by aunty Ifeka, who gives her the following advice: "You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? [...] Your life belongs to you

and you alone...” (HOAYL 226). This highly emancipated advice helps Olanna to deal with her mother-in-law as well as the instructed betrayal<sup>7</sup> and grows even stronger and more independent after these incidents.

Another aspect of the traditional family system that is criticised in Western discourse is the fact that men are able to inherit as well as exchange daughters and wives, which is clearly depicted in Emecheta’s novel when Nnu Ego’s father “Agbadi inherits daughters and wives through war victories” or when her husband Nnaife inherits wives after the death of his older brother (Nfah-Abbenyi 37). Marriage, childbearing and the exchange of women are seen as basic components of a relationship between men and women in Nnu Ego’s society, which are widely accepted (see *ibid.*).

However, as the reader is repeatedly informed, Nnu Ego does not love her second husband Nnaife, who was chosen by her father. Yet, she cannot leave the marriage due to the profound need for children and the failure of her first marriage. Nnaife knows about his superiority and Nnu Ego’s dependence on him:

‘I wonder what good father would take his pregnant daughter back into his home [...]? Your father is well known for his traditional principles. I’d like to see his face when you tell him you don’t like the second husband he has chosen for you [...] If you were not pregnant, it might be more understandable. [...] As I said earlier, you have to do what I say. Your father cannot help you now.’  
‘You are not even happy to see me pregnant – the greatest joy of my life!’  
‘Of course I am happy to know that I am a man, yes, that I can make a woman pregnant’ (JOM 50-51).

This passage shows the little appreciation Nnaife has for his wife and depicts various points concerning gender relations within African society, as Nfah-Abbenyi claims: “Marriage is an institution [and] does not change its traditional principles,” no matter how powerful and wealthy the family of the wife is (38). Moreover, the passage depicts that marriage and fertility define gender: Nnaife is happy about being a man as he has

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<sup>7</sup> See p. 44.

proven his procreative capacities. Other points delineated in the passage above are that “pregnancy legitimizes marriage” as well as that “[m]arriage and motherhood domesticate women” (Nfah-Abbenyi 38).

## **6.2. A depiction of a traditional patriarchal family structure in *Nervous Conditions***

In her novel, Dangarembga depicts a society that is larded with traditional sexist customs through Tambudzai, the protagonist and narrator of the story, who takes the reader into her consciousness and narrates the injustice occurring around her in the 1960s and 1970s. The beginning of the story already sets the tone and introduces the reader to the issues that will be discussed in the novel:

I was not sorry when my brother died... I shall not apologize but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion – Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful (NC 1).

As this very first passage in the novel shows, the novel is dealing with “gender-related hierarchies and dualisms that prescribe and ground women's entrapment” (Nfah-Abbenyi 61). Tambu, the young Shona girl, is, however, too young to realise gender issues at the beginning of the narration and fights for her right to go to school. As Dangarembga explains,

she just didn't have the consciousness to think ‘oh, I'm a woman and so I should not/ cannot have what he does.’ It's a very complex social network there, within that family structure [and] I think there were many factors that pushed her in the direction of having to choose to take matters into her own hands (Dangarembga in George & Scott 313).

Apart from Tambu's willingness to pursue Western education and her success in doing that at the mission school with the help of her uncle Babamukuru, the novel also depicts a different world, namely Tambu's home. Here, Dangarembga depicts the patriarchal

structure of a Shona family in colonial Rhodesia, which resulted from the male dominated traditional culture as well as the infiltration of Western patriarchy. This structure of Tambu's Shona family is most obvious in situations connected to food, as Mokry argues: "women are required to prepare the food [and] the best food is reserved for the males, leaving the youngest female members of the family with whatever is left. In addition, if larger groups eat at the homestead, the women and children usually eat in the kitchen, a symbol of women's restricted space" (Mokry 20): "In the kitchen we dished out what was left in the pots for ourselves and the children" (NC 41). Thus, Tambu and the other woman only had "gravy and vegetables" (ibid.) instead of the meat they had cooked for the men. Sometimes, girls and women can only start eating when everybody else has finished and moreover, they need to consider the serving order that "has to be done strictly by patriarchal rank, which privileges men before women and old people before young people" (Mokry 21). This order also needs to be followed by Tambu when she passes the water-dish round in which guests would wash their hands: "I knelt and rose and knelt and rose in front of my male relatives in descending order of seniority, and lastly in front of my grandmothers and aunts" (NC 40).

Tambu's mother, Mainini, is the prototype of a woman who has accepted her role in patriarchal society. Trapped as Jeremiah's wife, she is ill all the time and describes "womanhood [...] as a heavy burden" that derives from their duty to procreate (NC 16). Still, she does not question the inequality and the different tasks of men and women and wants to help her daughter Tambu grow into the same kind of womanhood by advising her "to learn to carry [her] burdens with strength" (ibid.).

When the protagonist visits her family after some time at the mission, she describes her mother as "thoroughly beaten and without self-respect" (NC 125). By that time, Tambu has already recognised gender differences and the attribution to femaleness: "What I didn't like was the way all of the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness.

Femaleness as opposed to and inferior to maleness” (NC 118). In contrast to Tambu, her mother has accepted her fate, as Mokry correctly summarises:

Mainini is not used to her opinion being considered, she is not used to being able to choose for herself. She has been living in a patriarchal family for her entire life and does not see the need to change it, or does not have the strength to change it. She laments that ‘what [she has] endured for nineteen years [she] can endure for another nineteen, and nineteen more if need be’ (NC 155) (Mokry 17).

Tambu’s aunt, Maiguru, who is different to Mainini as she is university educated, may seem strong and emancipated at first, but she is still not able to stand up to her husband Babamukuru. He not only controls her income and compels her into the role of the mother and wife, but he also oppresses her emotionally (see Nfah-Abbenyi 68). However, Maiguru receives help from her daughter Nyasha, who reprehends her for not fighting back and standing on her own feet. Eventually she breaks out of her cage and leaves the mission for a few days, which also gives hope to Nyasha and Tambu: “But now she’s done it, now she’s broken out, I know it’s possible, so I can wait” (NC 176). Later, when Maiguru returns after five days, she seems to be happier and more content than before as, I would suggest, she had proven to herself her strength and a small degree of independence (see *ibid.* 178).

### **6.3. Sexuality and women’s pleasure**

Analysing the depiction of sexuality and the erotic, one can notice another difference between African and Western conceptions: in an African context, sexual pleasure in society is not openly debated by anyone and women who do affirm their pleasure in public are mercilessly depicted as sluts, as it is demonstrated in *Nervous Conditions*: when Babamukuru catches Nyasha with a boy, he condemns her a whore, “making her a victim of her femaleness” (NC 118). This is highly problematic not only because women have to deny their sexual pleasure, but also because they are silenced when it comes to female circumcision (see Nfah-Abbenyi 25). Although this act of violence is extremely

important in this context, it will not be examined further in this thesis, as none of the novels under consideration deals with this subject matter.

For a traditional woman such as Nnu Ego, sexuality is considered as pleasurable but restricted to the act of reproduction and fertility (see Nfah-Abbenyi 40). Her co-wife Adaku, however, deals differently with her duties of a wife and enjoys the first night with Nnaife, which is why she is referred to as “shameless and modern” in a negative sense (see NC 124). For Nnu Ego, a husband is not supposed to be a lover and thus, a woman’s pleasure is something that must not need to be outwardly expressed (see *ibid.*).

Yet, what is unthinkable for Nnu Ego is possible for Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Different to Emecheta and Dangarembga, Adichie’s penchant is to describe something the way it really is, and thus, sexuality is an important component in her story. Hence, she describes the lovemaking between Olanna and Odenigbo in a rather detailed way (see Eromosele 104): “She knelt down before him and unbuttoned his shirt to suck the soft-firm flesh of his belly. She felt the intake of breath when she touched his trousers’ zipper. In her mouth, he was swollen stiff” (HOAYL 252). In addition, it is not the men but Adichie’s female characters who “dictate the pace in sexual acts” and “always take the lead in the coital act” (Olaniyi & Akinwale 147):

She unbuckled his trousers. She did not let him take them off. She turned her back and leaned on the wall and guided him into her, excited by his surprise, by his firm hands on her hips. She knew she should lower her voice [...] and yet she had no control over her own moans, over the raw primal pleasure she felt wave after wave that ended with both of them leaning against the wall, gasping and giggling (HOAYL 282).

