

Representations of Female Agency, Oral Aesthetics and Afrocentric Consciousness in Selected Novels of Veronique Tadjo and Yvonne Vera

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Abstract

This paper studies the intersection of African feminist ethics, cultural preservation, and transmission through the lens of oral literature, focusing on the literary works of Veronique Tadjo and Yvonne Vera. Drawing on a theoretical framework rooted in African feminist thought, the study seeks to explain the subtle ways these authors engage with and contribute to conserving cultural values and gender perspectives. The paper engages a combination of intersectionality and womanist theories to analyse Tadjo and Vera's fictions. These theories provide a holistic understanding of the complex interplay between gender, culture, and other social categories. By utilising these frameworks, the study seeks to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in the narratives, unveiling the authors' deliberate choices in portraying African women's experiences within their cultural contexts. Furthermore, the role of oral literature as a dynamic medium for cultural preservation and transmission is examined. The paper highlights Tadjo and Vera's use of oral storytelling traditions to convey feminist messages and challenge prevailing norms. This exploration aims to underscore the importance of oral literature as a living archive, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage while promoting feminist ideals. The paper's objectives include critically analysing selected works, identifying recurring themes related to African feminist ethics, and evaluating the effectiveness of oral literature in conveying these messages. By deploying a theoretical framework firmly rooted in African feminist thought, this study aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature, specifically oral traditions, can

be a powerful tool for cultural preservation and feminist discourse in the African context.

Keywords: *African Feminist Ethics, Gender in Oral Narratives, Feminist Literature, Feminist Discourse, Cultural Transmission*

Introduction

Oral literature is a vibrant complication of stories, songs, and proverbs passed down through generations by word of mouth. It has served as the cornerstone of pre-literate societies and endures in many cultures today. This dynamic tradition transcends mere entertainment. It also has the capacity to function as a living archive that meticulously preserves cultural knowledge, values, and historical narratives. Proverbs offer nuggets of wisdom (Finnegan 2012), and folktales serve as moral compasses and cautionary tales. At the same time, epic narratives recount the deeds of heroes and ancestors, fostering a sense of shared identity and cultural pride (Ngũgĩ 1986). Despite being increasingly challenged by the rise of written communication, oral literature is eventually finding its way into written documents and publications. Hence, it remains a powerful medium for cultural transmission and social commentary. The relationship between oral literature and social issues—such as its place in feminist discourse and cultural preservation—has drawn more attention from academics in recent years (Barber 1997). This paper explores this very idea, presenting how the works of two prominent African authors, Veronique Tadjó and Yvonne Vera, exploit oral storytelling traditions to explore themes of gender, identity, and social justice within a framework of African feminist ethics.

This exploration is vital for several reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on the often-overlooked experiences of African women, foregrounding their voices and perspectives within their specific cultural contexts. Secondly, it examines the power of oral literature as a tool for cultural preservation and social critique, particularly in its capacity to challenge patriarchal dominance and promote feminist discourse. Finally, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of feminism within Africa, moving beyond the limitations of Western-centric frameworks. Prior research has established oral traditions as a cornerstone of African cultures (Ngũgĩ 1986). Scholars like Afolayan (1991) and Karega (2008) have documented the diverse forms of oral literature, highlighting their role in transmitting customs, beliefs, and historical memory. However, the

exploration of how these traditions are employed to address issues of gender and social justice remains an under-investigated area.

Although there has been a surge in feminist literary research in recent years, a large portion of this research has been done in relation to Western feminist theory (Showalter 1999). This overlooks the unique experiences and perspectives of African women contending with cultural practices, traditions, and social realities often distinct from their Western counterparts (Steady 2003). This paper addresses this gap by employing a theoretical framework rooted in African feminist ethics. This framework acknowledges the intersectionality of gender with other social identities like race, ethnicity, and class, shaping the specific realities of African women (Okpokwasili, 2023). Also central to this framework is the concept of womanism, by Alice Walker (1983), which celebrates the resilience, strength, and communal spirit of women of African descent. This framework gains additional depth from the inclusion of academics such as Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1997), who highlight the significance of African cultural values in feminist discourse.

