

Women Writing Nationhood Differently: Affiliative Critique in Novels by Forna, Atta, and Farah Annie Gagiano

Abstract: The focus of this article is on a discernible trend in contemporary African writing, wherein the fiction by mainly (though not exclusively) diasporic African women authors either explicitly or implicitly claims a nation for its women by highlighting the roles that women play in reimagining the (often shattered, or scattered) nation and place from which they have been separated. The article uses the concept of “affiliative critique” to indicate that these women writers hold the nation to account even as they indicate their continuing allegiance to it in their texts—despite the authors’ physical relocation to other countries and continents. The element of critique is strongly gender-inflected and indicates that gender injustice can be seen as one of the causes as well as one of the symptoms of broader failures of the nation-state in the African country of the authors’ origins. The essay juxtaposes novels by three newer writers: Aminatta Forna (focusing on *Ancestor Stones*, 2006), Sefi Atta (*Swallow*, 2010), and Cristina Ali Farah (*Madre Piccola*, 2007—using here the English translation titled *Little Mother*, 2011). These texts focus, respectively, on Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Somalia. While sufficiently different in what they portray, these novels serve as examples of the powerful and vividly imagined delineations of their troubled nations provided by contemporary African authors and are fine illustrations of the discerning social analysis, searing critique, self-criticism, and ethical insights that the continent’s trend-setting women writers are producing.

Keywords: contemporary African literature, affiliative critique, women writers, nationhood, gender, cross-generational transmission

And what I wanted . . . to show, is—are—the contradictions in [the women’s] minds, the experiences which are . . . kept down, which are in their minds, and I wanted to reveal that. So that men, or people in general, or the nation—can be as close as possible to women’s experiences.

—Yvonne Vera, “The Place of the Woman is the Place of Imagination” (380)

Write the poem, the song, the anthem, from what within you
Fused goals with guns & created citizens instead of slaves.

—Dambudzo Marechera, *Cemetery of Mind* (195)

The initial overwhelming predominance of male voices in fiction, criticism, and literary theory concerning Africa¹ is outlined in Biodun Jeyifo’s contribution to the text *Africa in the World & the World in Africa: Essays in Honor of Abiola Irele* (2011), where he refers to the “race men” whom he identifies as “African or African-American *male* intellectuals whose lifework consists primarily in the elucidation and affirmation of the traditions of thought, imagination and spirit of Africa and its diasporas, seen in Pan Africanist terms as a racial community with common or related destinies” (68; emphasis in original). Earlier, Jeyifo argued that those authors whom he identified as belonging to Soyinka’s generation occupied the “highly gendered postcolonial national-masculine tradition of the patrimonial ‘big man’ of national, continental or ‘racial’ destiny” (*Wole Soyinka* xx). Susan Andrade in her recent study suggests that the earliest female African Europhone writers were in general oblique and tentative in their references to their nations, while their seemingly domestic focus often failed to be recognized as functioning “allegorically” (*Nation* 1). She describes novels by male African authors as “evol[ing] out of their understanding of the economic and legal underpinnings of cultural acts” and sees earlier African women’s novels (written between

1958 and 1988) as “converg[ing] around the sphere of the familial as the orchestrating unit that looms over and plays out in national dramas” (34). While this distinction is possibly overstated—many male authors give considerable space and prominence to the familial, while several of the earlier female authors evince strong awareness of “the economic and legal underpinnings of cultural acts”—Andrade is right in suggesting that the national consciousness of the continent’s women writers was often overlooked or underrated.² Evidently, for women writers of African origin, making their voices heard as important evaluators of their societies was itself a struggle in the literary sphere even as they sought to delineate the unjust stifling of African women’s thoughts and feelings “on the ground” as one of the gravest faults of their cultures and communities.