In this passage, Adichie shows that both of the sexual partners, Olanna and Odenigbo, feel the pleasure in lovemaking. Eromosele claims that there is some vulgarity in the novel when, for instance, Olanna talks about Odenigbo’s infidelity and wishes that “[h]is rotten penis will fall off soon” (*ibid.* 229) (see Eromosele 104). However, this extraordinary incorporation of sexuality can be seen as a metaphor for the nature of the



relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo, which is also very atypical for African circumstances (see Eromosele 105). Adichie's female character thus represents an exceptional African woman who takes the lead not only when it comes to sex, but also when she decides "whether or not to get married" or "whether or not to have a baby" (ibid.).

Moreover, Olanna proves her strong character after she discovers Odenigbo's infidelity with Amala: she seduces and sleeps with Richard, her twin sister's boyfriend, and does not regret the sexual satisfaction, as Azuike remarks (see 89). The reader is told that after the sexual act, she "felt filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace (HOAYL 234). One can argue that Olanna is strong enough to enjoy the freedom to do what is best for her; however, the betrayal with Richard changes the relationship to her twin sister Kainene:

'You fucked Richard. [...] You're the good one.' Kainene's voice was controlled. 'The good one shouldn't fuck her sister's lover. [...] Why did you do it?' Kainene's voice sounded frighteningly calm. 'You're the good one and the favourite and the beauty and the Africanist revolutionary who doesn't like white men, and you simply did not need to fuck him' (ibid. 254).

Not surprisingly, Adichie is not only praised for her plain description of sexuality and its consequences but there is also severe criticism on her depiction of sex. Olaniyi and Akinwale argue that the female characters can be seen as "sex-maniac[s] or sex-starved" and behave in a graceless manner that has not existed before (148). Moreover, they claim that "[i]t is nothing but an absurdity of unimaginable consequence to give a vivid account of sexual scenes in traditional Nigerian literature" (Olaniyi & Akinwale 149). The fact that none of the characters whose pleasures are described is married aggravates the situation, as sex is still seen as unacceptable before marriage. Hence, Adichie is accused of a promoting of sexuality, which is connected with her "affinity with Western values" (see ibid. 150). Looking at this critique by rather traditional and conservative scholars one can challenge their opinion by arguing that Adichie only writes about what other authors do not dare speaking out. Still, one needs to consider

the Nigerian values and tradition, which Adichie supposedly ignores or consciously challenges.

In comparison to Adichie's novel, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* displays sexuality less openly, however, at one point Wicomb also challenges the traditions and calls a spade a spade:

He would like to fuck me without my noticing. I will not allow him that luxury. [...] The profusion of sweat unnerves him. Or perhaps it is the urgency of the bulge as he deftly unzips his trousers and flicks out the terrifying thing of which I catch a glimpse only. I relax at his haste and correctly predict that it will not take long" (YCGLIC 123).

As this scene illustrates, Frieda's attitude towards sexuality is very different to Olanna's as she does not enjoy the love act but hopes that it will not last long. The other scene connected to sexuality is when Frieda is on her way to having an abortion. The father of the child, Michael, is a white man who wants to go "to England and marry [her,] thousands of miles away from this mess" (ibid. 74). Frieda, though, knows that "[t]here are laws against that" (ibid.) as love between coloureds and whites is not permitted. What is remarkable about that scene, however, is that Wicomb does not write about their meeting and falling in love or the sexual act when Frieda was impregnated but terminates the relationship with Frieda's abortion (see Schwarzfurtner 89).

This chapter has investigated various different aspects in connection to the role of women in the traditional African family system. As the analysis has shown, the female characters depicted in the novels have found their individual ways to deal with expectations and cultural traditions: whereas Nnu Ego accepts traditional customs and sacrifices her own life for her children, Nyasha struggles with the expectations of her family, rebels and fights for emancipation. Hence, this chapter has revealed more profound differences between the female characters in the novels.

## **7. African women and their accessibility to education**

As it has been illustrated previously, Africa's social reality is strongly mirrored in contemporary literature, which also applies for schooling and the educational field. In Western discourse, the African woman is often referred to as an uneducated and mute object, however, considering the validity of other Western images that have been discussed, this chapter will focus on the depiction of women's accessibility to education by the four authors. The analysis will show that, in any case, education constitutes an important and highly influential factor for identity construction and can function as the trigger for female emancipation.

Looking at the four novels, one can see a clear divide: In *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Nervous Conditions*, girls are excluded from education and thus, most women embody the traditional uneducated housewife. Whereas Nnu Ego accepts this role, Tambu, who represents a different generation, struggles and challenges gender traditions. The other two novels, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, tie in with Tambu and depict a generation of educated and emancipated women who do not adapt to traditions any longer. This, however, does not remain without criticism by other, more traditional characters who thereby complicate the characters' identity formation.

### **7.1. Men holding a monopoly in education**

"Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (NC 15). This advice Tambu receives from her father illustrates the problem girls and women face very well: as women are supposed to be housewives, they do not need education and hence, they do not need to go to school. Moreover, daughters are supposed to leave their parents for their husbands' families and consequently, parents usually do not send them to school as they would not be able to benefit from their daughter's knowledge anyway. This situation is depicted in *The Joys of Motherhood*: Due to the high costs of school fees, Nnu Ego at

first only sends her sons to school. Later, when the mother can afford to send all her children to school, she still encourages her daughters to continue their trading as “[a] girl needs to master a trade to help her in later life” (JOM 180). Kehinde, one of the daughters, is criticised for being “too clever for [her] age and too impulsive,” as girls are not supposed to question things but accept their fate the way it is demonstrated by Nnu Ego (ibid.). In contrast to that, the sons are encouraged to “put more time into their school work” (ibid.) and are hardly asked to help their mother with her work. Consequently, at the end of the novel it is the sons who are able to go abroad to study whereas the daughters stay in Lagos.

The situation in colonial Rhodesia, the setting of *Nervous Conditions*, used to be similar around 1990: while boys were sent to school, girls were trained to become housewives, and so “far more boys than girls pursued formal education, with gender inequality most pronounced at higher levels” (Okeke 237). Although later female enrolment got encouraged through the inception of the “Universal Primary Education,” men still dominated the field of formal education at all levels (see ibid.). With Tambu, Dangarembga creates a character that grows up at a time when boys’ education is privileged and “[t]he needs and sensibilities of women in [her] family [are] not considered a priority, or even legitimate” (NC 12). Because of this, the girl is “in Standard Three in the year Nhamo die[s], instead of Standard Five, as [she] should have been by that age” (ibid).

As Nfah-Abbenyi correctly points out, both Emecheta and Dangarembga foreground the linkage between men and education, and women and home: while men are connected to intellectual advancement, the same is found unnecessary for girls and women (see 62), as *Nervous Conditions* poignantly depicts:

[M]y father called me aside to implore me to curb my unnatural inclinations: it was natural for me to stay at home and prepare for the homecoming. [...] He did not like to see me over-absorbed in intellectual pursuits. He became very agitated after he found me several times reading the sheet of newspaper in which the bread from magrosa has been wrapped as I waited for the *sadza* to

thicken. He thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the tasks of feminine living (NC 34).

According to Tambudzai's father, Jeremiah, women need to cook rather than follow intellectual pursuits: "He views education as that which ruins women, distracting them from their gendered role" (Nfah-Abbenyi 62). Tambu, however, finds the loophole to combine education with the domestic sphere as she does not want to confine and define herself in terms of one area only. One example for this is Tambu selling "mealies" she grows on her grandmother's land in order to pay the school fees herself (see NC 24). By combining farming and school, the girl "redefines what is seen [...] as a naturalized woman's place" in her society (Nfah-Abbenyi 63).

Tambu's life changes significantly when her brother Nhamo, the only son of the family, dies and her uncle Babamukuru suggests that she can follow her brother's path and move to his place at the mission, where he is headmaster at the mission school she is able to attend (see NC 56). Because of her motivation and her drive for education, she works very hard and studies a lot which later enables her to go to the exclusive Sacred Heart convent school (see Sugnet 33) that only offers two places to the most intelligent of "all the African Grade Seven girls in the country" (NC 181). Consequently, most of the students at Sacred Heart are white, but still, Tambu is happy that she is finally able to obtain Western education, which is seen as the best education that would open new doors outside of Africa (see NC 182).

Tambu's aunt Maiguru, Babamukuru's wife, can be seen as a role model for the narrator as she is an educated woman who has, just as her husband, achieved a Master's Degree in England. When the girl finds out about her aunt's qualifications, she is surprised as, just like many other people, she had thought that Maiguru only went to England to "look after Babamukuru" (NC 102). However, the aunt clarifies the situation and claims that Babamukuru "wouldn't be able to do half the things he does if [she] didn't work as well!" (ibid. 103). This passage in the novel depicts the narrow-mindedness and the

gender stereotypes present in Tambu's environment: even though she is an independent and educated young woman herself, she still struggles to imagine her aunt having a Master's Degree.