Gender Dynamics Through an African Lens

According to Steady (2003), African feminist ethics moves beyond simply highlighting the challenges faced by women on the continent. This framework celebrates their agency, resourcefulness, and the diverse ways they navigate patriarchal structures and societal expectations (2003). It recognises the numerous strategies women employ to resist oppression, reclaim their narratives, and find empowerment within their cultural contexts. Alice Walker's (1983) concept of womanism, which highlights the resilience and strengths of Black women, is consistent with the emphasis on agency (Collins 2002). This idea strikes a deep chord in the works of Tadjó and Vera, who frequently show strong female characters defying society norms and patriarchal structures by leaning on their sisterhood and cultural heritage. By examining how women in literature and real life navigate complex situations, African feminist ethics sheds light on their resourcefulness, adaptability, and their ongoing pursuit of self-determination. Another central pillar of African feminist ethics is its recognition of the interconnected nature of oppression. This framework recognizes how social categories like race, class, ethnicity, and gender interweave to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression for African women (Steady 2003). It draws inspiration from the concept of intersectionality, which was developed by legal scholar Kimberlé

Crenshaw (1989). For instance, a working-class woman in rural Nigeria might face a different set of challenges than an urban, middle-class woman in South Africa, due to the additional factors of economic hardship and geographical location. This framework underscores the significance of examining gender matters in the context of a particular African society, which encompasses broader social, political, and economic dimensions.

Examining Tadjó and Vera's fictions through this lens allows us to identify how their female characters challenge patriarchal structures and societal expectations. Do they pursue education, defy traditional gender roles, or seek to reclaim control over their narratives? It allows us to explore how colonial legacies continue to influence the lives of women. It also allows us to explore how female characters connect, support one another, and potentially work together to challenge the status quo. By employing intersectionality, the analysis can delve deeper into the character's experiences, acknowledging how these various social identities shape her challenges and opportunities. This framework allows us to move beyond simplistic narratives and celebrate women's resilience, resistance, and diverse experiences on the continent.

Veronique Tadjó's Perspective on Female Agency and Reclamation of Cultural Narratives

Born in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire in 1955, Veronique Tadjó transcends the role of a standard writer. She is a versatile artist who expresses herself through writing, painting, and academic research. Her artistic journey began within a family environment that nurtured intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration. Tadjó's literary career commenced with a focus on children's literature. Her early works, such as *Latérite* (1979) and *Ayoka* (1983), showcased her ability to weave folktales, proverbs, and cultural references into engaging narratives for young readers (Simon & Schuster, n.d.). These works not only entertained but also served as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge and values to the next generation.

As Tadjó's literary voice matured, she transitioned to writing novels that delve into more complex themes. She started investigating questions of gender, history, and cultural memory based on her personal experiences as a woman navigating a world influenced by both African and Western influences. Novels like *Silences* (1997) and *The Flight of the Nightingale* (2000) showcased her ability to craft compelling narratives that resonated with a broader audience. This analysis focuses on two of Tadjó's novels, *Queen Pokou* (2009) and *In the Company of Men* (2021), to illustrate how

she utilizes oral storytelling techniques and explores themes central to African feminist ethics.

African Female Ethics, Female Autonomy and Leadership in Veronique Tadjó's *Queen*

African female ethics is a moral framework founded on African cultural traditions that emphasises communal values, collective well-being, and relational interdependence. The concept of Ubuntu is central to this ethical perspective, as it emphasises the interconnection of individuals within a community and the belief that a person's humanity is defined by their interactions with others (Manda-Taylor et al., 2021). Unlike Western individualistic approaches, African female ethics emphasises mutual respect, caring, and accountability to the collective. Women, as custodians of family and community values, frequently exemplify and convey these concepts through nurturing roles, dispute resolution, and harmony building. This ethical philosophy questions established hierarchies, pushing for inclusiveness and shared responsibility, and thereby encouraging societal cohesion.

Pokou

The 2009 historical fiction book *Queen Pokou: A Legend of Côte d'Ivoire* by Veronique Tadjó goes beyond a simple biography of a historical person. It is a vibrant culture woven with history, myth, and feminist themes, all centred around the legendary Queen Pokou of the 17th-century Baoulé Kingdom in Côte d'Ivoire. It also addresses contemporary matters of female autonomy, leadership, and the difficulties of surviving in a patriarchal culture. Tadjó gives this legendary figure a new life by depicting her as a woman negotiating a convoluted political system dominated by men, in addition to her role as a ruler.