Bessie Head, Assia Djebar, Nawal El Saadawi, Lauretta Ngcobo, and Yvonne Vera are the women writers who opened the way for contemporary writers including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,³ Unity Dow, Delia Jarrett-Macauley, and Valerie Tagwira, as well as the three writers whose texts are discussed in this article (Aminatta Forna, Sefi Atta, and Cristina Ali Farah) to demonstrate not only that female authors throughout the continent have a strong sense of nationhood but that they can articulate their awareness powerfully, critically, and in complex, individual ways. This surge in African women’s writing that clearly and skilfully evinces these authors’ interest in recording politically and morally evaluative accounts of their nations is one of the most interesting features of the new(er) corpus of fiction by African authors. It is worth noting that diasporic authors such as Forna, Atta, and Farah do not assume “cosmopolitan” perspectives in their writing, even as they eschew the anti-colonial gestures of earlier generations. The nation is neither romanticised nor sentimentalised, but it is nevertheless acknowledged as an ongoing emotional as well as cultural-political presence in the authorial imagination.

Bessie Head ended her most complex novel *A Question of Power* (1974) with a “gesture of belonging” made by the protagonist, Elizabeth, as “she placed one soft hand over her land” (206). This “gesture” subtly indicates Head’s affiliation to her adoptive country Botswana, while

the unaggressive nature of the movement (which is neither harsh nor loud) indicates dedication rather than possessiveness. It comes after a long and harrowing struggle to re-root herself in the new country, an account that unblinkingly reports awareness of ugly and dangerous power urges in the society and in the protagonist's psyche. Head's text can therefore be taken as an early instance of the "affiliative critique" characterising this essay's focal texts,⁴ a critique that balances a sense of national bondedness with lucid articulation of social flaws and damaging histories. While suggesting that women writers articulating their knowledge of their societies write nationhood "differently" from the way male authors generally do, on the assumption that "knowledge is not only situated, historically and culturally, but that it is always gendered" (Lara, "Globalizing" 80), I am as wary of indicating a belief in a "gender enclave" for Africa's women writers as I am of seeming to disregard the fine work of the continent's male authors and their complex representations and interrogations of nationhood. I am also distrustful of enclosing African writers in customary (first, second, or third) generational boxes.⁵ The phenomenon of women writers continuing to show a strong (even increasing) interest in national communities is worth noting at a time when the nation is often declared an idea whose time has passed. A focus on cosmopolitanism, globalization, or transnationalism tends to downplay or even dismiss nationhood. Instead, the women writers listed here seem to want to write women into their nations' histories, present and future, rather than write off their nations.⁶ They inscribe women into the nation in complex ways that contrast with the tendency in nationalist rhetoric to invoke women primarily in simplistically symbolic (usually maternal) roles.

Ancestor Stones by Aminatta Forna (2006) sketches a type of history in narrated instalments of Sierra Leone between 1926 and 1999. *Swallow* by the Nigerian Sefi Atta (2010) evokes the trials of young women's working lives in modern Lagos and also during an earlier time in a Yoruba village. *Little Mother* by Cristina Ali Farah (2011—the English translation of the original Italian text *Madre Piccola*, published in 2007) concerns civil war Somalia and the lives of diasporic Somali people. The three novels demonstrate their authors' continuing preoccupation with

their original (African) national communities, despite all three having relocated to northern countries. In their articulation of national imaginaries that are female-centric⁷ and their discerning political analyses of the sources of their nations' woes and failures, and particularly as complex verbal and stylistic constructs, these are three noteworthy examples of new(er) African writing. All three writers illustrate Trinh T. Minh-ha's dictum: "Neither entirely personal nor purely historical, . . . writing is . . . [a]n act of historical solidarity, [articulated] in addition to the writer's personal standpoint and intention, a relationship between creation and society" (20). I take it that this refers to something like the synergy discernible in the texts discussed here, which is an indication of profound emotional investment by authors who want to create works of verbal art that delineate and archive their analyses of their respective nations' being or life-quality within specific time-frames, *even as* they implicitly renew and review (and perhaps rediscover) the nature of their own belonging to the nations of which they acknowledge themselves (through their characters) as a part.