Ultimately, one can argue that Tambu's struggle for education is one of the most important themes in *Nervous Conditions* as it not only expresses the youth's attitude towards schooling but also "mirrors an entire people's struggle for education" (Mokry 47).

## **7.2. Education as the trigger for emancipation**

Whereas Dangarembga's protagonist has only been given the chance to attend good schools because her brother died, women's access to education is presented differently in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*.

According to Hodgson and McCurdy, education can empower women "to challenge assertions of patriarchal privilege and power [as well as] persistent misrepresentations, policies, and practices that perpetuate gender oppression and inequality..." (14). Emecheta shares this opinion and claims that education can be seen as a way out of the vicious circles of African women: "Once a woman is educated up to a certain level, then she will have the confidence to communicate with [people] outside of [her] culture, and be able to compare notes. And maybe they can learn from each other. Until that is available to almost all women, we will be going around in circles" (Emecheta in Boss 95). Furthermore, the writer argues that it is not money that is most important but education, which enables women "to cope with the modern world" (see *ibid.* 99).

This situation is exemplified in *Half of a Yellow Sun*: the two protagonists, the sisters Olanna and Kainene, are educated, successful and independent businesswomen living in Nigeria in the 1960s. Like Adichie, the author, Olanna and Kainene have been sent to excellent schools and prestigious universities and have thus learnt to become

“superwomen” (Olufunwa 2), “strong and dynamic individuals who would allow nothing or no one to deter them from achieving their set goals” (Azuike 88). In the following, Kainene shows her elite school to Richard, her lover:

‘You can see Heathgrove from here,’ she said, pointing. ‘The iniquitously expensive and secretive British secondary school my sister and I attended. My father thought we were too young to be sent abroad, but he was determined that we be as European as possible. [...] It is very exclusive, many Nigerians don’t even know it exists’ (HOAYL 61).

Olanna, too, has made use of all opportunities offered by their parents and obtained a master’s degree from the University of London (see Mboya 54). When Ugwu, her houseboy, hears her speak for the first time, he is carried away as she speaks “the kind of English Ugwu heard on Master’s radio” (HOAYS 22).

Since the sisters have enjoyed exceptional education, they know how to live independently and therefore do not see the need to get married. Even though they both live in relationships, they repeatedly show their partners that they are autonomous as they earn enough money to be able to afford a good living. Odenigbo, Olanna’s partner and university professor, accepts Olanna’s independence and knows the importance of education also in relation to their houseboy Ugwu: “Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don’t have the tools to understand exploitation?” (HOAYS 11). Mboya claims that this advice is also applicable to the education of women because through education, women would understand the structures that oppress them and strive to end their dilemma (see 54).

Thus, Adichie employs education as a tool to “fight female subordination and oppression” (Mboya 53) and successfully depicts women who manage to stand on their own feet not only in good and secure times but also in times of war. In contrast to Nnu Ego, who has never made use of the women she was surrounded by, Olanna knows how to establish ties with relatives and friends that are helpful in hard times, especially when everything else seems to break down in the Biafra War.

Another important aspect connected to education is the influence of a language, namely the colonial language English. This, however, will be discussed in the following chapter, which focuses on colonialism and its influences and consequences for African women. Ultimately, the novels depict women that strongly differ from each other in many different ways. Whereas Nnu Ego is illiterate and has never been sent to school, Olanna and Kainene as well as Frieda, whose education will be analysed in the following chapter, have enjoyed excellent university education. *Nervous Conditions* depicts the generation in between: while most girls are captured to fulfil the traditional conventions of housewives and farmworkers, Tambu and Nyasha are given the chance to pursue Western education, which has a huge impact on their identities.

## **8. Colonisation and apartheid: accommodation and resistance**

Although the novels under discussion are not primarily works about colonialism, this part of history still bears an important meaning and will influence African life forever; too much has changed after the Europeans exploited African people and natural resources and imposed Western values on Africans who, until colonialism, had their own traditional civilisations and culture.

Furthermore, the demands on African women changed drastically, which caused significant changes in their lives. Before colonialism started in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Igboland, where the story of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set, was characterised by a “flexible gender system” which enabled women to be “classified as ‘males’ in terms of power and authority over others” (Thomas 48). Similarly, gender was only ascribed meaning for reproductive distinction in other parts of West Africa and consequently, women held important positions and played significant roles “in the economic life of their societies” (Sudarkasa 91). What is also remarkable is that, according to Achebe,



race has never been a distinguishing category in Africa as there has always been a huge diversity of ethnicities, language groups and cultures (see Achebe & Teboh 63).

Thus, the notion of gender difference, the belief of superiority of men and the differentiation of race were only introduced with European colonialism. Looking at the regions the novels are set in, colonial Nigeria lasted from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century until October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1960 and Zimbabwe, which was formerly known as colonial Rhodesia, was under British rule from 1890 to 1980 (see Mamacos 8-9). In that time, the British spread Christianity, Western education and Western values and tradition and, at the same time, destroyed African cultural heritage (see Mama 2001: 17). Moreover, African women found themselves trapped in a web of colonial subjugation and subjectivity, which is partly depicted in the novels under discussion. O'Brien however claims that African women have not only been colonised by "white colonialism" but also by "black masculinity," which places them at the very bottom of the hierarchy: "[T]he more feminized the black man is by white men, the more he is made inferior, and the more he needs to assert his masculinity, [meaning] his superiority, over the black woman" (100).

Looking at the setting of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, the situation is even more complex than in Nigeria and Zimbabwe due to the system of apartheid. Like in other African countries, racial segregation in South Africa started in colonial times. However, with the implementation of apartheid as an official policy following the general elections of 1948, South African inhabitants were legally classified into four racial groups, namely "black," "white," "coloured," and "Indian" (see Richards 2000: 75). The laws of apartheid institutionalised racial segregation and white supremacy and changed practically all areas of life, from housing to education to healthcare, including a prohibition of "interracial sexual activities," all in favour of the white population: the lives of blacks were dominated by poverty and hopelessness. Yet, over the years, various forms of resistance developed and under international pressure, most laws were abolished. The official end of apartheid was finally marked by a new constitution and

elections that led to a coalition government built up by a non-white majority in 1994. This brought tremendous changes and empowered the black and coloured racial groups (see South African Government Online).

In *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Zoë Wicomb picks up many problems South Africans had to face during apartheid and tells the story of the coloured woman Frieda Shenton. As Richards points out, the notion of nation and “the concept of ‘race’ has been complicated by the apartheid structure,” which strongly influences the feeling of affiliation and membership. This, in turn, is a crucial factor in connection to identity construction. However, before going into detail about Frieda’s struggle under apartheid and her search for cultural identity, we will look at colonial influences in the other novels, starting again with Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*.

### **8.1. Nnu Ego in the ‘White Man’s World’ Lagos**

When Nnu Ego leaves her father’s home to go to Lagos to live with her second husband Nnaife, there is not only an obvious shift in location but also a change in the progress of colonisation: whereas the countryside is still very traditional, Lagos is colonised, which is apparent from the very first moment when Nnaife is introduced as a laundry man working for a white family. For a traditional woman like Nnu Ego, this change has devastating consequences: she and Nnaife grow apart after some time as each of them lives in a different world and she soon realises that the “awareness which the illiterate farmer [in Ibuza] was able to show his wives, his household, his compound, had been lost in Lagos, for the job of the white man” (JOM 53).

Having been ascribed the role of the “sole provider” (ibid. 81) by colonialism, Nnaife needs to work long hours for his white Master, which generates two problems for his wife: on the one hand, Nnu Ego feels useless and lonely and, on the other hand, men have become “too busy being white men’s servants to be men” in traditional means (ibid. 51):

Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is the money, shining white man's money.... They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us. The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work, instead of having been bought (JOM 51).

Emecheta contrasts Ibuza, where men "are masters of themselves and their households" to Lagos, where they are "mastered" (Nfah-Abbenyi 42). Nnu Ego, feeling miserable about her new life and her second husband Nnaife, finds herself comparing him with her first husband Amatokwu. Regardless that he rejected her for her barrenness, she still remembers him as "that native Ibuza man. That African. [...] That sort of man to respect" (JOM 72). This point of view is laced with "sexism, classism, racism, and ageism" as, for Nnu Ego, only a man who is not engaged with colonialism is a suitable man (see Nfah-Abbenyi 42-43).