Tadjó's Queen Pokou defies the trope of the passive female ruler. Faced with the devastating prophecy requesting the sacrifice of her firstborn son, Pokou refuses to accept this fate. She declares with unwavering resolve, "There must be another way" (Tadjó 2009, 11). This statement sets the tone for the narrative, foregrounding Pokou's determination to protect her children and her kingdom at all costs. Her strategic brilliance is evident as she embarks on a relentless quest for alternative solutions, forging alliances and employing diplomatic tactics (Tadjó 2009). For instance, Pokou recognises the strategic value of the gold reserves and proposes using them to secure alliances, demonstrating her astute political understanding (Tadjó 2009, 42). This unwavering

determination to find a solution challenges the notion of female leadership as inherently passive or weak.

Female agency is further displayed in Queen Pokou's interactions with the male council. Despite their initial resistance to her leadership, she utilises her intellect and political acumen to gain their support. For instance, when faced with disapproval of her proposed diplomatic solution, she argues, "We cannot afford to be prisoners of tradition. We must adapt to the times" (Tadjo 2009, 48). This statement showcases her strategic thinking and her unwillingness to blindly follow established protocols. However, Pokou understands the importance of navigating the power dynamics within the council. She employs a mixture of firmness and diplomacy, ultimately securing their reluctant agreement to pursue alternative solutions.

The pursuit of agency comes at a cost for Pokou. Her unwavering resolve isolates her from those closest to her. The narrative reveals the emotional toll of her decisions, particularly when her closest advisor, Kouassi, questions her choices. This internal conflict demonstrates the complexities of female leadership within a patriarchal society. Women in power often face the burden of defying expectations and potentially sacrificing relationships for the sake of progress. Queen Pokou must constantly negotiate with them, overcoming their resistance to her decisions and countering their reliance on the oracle's prophecy (Tadjo 2009). For instance, when the King of Assinie proposes marriage as a means of securing an alliance, Pokou asserts her authority, stating, "Marriage is not the only path to an alliance" (Tadjo 2009, 57). She proposes a diplomatic solution involving trade agreements, demonstrating her ability to navigate the political sphere on her terms. This resistance to patriarchal expectations highlights the limitations placed on female power within the social and political spheres. Similarly, Queen Pokou grapples with the societal expectations placed upon her as a queen and a mother. Torn between tradition and the desire to protect her children, she expresses her inner turmoil: "How can a queen be a good mother if she sacrifices her son?" (Tadjo 2009, 27). This statement highlights the conflict inherent in her position. Society expects her to prioritise the kingdom's survival, even if it comes at the ultimate cost. However, Pokou refuses to accept this preordained fate. She challenges the notion that female leadership equates sacrificing maternal love.

Veronique Tadjó's *In the Company of Men*, Feminist Ethics and Contemporary African Female Sexuality

Veronique Tadjó's *In the Company of Men* (2021) explores the contemporary life of Awa, a middle-aged woman in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Beyond its captivating narrative, the novel explores themes central to African feminist ethics, offering a nuanced portrayal of female agency within societal constraints, the struggle to navigate traditional expectations, and the complex relationship between women and traditional cultural narratives.

Awa grapples with societal expectations surrounding female sexuality in a contemporary African context. The narrative explores her desires and frustrations, particularly in the wake of her husband's infidelity. However, her exploration of intimacy is often met with societal disapproval and judgment. For instance, after confiding in her friend Salimata about her attraction to a younger man, Awa laments, "Look at me, Salimata. Here I am, a woman of a certain age, and all I can think about is men" (Tadjó 2021, 87). This internal monologue highlights the societal pressures placed upon women to prioritise their roles as wives and mothers, often suppressing their desires. Furthermore, when Awa contemplates pursuing a relationship outside of marriage, the narrative reveals the potential consequences, stating, "She knew the whispers would start, the judging looks" (Tadjó 2021, 134). This societal disapproval underscores the limitations placed on women's choices regarding intimacy and reinforces the prevalence of patriarchal expectations surrounding female behaviour. However, Awa's resistance to these limitations, while subtle, demonstrates a form of agency. Through her internal monologues and self-reflection, she begins to reclaim the narrative around her sexuality and desires. She ponders the possibility of defying societal expectations, stating, "Perhaps it was time to stop feeling guilty about her desires" (Tadjó 2021, 182). This internal conflict reflects a growing sense of self-awareness and a potential challenge to societal norms.