Far from denying or rejecting the national for the anti-national,⁸ Africa's contemporary and younger Europhone women authors seem overwhelmingly to embrace nationhood (which should indeed be distinguished from nationalism). They could be aligned with the position adopted by Fanon in his essay "On National Culture," in which he insists that the "nation is not only the condition of culture" but "a necessity," since "the re-establishment of the nation" will not only "give life to national culture" but "make such a culture open to other cultures" (197).⁹ The younger female African writers in question here do vivify as much as critique their national cultures in their texts, while their sophistication, cultural confidence, and openness to the societies within which they have relocated themselves differ markedly from the resentment discernible in many of the more reactive, resistant, and distant perceptions of those cultures by colonial-era or earlier postcolonial African writers.

While in the late nineties it was appropriate and necessary to note that "[w]omen are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency" (McClintock 90), by the second decade of the twenty-first century, this remark has di-

minished bearing on African writing (especially by women) and even to an extent on actual political life. Postcolonial female (and some male) authors are inscribing women into (the) nation, and women writers from Africa are increasingly assuming the stances of national duty and authority in and through their texts. They give recognition to women's non-military but vital struggles within their societies by centralising women's battles and efforts in their texts.¹⁰ Forna, Atta, and Farah all demonstrate close connections between the national or social imaginary that dominates in a particular chronotope and the nature of the predominantly female characters' struggles for a dignified life, confirming Bakhtin's observation that "[t]he prose art presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity," which he elaborates by suggesting that this form of writing grows from "a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle" (*Dialogic Imagination* 331). The nature of the social struggles depicted in the featured novels creates "the gendered time within the redefined national space of women's narrative that yields innovative recreations of culture and identity" (Wilson-Tagoe 237), indicating how women's social placement endows them with particular perspectives on what the nation is and what they want it to become.

Commentators on women's testimonies at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee hearings noted that "[t]he women's stories primarily testified to the difficulties in maintaining relationships . . . and their perceived struggles and failures to maintain families and homes. Women have tended to tell a different story which is at odds with . . . the nationalist text. . . . Women lift up the woven weight of race, culture and class discourses in shaping their social worlds" (Motsemme and Ratele 308). The commentators observed: "the [T.R.C.] commissioners pit the struggle to remake nation against what they regard as privatised anguish" (315). By both honouring and focusing on women's socially and domestically constructive roles as vital for the survival of communities and nations, by examining women's *work*, thoughts, and discourse and not confining women to the symbolic role of carriers of nationhood as in literary texts by male African writers such as Senghor and Ngugi, representing women becomes (in Forna's, Farah's, and Atta's

texts) a way of presenting and “presencing” women in their labour, their achievements, their struggles, their authority, their organisational roles, and daily dealings. Recognition is given to the quotidian, to the civic role of familial and friendship alliances, and to the importance even of everyday social contentions for nationhood. The myriad shifting networks of community and domestic life within an encompassing socio-national frame are explored in these novels and evoked within depictions of the publicly *participant* roles of the various narrators. These dramas of the quotidian insist on women’s belonging—in the society as in the nation—and demand a rethinking of nationhood. What Achebe has called “the story of the land” (*Anthills* 124; also see endnote 7) has been necessarily enlarged by writers like these to accommodate the female presence.¹¹

The Mexican philosopher Maria Pia Lara in her work *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere* (1998) writes that “[r]ecognition is a struggle” and that “[r]ecognition, in this sense, is a performative process of acquiring identity” (157). Lara identifies autobiographies and novels as narrative acts that can enable women to enter the “public sphere”; she writes that “new historical accounts can be drawn that reveal the bias and distortion of earlier narrations,” adding that in this way, “polluted representations of marginalized, excluded and oppressed groups can be challenged and set right” (171). However, in order to achieve this aim, Lara notes thus: “for a group to gain esteem and recognition . . . requires entering into the convoluted, interlarded language of public life with illocutionary force” (136).¹² Lara’s references here to the “public sphere,” “recognition,” and “illocutionary force” are eminently applicable to what I see the three authors attempting in the focal texts. I discuss the three novels in more detail below in terms of four tropes that I see these texts sharing: firstly, their depictions of “matrilinear” knowledge transmission; secondly, their politically astute and critical—broadly, feminist—perceptions and renditions of women’s lives; thirdly, first-person narration and use of several narrators speaking in turn; and finally, the authors’ non-celebratory accounts of their nations.