Although Emecheta's characters are aware of the changes introduced by colonialism (see JOM 37), most of them do not resist but accept the new rules and traditions although they do not benefit from colonialism in many respects. Different to Nnu Ego, her co-wife manages to combine traditional and urban values and soon learns to be independent and profit from the 'White man's world' Lagos (see Nfah-Abbenyi 44). This unconventional autonomy, however, is criticised and seen as a kind of crime by Nnu Ego and the other women who seem to be stuck in their traditions (see *ibid.*). What is remarkable is that Adaku, who constitutes the only rebellious woman who dares to speak against her husband and his traditional ideology, is soon eliminated from the story as she moves away to become a prostitute, leaving her condemned on moral grounds by the other characters.

When examining the role of Lagos in connection to Nnu Ego's fertility, one fact attracts attention: "it is in the non-traditional, urban environment, with her effeminate husband [...] which finally makes her a 'real woman' (JOM 53)" (O'Brien 102). Hence, for Nnu Ego, the life in colonised Lagos is more fulfilling than her barren womanhood had been in

Ibuza. According to O'Brien, this change can be connected to her liberated role in the new colonised world, which is also reflected in the behaviour of the protagonist's daughter who "not only chooses her own husband [...], she chooses one unacceptable to her parents, crossing racial and cultural boundaries to do so" (104). Although colonisation influences and changed the lives of Africans as well as black African culture in dreadful ways, Emecheta also shows that it has offered new opportunities and chances for women (see *ibid.* 105).

## **8.2. The influence of colonialism and apartheid on language and education**

As it has been discussed in the first part of the thesis, there was a vast variety of different languages in Africa before colonialism. English, the language that bears a meaning for each of the four woman writers, has only been introduced with colonialism; however, it was nonetheless seen as highly significant in the time of change and has affected African women in different ways.

When examining the role of education in *Nervous Conditions*, it is noticeable that the protagonist perceives the knowledge of the English language as the most valuable learning content. Considering the origins of the language, though, Richards does not see this worship of English as a positive development only:

Language, as the bearer of culture, is crucial to the development of the child's self-esteem. With the imposition of the colonial language in the educational system, the language of school becomes divorced from the oral language of the child's upbringing, the language of storytelling, of daily activities, and the child is forced to embrace the language of the colonizer at the expense of a rich oral tradition (2000: 8).

However, the acceptance of the colonial language and its high prestige did not only work as a force of colonialism but also brought benefits for the African population. Whereas before, different ethnic groups were hardly able to communicate due to the great variety of languages, the common language introduced allowed mutual communication for the first time (see Richards 2000: 7). In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, all

protagonists but Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy, master the English language perfectly. Seeing them as role models, Ugwu studies hard and soon becomes fluent in the colonial language. For the village boy, speaking English equals power and emancipation and this motivation can be seen as the driving force, which eventually makes him succeed and even become the writer of the whole narrative, which is revealed at the very end of the novel.

Conversely, Western education can also cause confusion, which is depicted in *Nervous Conditions* and *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*. Language constitutes a crucial factor for the construction of identity and the feeling of membership and therefore, accepting a new language as the 'better' can cause problems within the traditional language community, as Tambu and Nyasha learn in the course of the novel.

Having grown up with the traditional language Shona, Tambu is shocked by her cousin's inability to speak her mother tongue after returning from England where she spent a few years of her childhood. Maiguru, Tambu's aunt, tries to defend her children Nyasha and Chido, who "have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone" (NC 42). Tambu, however, does not want to accept this as an excuse: "What Maiguru said was bewildering, bewildering and offending. I had not expected my cousins to have changed, certainly not radically, simply because they had been away for a while. Besides, Shona was our language. What did people mean when they forgot it?" (ibid.). The protagonist sees forgetting the mother tongue as bewildering and offending and links the loss to a negative transformation of the character. Moreover, the communication between the cousins who have had a good relationship is disturbed as Nyasha "did not talk beyond a quick stuttered greeting [n]or did she smile any more at all" (NC 51). In the narrator's eyes, she behaves "ungrateful, awkward and ill-mannered" (NC 60) and thus she distances herself from her cousin.

Tambu's brother Nhamo, too, quickly forgets his Shona when he is sent to the mission school to live with his uncle Babamukuru (see NC 53). For the boy and his sister, the mission embodies the place of the English language and Western education, which is basically all they have always been longing for. And even though Tambu sees Nyasha's obvious change critically, her great ambition is the mastery of English and the access to Western education. This dream comes true when she is later sent to the mission in place of her dead brother (see NC 28), however, she keeps on reassuring the reader that she "will not change her identity but only extend and improve it" (Mokry 72) in "the period of [her] reincarnation," as she calls this time (NC 94). And truly, Tambu studies hard and ambitiously and becomes fluent in English after some time at the mission, the "English place" (NC 86). Thereby, Nyasha and her become friends as they are again able to communicate and share interests and emotions. However, there are also other developments she had not intended: just like her brother, Tambu starts to become alienated from her family and the Shona culture and thus, "[i]n her eagerness to rid herself of the restrictions of her patriarchal family and to gain the best education possible, Tambu drifts further and further away from the homestead" (Mokry 72). As it has been mentioned above, Tambu's mother suffers from the absence of her daughter and "declined so rapidly [...] as though she was the one who had been cursed" (NC 184). Analysing this physical as well as psychical decay, Thompson argues that Mainini can be seen as the personification for Shona language and culture (see 52-53).

Tambu, who has already distanced herself from home, cannot feel sorry for her mother and thus rejects her past at the homestead: "As far as I could see, the only affection anyone could have for that compound had to come out of loyalty. I could not imagine anyone actually wanting to go there..." (NC 123). Furthermore, Tambu experiences the language problem she had once observed and criticised and finds it hard to communicate with her mother: "I was surprised at how difficult it was to be correct with my mother when I managed so becomingly, so naturally, with Baba and Maiguru" (NC 129). Thompson again connects Tambu's relationship to language to her relationship

with her mother: “as she rejects her mother’s language, her mother tongue, she also rejects her mother” (50). As a reader, one cannot fully sympathise with the protagonist’s development and feels sorry for the mother, however, for Tambu, education and the life at the mission equals self-realisation, which is why she does not waste a single opportunity she is offered. The girl knows how to fight for her rights and her thirst for knowledge is once more rewarded when she is offered a place at the Sacred Heart boarding school. Her mother, not even trying to understand her daughter’s ambition or be happy for her, reacts in the following way: “Tell me, Tambudzai, does [Babamukuru] want to kill me, to kill me with his kindness, fattening my children only to take them away, like cattle are fattened for slaughter? Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time” (NC 184). Similarly, Nyasha is not excited for Tambu either:

Nyasha knew them and was alarmed. [...] She thought there were more evils than advantages to be reaped from such an opportunity. It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. [T]hey make a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself (NC 182).

These lines constitute a highly alarming advice given by the cousin who has suffered from this assimilation and the results of colonisation herself (see Nfah-Abbenyi 64). Nyasha knows what the time in England has done to her and criticises Tambu for accepting the Englishness without scrutinising it and thus intentionally forgetting herself. For the anglicised cousin, it is too late to antagonise as her selfhood is already disrupted: “I don’t know what to do about it, Tambu, really, I don’t. I can’t help having been there and grown into the me that really has been there” (NC 78). This meaningfully depicts that Nyasha’s Shona-self is alienated, denied and thus positioned as the ‘Other’ through the process of assimilation. She is, moreover, struggling to find friends and as she keeps on shifting from one identity to the other and thus tries to restore her Shona language and identity by reading a lot and studying history. However, Nyasha’s troubles are not solved easily as there are more factors that are intertwined with this inner

conflict. This, however, will be discussed later in this chapter. Summing up the role of education in *Nervous Conditions*, one can argue that it symbolises both good and evil: “For Tambu, Western education leads to emancipation and liberation [, but] for Nyasha, it resembles the manipulation and assimilation of African minds” (Mokry 42).

Zoë Wicomb presents the impact of colonialism on education in a similar light. Before analysing the meaning of English for Frieda, however, it is important to consider its role under apartheid. As Richards points out, the embrace of English was part of the Black liberation movement’s program: Afrikaans was imposed upon the indigenous people and represented the brutal apartheid-structure” (2005: 23) whereas the colonial language, English, opened up education and employment opportunities beyond the borders of South Africa. For Frieda’s parents, the Shentons, the motivation is not necessarily the politicisation but rather the “mastery of the King’s English” (Richards 2005: 23). They perceive Western education as the “best, the very best education” (YCGLICT 31) and willingly adopt not only the English language but also the moral codes. Frieda’s father, a primary school teacher, sees his family as ‘better’ than the common locals (see Schwarzfurtner 80): “We, the Shentons, had an ancestor, an Englishman whose memory must be kept sacred, must not be defiled by associating with those beneath us. We were respectable Coloured,” Frieda remembers her father’s pride in an ancestor (YCGLICT 116).