The traditional institution of marriage is presented as a source of both comfort and constraint for Awa. While she acknowledges the emotional support it provides, particularly after the death of her daughter, she also questions its limitations on female autonomy. This complex reality is evident when Awa contemplates her relationship with her husband, wondering, "Is marriage a cage or a haven? Perhaps it was both at the same time" (Tadjó 2021, 32). This internal conflict reflects the challenges faced by many African women who navigate societal pressures to marry while simultaneously yearning for greater personal fulfilment.

Furthermore, Awa observes the limitations placed upon her friend Salimata within her marriage. Salimata endures her husband's infidelity and emotional neglect, highlighting the power dynamics often present within marital relationships (Tadjo 2021, 51). Through Awa's introspection and her observations of others, Tadjo challenges the notion that marriage is the sole path to happiness and fulfilment for women. The narrative suggests that women deserve the right to define their happiness and choose a path that aligns with their aspirations.

Tadjo incorporates elements of folktales throughout the narrative, particularly through Awa's dreams and recollections. These folktales, traditionally serving as cautionary tales, are often infused with anxieties around female sexuality and independence. For instance, the recurring folktale of the "woman with two mouths" is initially presented as a story of punishment for female defiance. The tale warns of a woman who is cursed with an extra mouth for speaking out of turn and challenging societal norms (Tadjo 2021, 112). However, Awa's reinterpretation of this folktale allows her to reclaim its narrative power. She begins to see the "extra mouth" as a symbol of the female voice and the ability to challenge limitations. As the narrative progresses, Awa reimagines the folktale, transforming it into a story of empowerment. She envisions the woman with two mouths not as someone to be punished, but as a powerful figure who can speak her truth and challenge the status quo (Tadjo 2021, 183). This act of reinterpretation highlights the importance of reclaiming cultural narratives and using them to empower women to challenge societal expectations. By rewriting the folktale, Awa asserts her agency and paves the way for a future where women can claim their voices and desires.

Despite the societal pressures faced by Awa, the narrative also emphasises the importance of female solidarity. Her connection with her friend, Salimata, provides a source of support and understanding. Their conversations offer a safe space for Awa to express her anxieties and frustrations openly. For instance, when Awa contemplates defying societal expectations regarding intimacy, she confides in Salimata, stating, "Perhaps it's time for me to live a little for myself" (Tadjo 2021, 152). Salimata's supportive response, "You deserve to be happy, Awa" (Tadjo 2021, 152), underscores the importance of female friendship in navigating societal constraints. These moments of shared vulnerability and validation create a sense of collective agency, where women can empower each other to challenge limitations and forge their paths. Furthermore, the narrative

introduces other female characters who defy societal expectations. Awa observes women who are entrepreneurs, artists, and those who choose not to marry (Tadjo, 2021, 98). These portrayals offer Awa alternative models of womanhood, demonstrating the possibility of living a fulfilling life outside the confines of traditional expectations.

Veronique Tadjo's novels, *Queen Pokou* and *In the Company of Men*, illuminate the complexities of the female experience through the compass of African feminist ethics. *Queen Pokou* exemplifies the theme of female agency. The novel re-imagines the historical figure of Queen Pokou, who defies the limitations imposed by societal expectations and the oracle's prophecy. She embarks on a relentless quest for alternative solutions, demonstrating strategic thinking and resourcefulness. Her refusal to accept the predetermined fate and her use of political tactics highlight the agency women can possess, even within a male-dominated society. Similarly, in *In the Company of Men*, Awa navigates societal pressures surrounding marriage and female sexuality. While facing judgment and disapproval, she demonstrates a subtle form of agency through self-reflection and the reinterpretation of cultural narratives. Her internal dialogues and acts of defiance, like contemplating an extramarital relationship, showcase her desire to carve out her path within the confines of societal expectations. Both novels demonstrate that female agency can manifest in various ways, from overt acts of defiance to subtler forms of resistance and self-determination.

Tadjo's novels highlight how women navigate and challenge patriarchal structures within their respective contexts. *Queen Pokou* depicts the Queen's constant negotiation with male advisors and elders. She must counter their reliance on tradition and assert her authority through strategic arguments and political manoeuvring. This struggle underscores the power dynamics at play and the challenges women face in gaining recognition within traditionally male-dominated spheres. Similarly, *In the Company of Men* portrays the limitations placed upon women within marriage and societal expectations surrounding female sexuality. Awa's internal conflict about challenging these expectations reflects the power dynamics within relationships and the societal pressures that constrain women's choices. However, both novels offer a glimmer of hope. Queen Pokou's strategic actions demonstrate that patriarchal structures can be challenged, and Awa's act of reinterpreting the folktale suggests the

potential for women to reclaim control over cultural narratives that have traditionally been used to reinforce patriarchal norms.