Always keen on an upward social mobility, the Shentons set strict rules to maintain their feeling of superiority and, for instance, do not allow Frieda to play with the neighbours, the Dirkses’ children as they are not “white enough in social and moral terms” (Schwarzfurtner 93). Furthermore, Frieda is not allowed to speak the traditional language Afrikaans (see YCGLICT 4) as the parents think that the mastery of English “represents cultural capital” and is thus ‘better’ (Richards 2005: 23). In contrast to the colonial language spoken by Mr Weedon, who is the personification of “a gentleman, a true Englishman,” the sounds of Afrikaans are described as “barbaric” (YCGLICT 2). However, by imposing their favoured language on Frieda and defining themselves as



English speaking and consequently respectable, the Shentons create an identity crisis in their daughter (see Gaylard 178).

Similar to Nyasha, Frieda suffers from a feeling of indisposition and begins “to question the hegemony of English culture and the white race” when she enters the University of Cape Town, “a predominantly white institution” (Richards 2005: 23). She does not feel part of her colleagues at university and also faces a conflict of opinion with a professor in English literature. Later, she tries to distance herself by going to England but only finds her identity even more disturbed. Like Dangarembga, Wicomb presents her protagonist as a woman who was robbed her traditions and mother tongue and therefore suffers from a lack of a feeling of membership and struggles to find her cultural identity<sup>8</sup>.

### **8.3. Post-colonial confusion and the impact of Englishness in *Nervous Conditions***

Apart from the confusion in connection to education and the impact of the English language on the children in *Nervous Conditions* the novel offers other aspects of postcolonial identity and resistance in colonised Rhodesia and depicts how the characters, especially Nyasha, her father Babamukuru and the protagonist Tambu, struggle with differences between the imported Englishness and the traditional culture.

The reader is introduced to parts of Rhodesia’s colonial history right at the beginning of the novel when Tambu recalls the stories her dead grandmother told while they were working together in the garden. These oral “history lessons” (NC 17), as she refers to the stories, “give an allusion to the injustice indigenous people underwent and the repercussions they had to endure” and explain how Tambu’s family, who used to be

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<sup>8</sup> Frieda’s cultural identity will be further analysed in 8.4..

fairly rich owners of fertile land, turned into the slaves of colonial settlers (see Mokry 43):

Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land. [They] were avaricious and grasping; there was less and less land for the people. At last the people came upon the grey, sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it. There they built a home [and attracted farmers with] whispers of riches and luxury (NC 18).

However, arrived at the settlers' farm, Tambu's grandfather soon realised that he "had been enticed into slavery" (ibid.) and got killed after he tried to escape. Subsequently, his wife and the children were thrown off the farm and thus had to move back to their old homestead. As she struggled to support her six children, however, she brought her eldest son, Babamukuru, to the mission of other, "holy [,] wizards," who educated him by their customs and "prepare[d] him for life in their world" (ibid. 18). And really, the grandmother's trust in the people paid off and Tambu's uncle was given access to Western education and eventually studied in England while his brothers and sisters remained at the homestead. Dangarembga hence depicts different characters that "represent specific, identifiable forms of colonial experience and are shaped by identifiable historical forces associated with colonialism" (Mokry 41).

The boy who was blessed to be educated by colonial settlers, however, "becomes a tragic representative of the post-colonial subject" (Nfah-Abbenyi 70). First, the reader is told that Babamukuru is cherished and glorified after returning from England: everyone, especially Tambu, sees him as the patriarch who has everything they can only dream of: higher education, a position as the headmaster of the mission school and, along with that: wealth and a Western living standard (see NC 70). However, the more Tambu gets to know him the more she realises that his "identity was elusive. [...] His nerves were bad because he was so busy" (NC 104): he too had changed in England. According to Sugnet, Babamukuru is "caught between the demands of his life as a surrogate Englishman and his obligations as the head of a large African family" (36-37), which makes him become a victim of colonialism.

However, via Nyasha, the patriarch's daughter, psychological effects of colonial politics become even more apparent. In contrast to her father she is aware of her predicament and the danger of Western influence and repeatedly warns her cousin Tambu, who seems to be blinded by excitement concerning her 'new' life at the mission. One can argue that the girl is torn between her English and her African identity and does not find a way to get rid of her Englishness that she has acquired in the years of her formative childhood. Nyasha lives and thinks in English and is unable to replace it with Shona, which makes her become detached from her family and community. Even though she tries hard to recapture her African identity by reading a lot and talking to Tambu, she fails as she has lost track: not only does she speak a perfect English, she has also adjusted to a lifestyle with more freedom relating to gender equality and "continues to dress in short skirts, smoke, and talk to boys at night, all behaviours considered inappropriate for a young Shona girl" (Thompson 59).

Nyasha, unable to articulate her psychological problems as she is, literally, not understood, expresses "a voiceless anger through her body and her mouth" and develops anorexia (see Hill 78):

[Nyasha's] refusal to eat food becomes a weapon of power in an otherwise powerless situation. The words have little to do with the original conflict, so they have the effect of shifting the subject to one in which she can have the last word. And by removing herself bodily, she controls the way in which the conflict is ended (see *ibid.* 82- 83).

As she usually flushes "the vital juices [...] down the toilet" (NC 199), one can suggest that the toilets are also meaningful in the sense that "[t]he modern convenience [and English-inspired cleanliness] turns out to be a life-sucking parasite" (Sugnet 43).

Albeit, Nyasha slowly opens up to Tambu and, at one point, expresses her anger by tearing up her history book with her teeth in a murderous rage as it has taught her "lies" and given her the Englishness (see Nfah-Abbenyi 69). In her dreariness, she loses sight of

living and of being a teenager and is constantly preoccupied with studying and contemplating her identity:

Then she sat on her bed and looked at me out of her sunken eyes, her bony knees pressed together so that her nightdress fell through the space where her thighs had been, agitated and nervous and picking her skin. 'I don't want to do it Tambu, really, I don't, but it's coming.' Her eyes dilated. 'They've done it to me,' she accused, whispering still. 'Really, they have.' And then she became stern. 'It's not their fault. They did it to them. You know they did,' she whispered. 'To both of them, but especially to him' (NC 204).

At this point, Nyasha has had arguments with her parents, especially with Babamukuru, whom she is referring to at the end of the quote. Not understanding her cry for help expressed through anorexia, the parents are supported by a psychiatrist, who explains that "Nyasha could not be ill, that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described" (NC 206). Thereby, the doctor declares that the Englishness dominates his patient, which the parents unfortunately cannot decode and understand. Although they are aware of the influence the time in England had on their children, they only criticise their behaviour:

'They are too Anglicised' explained Maiguru. 'They picked up all these disrespectful ways in England' she continued conversationally, 'and it's taking them time to learn how to behave home again. It's difficult for them because things are so different. We keep trying to teach her the right manners, always telling her Nyasha do this; Nyasha why didn't you do that? But it's taking time. Ha Nyasha! That child of mine has her own thoughts about everything!' (NC 74).

The only person who has recognised the illness from the very beginning and who is able to empathise with the girl is Tambu. Yet, when she is accepted at the convent school, Nyasha is left behind by her only confidante:

I am missing you and missing you badly. In many ways you are very essential to me in bridging some of the gaps in my life, and now that you are away I feel them again. I find it more and more difficult to speak with the girls at school. [...] They do not like my language, my English, because it is authentic, and my Shona, because it is not! They think I am a snob, that I think I am superior to men (if they call the boys in my class men). And all because I beat the boys at maths! [...] I very much would like to belong, Tambu, but I find I do not. [...] I cannot help thinking that what antagonises is the fact that I am me – hardly, I admit, the ideal daughter of a hallowed headmaster, a revered patriarch (NC 196-97).

In this extract from a letter one can see that she slowly realises that she needs to try to reconstruct her African identity in order to manage her life at the mission without Tambu.

In contrast to Nyasha, Tambu deals differently with her new Western lifestyle and aspires to every single chance she is given to emancipate herself and gain new knowledge. Being asked why the narrator is able to handle the hybridisation without struggling like her cousin, Dangarembga explains that “she has this very solid background. She knows exactly where she’s from. She may be leaving it, but it’s there for her” forever (qtd. in Nfah-Abbenyi 71). Therefore, it is Tambu’s roots and the “deep old places” of her memories and childhood experiences that are crucial for her orientation and identification with the Shona culture. Hence, she does not get lost in Colonialism as she can still look and, in her mind, go back to those places, whereas Nyasha lacks these memories and gets lost (see Sugnet 41). Tambu, in contrast, is able to create and obtain a balance in her life by learning, questioning, and nurturing the history that was passed on to her by her grandmother, mother and other female relatives. Thus, she can deal with the clash of the two cultures and becomes a whole person. Nyasha and Tambu’s mother, however, are aware of the danger of the Englishness and cannot imagine that Tambu is able to handle Western education unscathed: “Don’t forget, don’t forget, don’t forget. Nyasha, my mother, my friends. Always the same message. But why? If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself. And that of course, could not happen. So why was everybody so particular to urge me to remember?” (NC 188). Here, Tambu makes a very significant point: she knows that she would forget herself, her identity, if she forgot her history and thus she is aware of one of the most important factors for identity construction: someone’s memories.