The reclamation of cultural narratives is a central theme in Tadjó's work. *Queen Pokou* re-imagines the historical legend, centring the story on the Queen's perspective and highlighting her agency. By doing so, Tadjó challenges the traditional male-dominated historical narrative and offers a more nuanced understanding of a significant female figure. Similarly, *In the Company of Men* incorporates folktales, traditionally serving as cautionary tales around female defiance. However, Awa reinterprets these narratives, transforming them into stories of empowerment. This act of reclaiming and reinterpreting cultural narratives allows women to challenge the limitations imposed by these stories and pave the way for a future where women can claim their voices and desires (Gafour, 2024).

Yvonne Vera's Perspective on Female Agency and Reclamation of Cultural Narratives

Yvonne Vera (1964-2005) was a prominent Zimbabwean author whose powerful prose explored the complexities of war, colonialism, and the silenced experiences of women in postcolonial Africa. Born in Bulawayo during a period of escalating tensions leading to the Rhodesian Bush War, Vera's childhood was deeply affected by the realities of conflict. This formative experience significantly influenced her writing, which often grapples with the psychological and social scars left by war.

Vera's literary career blossomed in the early 1990s with the publication of her short story collection, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals?* This collection established her reputation for weaving lyrical prose with an unflinching portrayal of the human condition, particularly the experiences of women and children. Vera went on to publish five acclaimed novels: *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). Her work garnered numerous awards, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Africa. Tragically, Vera passed away in 2005 at the young age of 40, leaving behind a rich literary legacy that continues to resonate with readers worldwide. Vera's storytelling techniques are deeply rooted in Zimbabwean oral traditions. She skillfully employs proverbs, folktales, and a unique narrative style to create a multilayered and evocative reading experience. This analysis focuses on two of Vera's novels, *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *Without a Name* (1994), to illustrate how she utilises

oral storytelling techniques to explore themes central to African feminist ethics.

Feminist Ethics, Female Desire, Social Constraints, and Self-determination in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998) is a moving examination of female desire, social constraints, and the desire for self-determination within a patriarchal Zimbabwean society. It is set in the racially charged atmosphere of 1940s colonial Zimbabwe. The novel centres around Guinevere, a young woman yearning for liberation and self-determination. Vera portrays Guinevere's frustrations with the limitations placed upon her by societal expectations. This is evident in Guinevere's internal monologue, where she contemplates, "She wanted more than obligation, not a fleeting excitement among male strangers with enticing tongues and an inviting oneness. She wanted a birth of her own" (Vera 1998, 12). This desire for self-ownership and a life beyond the confines of societal expectations reflects a form of agency, even if expressed through internal dialogue.

The protagonist, Guinevere, embodies a form of female agency that defies societal expectations. She also rejects the limitations placed upon women within her community, particularly regarding marriage and sexuality. This is evident in her initial resistance towards Fumbatha's marriage proposal. She declares, "I do not want to be your wife. I do not want to be anyone's wife" (Vera 1998, 12). This statement highlights her desire for autonomy and her defiance against the societal pressures to conform to a traditional feminine role. Furthermore, Guinevere's pursuit of education and her defiance of the arranged marriage proposed by her father demonstrates a willingness to challenge the status quo (Vera 1998, 48). However, her actions are also met with disapproval and judgment. This reveals the societal pressures that constrain female choices, highlighting the challenges faced by women in asserting their agency within a patriarchal system.

Butterfly Burning depicts the complex web of power dynamics that exists in a patriarchal society. Despite her initial resistance, Guinevere enters into a relationship with Fumbatha, a much older construction worker. While Fumbatha initially offers Guinevere a sense of security and companionship, the relationship becomes increasingly unequal. His possessiveness and attempts to control her movements highlight the

limitations faced by women within even seemingly consensual relationships (Vera 1998, 42). Guinevere, however, does not passively accept these limitations. She confronts Fumbatha's controlling behaviour, stating, "I am not your possession. I am a person" (Vera 1998, 54). This act of defiance demonstrates her unwillingness to be subjugated and her assertion of agency within the relationship. Furthermore, the societal disapproval surrounding their relationship underscores the limitations placed upon women's freedom to choose their partners. Guinevere eventually recognizes the constraints of this relationship, stating, "She felt a leaden weight settle in her chest. This was not the love she had dreamt of" (Vera 1998, 104). This realization marks a turning point in her journey, a step towards challenging the societal norms that dictate female behaviour and limit their agency within relationships.

Vera incorporates elements of Shona folktales into the narrative, particularly through Guinevere's dreams and visions. These folktales, traditionally serving as cautionary tales, often focus on the dangers of female transgression and societal expectations surrounding female sexuality. For instance, the recurring motif of the "mhondoro," a vengeful spirit, embodies the societal anxieties around female desire and the potential consequences of defying traditional norms (Vera 1998, 28). However, Guinevere's encounter with the *mhondoro* in her dreams can be interpreted as a challenge to these traditional interpretations. She confronts the spirit and questions its authority, stating, "Why do you torment me? I have done nothing wrong" (Vera 1998, 132). This act of defiance demonstrates an attempt to reclaim the narrative and challenge the limitations imposed by these folktales. By reinterpreting these cultural narratives, Guinevere asserts her agency and paves the way for a future where women can define their desires and navigate their sexuality outside the confines of tradition.

Feminist Ethics, the Trauma of War, Societal Expectations, and Loss of Innocence in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*

Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) is a haunting and lyrical exploration of the lasting impact of war on rural Zimbabwean communities, particularly on the lives of women. The story is set in the rural village of Kezi and follows the lives of two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, as they deal with the trauma of war, societal expectations, and loss of innocence. The war has stripped Thenjiwe and Nonceba of their childhood security and disrupted their sense of self. However, Vera

portrays their agency in their contrasting, yet equally valid, efforts to reclaim their identities and purpose in the face of loss. Thenjiwe, the elder sister, chooses the path of education, becoming a teacher. The narrative describes her dedication, stating, "Thenjiwe found solace in the faces of the children...She taught them the history they did not know, the stories that were never told" (Vera 2002, 117). This act of nurturing the younger generation and contributing to rebuilding their community reflects a form of agency, a way to finding meaning and creating a positive impact in a world shattered by violence (Mollica, 2024).

Meanwhile, Nonceba confronts her grief through a more artistic form of expression. She sculpts "stone virgins" – stark figures embodying the lost innocence and resilience of women during wartime (Vera 2002, 142). The narrative explores Nonceba's creative process, stating, "She chipped away at the stone, feeling the resistance, the coldness until a face emerged, a woman's face, strong and defiant" (Vera 2002, 143). This act of creation allows Nonceba to process her trauma and reclaim a sense of agency through artistic expression. While their paths diverge, both sisters demonstrate resilience and a determination to carve out their own identities in the aftermath of war.

The novel subtly challenges traditional notions of femininity and female sexuality imposed by a patriarchal society. Thenjiwe, while initially seeking comfort in a traditional marriage with Cephas, ultimately recognises the limitations placed upon her. The narrative captures her internal conflict, stating, "Marriage had not brought her the solace she had craved. It had brought a new set of demands, a new kind of loneliness. Cephas was a stranger in her bed" (Vera 2002, 157). This passage highlights the potential limitations of marriage for women and the societal expectations that can create a sense of isolation despite companionship. Thenjiwe's decision to leave her marriage, albeit a difficult one, signifies her assertion of agency and her desire to define her path. Furthermore, Nonceba's artistic expression through the "stone virgins" challenges the objectification of female sexuality often present within patriarchal narratives. These sculptures depict not passive victims, but figures of strength and endurance. The narrative describes them as having "eyes that held the memory of suffering, yet they were defiant" (Vera 2002, 161). By imbuing the "stone virgins" with such characteristics, Vera challenges the limitations placed upon female representation and celebrates the resilience of women.

Vera incorporates fragmented narratives and lyrical prose to capture the emotional landscape of the characters, particularly the unspoken trauma of war. The female characters are tasked with remembering not only their own experiences but also the stories of those who were silenced or forgotten. For instance, Thenjiwe contemplates the "women who had borne the brunt of the war," their stories often erased from official narratives (Vera 2002, 87). This act of remembering allows the women to reclaim a sense of agency and ensure that the sacrifices of others are not forgotten. Furthermore, the novel explores the complexities of female relationships. The bond between Thenjiwe and Nonceba serves as a source of strength and resilience. The narrative describes their connection, stating, "They did not need words. They understood each other through a language born of shared suffering" (Vera 2002, 123). This deep understanding and mutual support defy the notion of women as sole competitors within a patriarchal system. Their relationship showcases the importance of female solidarity in navigating the challenges of a postcolonial world. Female solidarity, as exemplified by Thenjiwe and Nonceba's bond, allows women to create a space of support and understanding outside the confines of patriarchal structures. Through mutual support, experience sharing, and remembering past sacrifices, they enable each other to overcome obstacles placed in their path by a society that frequently tries to silence and marginalise women. This sense of solidarity becomes a crucial tool for resistance and a foundation for building a more just future.