Nonetheless, Tambu quickly gets used to her new lifestyle that makes her perceive Shona culture as backward and English culture as progressive and struggles to appreciate her mother and the life back home at the homestead. At times, this leaves the reader, who until then had been able to sympathise with her, “wondering how faithful she has been to her mother and to Shona” (Thompson 60). However, the narrator, the adult Tambu, is self-critical at times and reflects that her early perception of the glory of Englishness was an illusion: “[A]s the novelty wore off, you began to see that the antiseptic sterility that my aunt and uncle strove for could not be attained beyond an illusory level because the buses [...] rolled a storm of fine red dust which perversely settled in corners and on surfaces” (NC 71). This dust can be seen as a metaphor for all the side effects of her comfortable new life at the mission.

At the end of the novel, Tambu comprehends the brainwashing she has undergone, comes to acknowledge and appreciate her mother’s traditional knowledge and wisdom and eventually starts to see the embrace of Western culture critically: “Was I being careful enough? I wondered. For I was beginning to have a suspicion, no more than the seed of a suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the ‘Englishness’ of the mission; and after that the more concentrated ‘Englishness’ of Sacred Heart” (NC 207-208).

Ultimately, one can argue that despite her struggles in the course of her ‘reincarnation,’ she has managed to attain emancipation and freedom, which is expressed through the narrative she has produced with the novel. By composing her own account for herself, she “make[s] herself healthy by becoming more and more aware of her oppression and more consciously resistant to it. [And] although it involves stomaching some ‘Englishness,’ is ultimately an empowering [process]” (Sugnet 45).

#### 8.4. Frieda's search for a cultural identity

After having analysed the confusion created by Western education and traditions through colonialism, this part is going to illustrate how the protagonist in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* struggles to find her cultural and personal identity in the time under the apartheid system. Although Frieda grew up in a rural area in South Africa, she cannot fully identify with the traditional culture due to various different reasons. Therefore, every short story in the novel can be seen as a period of her quest for identity.

Looking at the concept of cultural identity, it is important to note that “speak[ing] of South Africans is a confusing business because South Africans have always been, and still are made up of separate racial constituencies...” (Wicomb in Mengel 20). In contrast to other parts of Africa, the situation of a great variety within one country arising from colonialism has been even further complicated and troubled by the system of apartheid. This diversity within South Africa has made it extremely difficult to define a valid concept of a cultural identity.

Growing up in the time under the apartheid system, Frieda's childhood is closely tied to the idea of racial segregation and class, which creates instability within her identity. Her parents, however, reinforce this confusion by imposing their values upon her: whereas Frieda's father embraces the English culture and sees his English ancestors and consequently his family as “respectable coloureds” (YCGLICT 116), her mother is of Griqua heritage. Although the history of this heterogeneous subgroup is long, it is widely unknown and unappreciated, which is expressed through a lack of recognition as a legally recognised cultural identity (see YCGLICT 96). Having discussed Nyasha's identity problem, one can argue that the Shona culture in *Nervous Conditions* can be compared to Griqua culture in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*: both characters struggle to understand and appreciate their roots as they have been confused by the English culture. Frieda's father thus resembles Babamukuru in being a dominant patriarch who

embraces Englishness and Western traditions, which shapes and confuses his daughter's self-concept.

Furthermore, Frieda's parents are both coloured and therefore marked as one of 'the others' in the racially segregated South African society. However, "instead of uniting with 'the others' as a common front," Frieda's family feels socially superior to other Coloureds and Blacks as they are well educated and hence speak the colonial language (Schwarzfurtner 81). Yet, the apartheid system classifies them as inferior to Whites, which creates feelings of unease and displacement in Frieda in the same way it has affected the author, Wicomb, who too is a "'Coloured' who identifies as black" (see Richards 2000: 75-76).

Due to the white-non-white binary under the apartheid system, Frieda's identity construction needs to be understood as a 'coloured' experience that strongly influences every step in her life: "Just think, in our teens we wanted to be white, now we want to be full-blooded Africans. We've never wanted to be ourselves and that's why we stray... across the continent, across the oceans and even here, right into the Tricameral Parliament, playing into their hands" (YCGLICT 156). Here, Frieda and her friend, Moira, obviously struggle a lot with their cultural identity as Coloureds and are, as this passage shows, well aware of straying around in a disoriented manner. In addition, they feel out of place in the increasingly insistent liberation struggle as they do not see themselves as part of the oppressed Blacks and Coloureds. This makes them drift even further away from a stable feeling of cultural membership.

In order to escape from the "coloured pretty bourgeoisie" (Schwarzfurtner 85) and her authoritarian father, Frieda leaves for England, hoping to find her self and, thereby, the strength to reconstruct her identity. Her relatives, however, feel betrayed by her departure and criticise her without sympathy: "we've sent you to college, just so that you can go away and leave us to stew in ignorance" (YCGLICT 86). As the protagonist's experiences in England are not mentioned at all in any of the short stories one can argue



that “Wicomb’s text does not seem to support exile as a solution” (Richards 2000: 100). The only thing Frieda reveals about that time is that “her memories of life there conflate the uncomfortably cold winter and her sense of racial otherness” and therefore she refers to the time in England as a “period of [...] alienation” (ibid. 100-101) (see YCGLICT 122). This suggests that Frieda might have been traumatised by racism, which makes her keep silent about that time.

After returning to South Africa, Frieda turns into a solitary wanderer, which is, for instance, expressed in the short story named ‘You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town.’ Michael, the father of her unborn child, proposes to her and wants her to come to England with him (see YCGLICT 74). Frieda, however, cannot imagine having the happy life he is dreaming of and refuses, which suggests that she is aware of her limitations as a coloured woman. She continues her bus trip to the surgery where she is having an abortion. There, however, she is once again confronted with a question concerning her identity:

‘You’re not Coloured, are you?’ It is an absurd question. I look at my brown arms that I have kept folded across my chest, and watch the gooseflesh sprout. Her eyes are fixed on me. Is she blind? How will she perform the operation with such a defective sight? Then I realise: the educated voice, the accent has blinded her (ibid. 78).

This passage shows that Frieda’s identity confusion does not only prey on her own mind, but it is also visible for strangers and makes the doctor question the obviously coloured skin.

Although Wicomb’s protagonist has gained a lot of negative and disruptive experiences throughout the novel, she manages to mature and eventually finds out where she belongs on a trip to the Gifberge in the last story (see Richards 2000: 74). Her mother, whom she had rejected before, makes her realise that she needs to know her roots in order to find her sense of self: “What do you know about things, about people, this place where you were born? About your ancestors who roamed these hills? You left.

Remember?” (YCGLECT 172). Hence, the trip turns into a formative experience that makes her discover her country and see that “a bush is a bush; it doesn’t become what you think they inject into it” (ibid. 181). This bush can be seen as a metaphor for Frieda’s identity: although Englishness had been injected into her, she will remain South African.

Ultimately, the end of the novel is similar to Tambu and Nyasha’s realisation in *Nervous Conditions*: identity construction only works when knowing and appreciating one’s roots and thus it enables Frieda to “actively negotiate what it means to be a woman and, as importantly, what it means to be a ‘Coloured’ South African” (Richards 2000: 74).

## **9. The power of memory and the past**

Having discussed some factors that strongly influence the construction of female identity, one can notice that there is one element that runs like a golden thread through all areas. What does women make what they are? Who instructs them to behave in certain ways? As Mamacos points out, “Africa today can be seen as a mosaic composed of the pieces of its past, comprising not only indigenous traditions but also colonial traces, while at the same time manifesting entirely new and modern modes of living” (1). Yet, the tradition arising from the past lives on in the memories of Africans and strongly affects their identities, which applies to all four novels under discussion. In the course of the analysis, a lot of instances connected with memories and the past have already been discussed, such as Nnu Ego’s conflict arising from being torn between her old traditional life and colonial life in Lagos, or the influence of Tambu’s, Nyasha’s as well as Frieda’s connection with their childhood memories and their roots in a certain culture and environment.

Discussing the power of the past, one needs to again highlight the importance of storytelling in African societies, which is seen as a huge cultural treasure. Women hand down fundamental knowledge to their children, especially to their daughters, who will

then continue the process of remembering and transmission. However, as many traditions have changed by and by, oral storytelling is gradually replaced by written storytelling: literature. Therefore, writers play a crucial role in the process of remembering by offering novels that possess a therapeutic quality for handling and reconsidering history (see Palmberg & Holst Petersen 101). Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is one example for this situation, as the writer makes her readers remember in the Nigerian-Biafran War.

### **9.1. The Nigerian-Biafran war and its importance for Adichie**

I have often been asked why I chose to write about Biafra, and I like to say that I did not choose Biafra, it chose me. [...] I was born seven years after the Nigeria-Biafra war ended, and yet the war is not mere history for me, it is also memory, for I grew up in the shadow of Biafra. I knew vaguely about the war as a child - that my grandfathers had died, that my parents had lost everything they owned. Long before my parents began to talk, under my keen questioning, about their specific experiences, I was aware of how this war haunted my family, how it coloured the paths our lives had taken [...] What illuminated my choices as I wrote was remembering and reliving through books and oral accounts remarkable stories of the courage of ordinary people (Adichie 2008: 49-50).

This account by the writer of *Half of a Yellow Sun* nicely shows her motivation for making people remember the civil war. After gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria's boundaries had been defined arbitrarily by former colonial powers, neglecting religious and ethnic differences of, among many others, the three predominant ethnic groups in the country, namely the Hausa and Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the southwest, and Ibo in the southeast. Due to political and ethnic tensions, the latter declared themselves independent from Nigeria in 1967, causing a civil war with massive violence and killing (see Mamacos 4). Looking at the consequences for Nigerian and Biafran civilians, Olufunwa claims that war, being a "cultural disruption and social chaos," provides a perfect opportunity for constructing new gender roles in a nation that is disrupted and badly harmed (7).

In the novel, the reader is warned and prepared for the war through discussions between Odenigbo and his politically interested friends. With the outbreak of war, however, life changes dramatically for all characters: Olanna and Odenigbo are not only forced to leave their house with Baby and Ugwu, but they also have to leave their wealth behind to face violence, poverty and hunger. However, besides this main plot line, Adichie also shows how women become sexual victims of the war. As sex works as a “metaphor for oppression and exploitation,” there are several incidents where women are sexually abused by soldiers or men in higher military positions who “betray the ideals of freedom they are supposed to be fighting for” (Eromosele 105). When Ugwu, Olanna’s houseboy who helps her teach during the war, is forced to perform military service, he finds himself in a group of soldiers who make a young bar girl have sex with them and thus seriously damage their victim’s psyche (see Azuike 86):

The bar girl was lying on her back on the floor, her wrapper bunched up at her waist, her shoulder held down by a soldier, her legs wide, wide ajar. She was sobbing, ‘please, please, *biko*.’ [...] Between her legs, High-Tech was moving. His thrusts were jerky, his small buttocks darker coloured than his legs. The soldiers were cheering. [Compelled by the others,] Ugwu pulled his trousers down, surprised at the swiftness of his erection. He entered her. He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down. [H]e moved quickly and felt his own climax[:] a self-loathing release. He zipped up his trousers while some soldiers clapped. Finally, he looked at the girl. She stared back at him with a calm hate (HOAYL 365).

This extreme humiliation by soldiers can be interpreted as “‘a sign of victory’ in war situations [that] remains a sort of ‘unwritten law’ which many women pay dearly for,” (Azuike 87). When a commander “throws girls on their backs in the open, where the men can see him, and does them, all the time holding his bag of money in one hand” (HOAYL 323), the novel displays two forms of oppression in times of war, namely (male) power and money. Moreover, violence against innocent women is publically advertised: “I was listening to Nigerian radio. [...] Kaduna says every Igbo woman deserves to be raped” (HOAYL 346).

Olanna, being untroubled by sexual abuse, teaches and helps wherever she can in the upbringing of Ibo children (see Olaniyi & Akinwale 149). However, she does not live without a constant fear “that Baby would die. It was there, the festering fear, underlying everything she thought and did” (HOAYL 266). Later, Kainene, who had distanced herself from her sister after the betrayal with Richard, comes to stay with her. The exceptional circumstances make them forget the incident and help each other to deal with the effects of war and starvation (see Mboya 58). At one point Olanna, having become stronger and even more independent through war, realises that she had loved Odenigbo “blindly [...] without ever criticizing him” (HOAYL 388). One can thus argue that the war triggers a process of emancipation in Olanna, who is supported not only by her sister but also by other women she has made friends with. However, although Olanna and her family remain safe until the war is over, the story ends on a tragic note: Kainene never returns from a trade across the enemy’s lines (see *ibid.* 403), leaving her sister devastated and heartbroken (see *ibid.* 407). Azuike argues that “Olanna’s traumatic journey through the Nigeria-Biafra War is symbolic of the state of Biafra itself: deeply ravished, abandoned, violated and volatile and in need of healing” (90).

Having analysed a big variety of African women living in most different ways and being confronted with various different problems, one can see Olanna as the “true role model for African women” (Azuike 90). Her significance for African literature is rightly expressed in the following:

[Olanna] emerges as a true heroine of feminism. Her image as the beautiful, intelligent, self-willed, resilient and quintessential mother; the nurturer and above all, the truly independent woman that she is, will remain ingrained on many readers’ memory. Adichie shows through Olanna that every woman must create her own individuality and, at the same time, be confident with the person she is (*ibid.*).

With *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie proves many critics wrong who claim that women writers do not engage in politics. Although the narrative is conveyed through the sisters’ eyes, the novel foregrounds a story of the Biafran War, and, “thereby [,] a story of the

ending of old nations and the making of new ones” (Andrade 2007: 93), which can be related to Africa as a whole, having been forced to redefine its cultural identity after colonialism.

## **9.2. Remembering through literature**

Women writers can be seen as actors who have pursued and refined the great tradition of oral storytelling. The following part will examine not only the writers’ motivations and aims but also the influence their works have on African women. It will thus be a concluding chapter that investigates the ways novels can affect reality.

For Tsitsi Dangarembga, it is not easy to separate construction and reality: “I think it’s very difficult [...] to understand which way the influences were working, whether the constructions were working on the reality or vice versa” (Dangarembga in George & Scott 311). Either way, her intention is to leave a taste of real life in order to make her readers remember in the past: “it just seemed to me that [...] there were people living in Zimbabwe or Rhodesia, and nobody knew about them, and if nobody set it down, then nobody would know about them” (ibid.). Hence, she took it upon herself to write about people like Tambu, Nyasha, or even Tambu’s grandmother, the storyteller; characters that Zimbabweans are able to identify with as they share the past and traditions or they know someone who was affected by colonialism in a similar way. In her own childhood, Dangarembga missed literature she, an ordinary Zimbabwean child, could relate to and thus she is “glad about recent changes as [...] writers are now able to write things about themselves in their own voices so that other people can pick it up, read it and learn from the stories for their own lives (George & Scott 311). Here, finding one’s own voice is of great importance: whereas African women have been oppressed and seen as passive objects in former times, they now manage to actively engage in fields such as literature and politics.

Adichie, whose work in relation to the past has already been discussed, was once criticised for her lack of African authenticity by an American professor: “My characters were educated and middle class. They drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore, they were not authentically African” (Adichie 2008: 48). This perception has made Adichie see stereotypes as a danger that can cause racism and prejudices: “I do not accept the idea of monolithic authenticity. To insist that there is one thing that is authentically African is to diminish the African experience” (ibid.). Consequently, Adichie continues to write stories about modern African women who do not fulfil traditional conventions and moreover gives talks and interviews about her personal experiences. She wants to deconstruct and revise the picture of the mute and uneducated African woman and show female characters who are, just like her, emancipated and independent.

Lastly, Wicomb’s narrative is strongly influenced by her own personal history. The short stories in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* can be seen as Frieda’s own texts, however, there is also an undeniable connection to the author’s life. Therefore, the novel constitutes a narrative reflection on (autobiographical) writing that highlights the political system, apartheid. Like her colleagues, Wicomb aims to prevent people forgetting their past as “[t]wenty years later [...] there is a whole generation of dispossessed people who barely know the history of apartheid” (Wicomb in Mengel 21). Moreover, she stresses the importance of “teaching young people to think for themselves what they consider to be good and why they do so” (Wicomb in Meyer & Olver 189), which closes the circle as the thesis has already shown that education empowers women in many different respects.