Both novels showcase the capacity for female agency, albeit expressed in different ways. In *Butterfly Burning*, Guinevere defies societal expectations surrounding female sexuality by pursuing a relationship with the older Fumbatha. While her choices may not be universally successful, her act of defiance demonstrates her desire for agency over her desires (Vera 1998, 12). Similarly, *The Stone Virgins* portrays Thenjiwe and Nonceba navigating the aftermath of war. Thenjiwe finds agency through education, becoming a teacher and contributing to the rebuilding of her community (Vera 2002, 117). Meanwhile, Nonceba reclaims her agency through art, sculpting "stone virgins" that symbolise the resilience of women during wartime (Vera 2002, 142). These acts of defiance and self-expression highlight the diverse ways women can assert control over their lives within societal constraints.

Vera's novels subtly challenge the dominance of patriarchal structures within Zimbabwean society. *Butterfly Burning* explores the limitations placed upon women within marriage. Guinevere's relationship with Fumbatha initially offers a sense of security, but ultimately reveals the limitations of a male-dominated dynamic (Vera 1998, 82). Her struggle highlights the ways women must navigate power imbalances within intimate relationships. Similarly, *The Stone Virgins* explores the societal expectations placed upon women through Thenjiwe's experience in marriage. While she initially seeks comfort in a traditional marriage, she ultimately recognises its limitations and leaves Cephas to pursue her path (Vera 2002, 157). These acts of resistance, while not always leading to easy solutions, showcase the challenges women face within patriarchal structures and their attempts to redefine their roles within these systems.

The reclamation of cultural narratives is a powerful theme in both novels. *Butterfly Burning* incorporates folktales, traditionally serving as cautionary tales around female transgression. However, Guinevere's experiences do not mirror the tragic consequences often depicted in these tales. While she faces societal disapproval, she does not succumb to a predetermined fate (Vera 1998, 104). This departure from traditional narratives can be seen as a challenge to the limitations imposed by these tales and a potential reclaiming of the cultural narrative surrounding female agency (Santos, 2023). Similarly, *The Stone Virgins* delves into the importance of remembering the experiences of women silenced by war narratives. Thenjiwe contemplates the "women who had borne the brunt of the war," their stories often erased from official histories (Vera 2002, 87). By remembering and giving voice to these silenced stories, the women in the novel reclaim a sense of agency and ensure the sacrifices of others are not forgotten.

Vera's novels celebrate the importance of female solidarity in confronting societal pressures and navigating a world dominated by men. *Butterfly Burning* portrays a complex relationship between Guinevere and her friend Thandiwe. While not without moments of jealousy, their friendship offers a sense of support and understanding in a patriarchal society (Vera 1998, 72). Similarly, *The Stone Virgins* emphasises the power of sisterhood. The bond between Thenjiwe and Nonceba is a source of strength and resilience. They rely on each other for emotional support and share a "language born of shared suffering," defying the notion of women as sole competitors within a patriarchal system (Vera 2002, 123). These portrayals of strong female relationships subvert the notion of

female isolation and highlight the importance of solidarity in navigating the complexities of postcolonial life.

Véronique Tadjo and Yvonne Vera's Fictions, Oral literature, Cultural Preservation and Transmission of African Feminist Ethics

Oral literature boasts unique strengths when it comes to preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. Oral traditions are fluid and adaptable. Storytellers can tailor narratives to their audience and context, incorporating new elements or emphasising specific themes (Johnson 1988). This adaptability allows cultures to evolve alongside their stories, ensuring a continuous connection between generations. Furthermore, the act of storytelling in oral traditions is a communal experience, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. Laughter, shared gasps, and discussions following a performance create a powerful bond that transcends generations (Okpewho 1992). This communal aspect strengthens cultural identity and ensures traditions remain vibrant within a community.