## 10. Conclusion

By analysing four Anglophone African novels, the thesis has shown that there is an urgent need to revise the picture of African women presented in Western discourse. Literary works are one step ahead as African women writers often process their own life and experiences of growing up and living in Africa. Therefore, their works and characters represent Africa, its social reality and its women in an authentic and realistic way, constituting an efficient tool to examine female identity construction in Africa.

Whereas in the first part of the thesis I have discussed theoretical concepts and issues connected to identity, gender and the assignment of Western theories on African novels, I have subsequently examined the point of view of African women and the way they perceive identity discourse. By depicting authentic female characters in their literary works, women writers enable their readers to gain an insight into what forms their lives, what they struggle with and what influences their identities. However, having discussed the female characters in four novels, the great variety of characters is striking, as, even after colonialism, there is a huge cultural diversity, which affects the individual identities. In the following, the novels are once again presented to recapitulate the different female characters and the most formative and hence most important factors in relation to their identity construction.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta portrays a very traditional Igbo woman who first struggles with her barrenness and then later sacrifices everything for her children. Nnu Ego thus represents a woman who is absorbed by the idea of motherhood, compliant to her husband and cultural demands. In addition, she is torn between her life with her family in colonised Lagos and her past in traditional Ibuza which creates confusion and instability within her self-identity. Thus, she can be seen a victim of society, but, looking at her life from a different angle, one can claim that it is Nnu Ego's own responsibility to construct her life and her self. What Emecheta indicates with her story is that "there is no joy to life or motherhood for a woman who chooses to live an



isolated, anachronistic life in a changing world” (Nnoromele 188). In contrast to other characters in the novel, Nnu Ego does not accept any help and sees her only motivation in her role as mother. She does not learn to find satisfaction in herself and refuses to construct her own individual identity until it is too late and she dies on her own, left by all her children.

In the voice of Tambu, a Shona girl growing up in colonial Zimbabwe, Tsitsi Dangarembga presents a younger generation than Emecheta. Whereas Tambu’s mother is uneducated and sticks to Shona traditions, the girl’s greatest ambition is the mastery of the colonial language, English, and the access to Western education. This dream is fulfilled after the death of Tambu’s brother, which enables her to go to the mission school where she absorbs as much Englishness as possible. Tambu, referring to this period as her time of reincarnation, becomes alienated from her traditional home but still does not get lost like her cousin as she can still remember in her past and her deep roots in Shona culture. With Tambu’s story, Dangarembga reconstructs her own childhood and depicts the confusion colonial influence causes within a traditional family. The second remarkable character in *Nervous Conditions* is Nyasha, Tambu’s cousin, who does not handle the cultural hybridity unscathed but expresses her confusion through an eating disorder. Still, Nyasha represents a young African woman who is well educated, highly emancipated and exactly knows what she wants, which can be seen as the total opposite of Nnu Ego.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer predominantly living in the United States and fighting for gender equality and women’s rights, continues this redefinition of the African woman. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a story about the Nigerian-Biafran war, which personally affected the author, but also about the twin-sisters Olanna and Kainene, who are not only highly educated but also socially and financially independent. They know how to deal with cultural expectations, where to receive advice and how they can learn from problems and grow even stronger, especially in times of war. As the analysis has

shown, Olanna sets up a role model for African women as she has found her self and hence lives her own life, be it in good or bad times, in a confident way.

Finally, Zoë Wicomb's short story cycle *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* depicts a woman, Frieda Shenton, who, similarly to Nyasha, struggles to find her identity. Having her roots in Griqua culture, the English culture is forced upon her by her patriarchal father, who thereby creates an identity crisis. Frieda's situation is, however, further complicated by the system of apartheid, which degrades her coloured family and imposes restrictions on all South Africans. Thus, she tries to escape to England, which disturbs her identity even more. The protagonist only finds her self when she is reminded of her roots by her mother, whom she had banished from her life before.

By closely examining the female characters depicted in the novels, the thesis does not intend to create one universal and everlasting picture of the African woman but, on the contrary, highlights the huge diversity of different women from different cultures. As the time in which the novel is set plays a crucial role, the context and the cultural and political developments as well as the social demands have been discussed when analysing the role and identity of a character. Still, certain aspects run through the analysis like a golden thread and thus constitute the most formative and influential factors when it comes to identity construction. Besides the past and the memories connected to it, education, traditions and expectations play a crucial role in the quest for identity. Yet, it has also been shown that finally, the way a woman is dealing with problems, opportunities and chances depends on her individual character traits as well as her motivations and prospects. The differences between the female characters however illustrate a change in the depiction of women: whereas women writers used to portray rather traditional characters such as Nnu Ego, they now also embrace 'wicked' women and non-conformist characters like Olanna and Kainene who do not fulfil traditional expectations such as getting married or having children.

In my thesis I have analysed a great variety of different female characters and identified the factors that influence their identities in the most significant ways. Yet, I shall lastly note that this as well as other endings of works foreshadow change and new beginnings, because, just like identities, literary traditions are never stable but ever-changing.

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## 12. Appendix

### 12.1. German Abstract

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Konstruktion der weiblichen Identität in ausgewählten englischsprachigen Romanen und untersucht, welche Faktoren das Leben und die Identität der dargestellten Frauen beeinflussen.

Afrikanische Frauen fühlen sich von westlichen Gender- und Identitätstheorien, die auf Diskurse und Unterschiede beruhen und somit Machtverhältnisse zwischen Kulturen aber auch einzelnen Menschen erzeugen, abgewertet und objektiviert und kritisieren den Vergleich zweier Gesellschaften, die sich in vielen Bereichen grundlegend voneinander unterscheiden. Aus diesem Grund versuchen afrikanische Wissenschaftler\_Innen nun, die Gender-Identitätstheorie zu rekonstruieren und an afrikanische Verhältnisse anzupassen. Anstatt Feminismus wie zuvor abzulehnen, versuchen Frauen von der politischen Bewegung zu profitieren und kämpfen für Gleichberechtigung und mehr Rechte für Frauen in der afrikanischen Gesellschaft.

Im Anschluss an diese theoretischen Erläuterungen wird anhand vier englischsprachiger afrikanischer Romane, Buchi Emechetas *The Joys of Motherhood* (Nigeria), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Nigeria), Tsitsi Dangarembgas *Nervous Conditions* (Zimbabwe) und Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (Südafrika), untersucht, wie afrikanische Frauen zu ihrer Identität finden und welche Faktoren sie dabei beeinflussen. Mit der Auswahl der Romane, die ausschließlich von weiblichen Autorinnen geschrieben wurden, wird versucht, die große Vielfalt Afrikas widerzuspiegeln: die Erzählungen stellen nicht nur verschiedene Kulturen in unterschiedlichen Ländern, sondern auch verschiedene Generationen von Frauen dar.

Da die Autorinnen in ihren Werken ihre eigene Kindheit, Erfahrungen mit politischen Geschehen und die Beziehung zu ihrer Heimat, Afrika, verarbeiten, handelt es sich bei

den ausgewählten Romanen um eine partielle Spiegelung eines Stückes sozialer Realität. Deshalb spielt der politische Kontext, sei es die Zeit der Kolonialisierung oder das Apartheid System, eine wichtige Rolle für die Werke und die Identität der dargestellten Frauen, die damit konfrontiert sind, einen neuen Platz im stark hybridisierten Afrika zu finden.

Im Laufe der Arbeit wird festgestellt, wie die Verteilung der Geschlechterrollen im traditionellen afrikanischen Familiensystem, die damit verbundenen Erwartungen wie Mutterschaft und polygame Ehe, die Bildungschancen und die Erinnerung an die Vergangenheit auf die Identität afrikanischer Mädchen und Frauen einwirken. Zusätzlich zu diesen externen Faktoren haben individuelle Charaktereigenschaften, Willensstärke und Motivation einen großen Einfluss darauf, wie Frauen mit ihren Schicksalen und den gesellschaftlichen Erwartungen umgehen.

Weil die Romane stark von den Erfahrungen der Autorinnen geprägt sind und eine große Vielfalt authentischer Frauenbilder darstellen, lässt sich von der Literaturanalyse auf die reelle soziale Entwicklung und Situation der Frauen in Afrika schließen. Literatur dient aus diesem Grund als Sprachrohr für afrikanische Frauen und bietet Vorbilder und Wegweiser an, die ihnen bei ihrer Identitätssuche helfen.

## 12.2. Curriculum Vitae

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Seit 10/2008	Lehramtsstudium UF Deutsch und UF Englisch an der Universität Wien
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09/2013 bis 12/2013	Fachspezifisches Praktikum für das UF Deutsch in der AHS Mater Salvatoris, Kenyongasse, Wien
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