Oral traditions also offer advantages in terms of memorisation and accessibility. Mnemonic devices like rhythmic patterns, songs, and proverbs aid recall for both the storyteller and the audience. These elements make stories more engaging and ensure key messages are retained (Finnegan 2012). Additionally, oral literature requires no literacy or physical materials, making it an inclusive medium accessible to all regardless of social class or education (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986). This inclusivity allows for the widespread sharing of cultural knowledge, ensuring traditions remain accessible to future generations. Finally, storytelling in oral traditions is often an embodied performance. Gestures, facial expressions, and movement add another layer of meaning and emotional connection to the narrative (Jackson 1989). This embodied performance brings stories to life, creating a more impactful experience for the audience and strengthening the cultural transmission process.

The fictions of African francophone authors, Véronique Tadjo and Yvonne Vera, demonstrate a profound understanding of oral literature's significance in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. Through their distinct narrative styles, both authors champion the importance of safeguarding traditions and ensuring their continued relevance for future generations. Oral traditions rely heavily on the skilled storyteller, who not only relays narratives but also imbues them with personal interpretations and cultural nuances. Similarly, Tadjo and Vera craft narratives that evoke

the voice of a seasoned storyteller. In Tadjo's *Queen Pokou*, the protagonist, Queen Pokou, recounts the story of her people's migration (Tadjo 2009). Through her voice, rich with proverbs and historical references, Tadjo transmits the cultural memory of the Abrons and celebrates their resilience. Vera, in *The Stone Virgins*, employs a lyrical and fragmented narrative style that reflects the fragmented memories of her characters following a war (Vera 2002). This style echoes the way stories might be passed down in fragments, with each generation adding their interpretations. By harnessing the power of the storyteller's voice, Tadjo and Vera ensure that cultural narratives are not merely preserved, but actively experienced by the reader.

Oral traditions often rely on mnemonic devices like rhythmic patterns, songs, and proverbs to aid memorisation and enhance the storytelling experience. Tadjo and Vera incorporate these elements into their writing to create a sense of performativity and ensure key cultural messages are retained. In *Queen Pokou*, Tadjo utilises songs and rhythmic language to recreate the experience of oral narration (Tadjo 2009). Similarly, Vera infuses *The Stone Virgins* with proverbs and lyrical descriptions that resonate with the rhythmic flow of spoken word (Vera 2002). These elements not only enrich the reading experience but also serve as a bridge between the written word and the embodied performance that characterises oral traditions.

The act of storytelling in oral traditions strengthens communities by fostering a shared cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Both Tadjo and Vera acknowledge the importance of remembering the past for the well-being of the present. In *Queen Pokou*, Véronique Tadjó tells the story of the Abron people, an Akan ethnic group from present-day Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The book shares the history of their migration, focusing on the need to remember their roots and the sacrifices their ancestors made along the way. Through the story, Tadjó draws attention to how these experiences shape identity and strengthen the community's connection to their past. The narrative is based on oral traditions and historical events, showing the struggles and leadership that helped the Abron people survive and adapt during difficult times. Tadjó's work reminds readers of the importance of honouring history and the lessons it carries. In the same way, its focus on collective memory serves as a source of strength and identity for the Abron community. Likewise, *The Stone Virgins* explores the trauma of war and the importance of remembering the experiences of those silenced by history (Vera 2002). By giving voice to these silenced

stories, Vera underscores the role of oral tradition in preserving not just grand narratives, but also the intimate experiences that shape a culture's collective memory.

Conclusion

This analysis of Véronique Tadjo and Yvonne Vera's fictions has demonstrated how contemporary African feminist writing, informed by oral literature, possesses the potential to address crucial issues championed by African feminist ethics. Central to these concerns is the amplification of previously silenced voices, particularly those of women. By incorporating these narratives, these authors ensure the complexities of history are not forgotten, fostering a sense of collective identity for women navigating the legacies of colonialism and ongoing social struggles.

While some might argue that African feminist ethics are fixated on an idealised past, the fictional works of Tadjo and Vera reveal a future-oriented approach. Their utilisation of oral traditions acts as a powerful tool for ensuring cultural knowledge remains relevant for future generations. This focus on cultural transmission empowers women to not only understand their histories but also challenge existing patriarchal structures. The adequacy of these emerging ethical theories in addressing contemporary issues is an ongoing conversation. However, the novels analysed here showcase the effectiveness of storytelling in exploring multifaceted issues like female sexuality, the impact of war on women, and the limitations imposed by traditional marriage structures. These narratives provide a platform for women to grapple with such challenges and envision alternative ways of being within their communities.

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