The cross-generational transmission of an experientially obtained knowledge of the nation in question occurs in each of the three novels.

It can be termed matrilinear, since it manifests as a narrative recounted by an older woman or women to a younger one, or as an account or guiding explanation offered as narrated experience by one woman to another. To outline both the pattern of older to younger female narrative transmission and to indicate something of the featured characters' historical and political awareness requires taking account of some complicated chronologies in the chosen texts.

In the earlier sections of Forná's text, accounts of rural Sierra Leonean co-wives' lives in a polygynous household are (in turn) recounted and (re-)interpreted by their now middle-aged and older daughters, the "aunts" of the frame narrator, Abie, who has been invited to return to post-civil war Sierra Leone from Britain to take charge of the defunct coffee estate of the deceased paterfamilias. We have, hence, three generations of women involved in the transmission of these "stories of the land," with the frame narrator's daughter briefly appearing as the next "inheritor." The second of the four sets (of four stories each) that constitute the novel takes up the young women's lives of the "aunts"—chronologically arranged accounts that range from those set during colonial times and continue through to the period of the first elections in which Sierra Leoneans cast practice votes and women can be seen to enter the public sphere. The heyday of the feudal-style coffee estate is past. Political upheaval affects the extended family when rebellious workers burn down the Kholifa homestead and leads to one aunt's wealthy suitor calling off the betrothal. Serah, the frame narrator's paternal aunt, is married to a slick young barrister-to-be, but a chance encounter in Britain with her first love, a political idealist, exposes (by contrast) her husband Ambrose's political opportunism and cynicism. In early postcolonial Freetown (after their return) the idealist (editor of an opposition newspaper) is murdered—as others are, too: "One by one, like lights going off all across the city"—while Ambrose "spent his days in the Attorney General's office drafting new laws to take away our freedom little by little" (233). Asana, the oldest "aunt," tells and teaches Abie how she became a successful businesswoman and later achieved the cultural status of an honorary male, having overcome an abusive first marriage and later

widowhood. Mariama, the “aunt” who suffered a nervous collapse (due to loneliness and cultural alienation) while studying in England, has the strongest mythical-cultural awareness among the four aunts, but she sees Sierra Leone as abandoned by its old, great gods because their society had itself betrayed and abandoned these powers. Each of the sixteen stories in Forná’s text has affective power or “illocutionary force” and socio-political as well as more familial and personal *pedagogical* effects, while as a full narrative body the stories constitute an unusually told but vital and complex national history. The stories’ combined function—that of keeping women’s memories of the nation’s histories alive—is evoked in the set of small, treasured “ancestor stones” that Abie’s young daughter imagines are “talking” to her in London (317) while her mother writes up the aunts’ narratives.

Matrilinear knowledge transmission is evoked also at the end of Atta’s *Swallow*, when the main narrator Tolani’s mother Arike says to her:

“No story should remain untold. Death is the state that should follow the surrender of all the secrets we carry, and I have resolved that it makes no difference how much time there is between our successive lives anyway. What matters is what we learn while we are living, what we can teach. Therefore, we need not wait for the moment before death to look at each other and say, ‘Listen to me. Let me tell you what has happened in my life so far. Let me tell you as I understand it now.’” (294)

In the last words of the novel, Tolani stops her mother from making a final, crucial revelation, saying: “It’s my turn to speak” and adding: “Your story is already told” so as to “let her rest” (295). Although the main narrative concerns Tolani, the depicted period in her life is interspersed with italicised sections from her mother’s narrative. Though set a generation apart, both mother and daughter have professions: Arike is a cloth dyer and tradeswoman in the Yoruba village Makoku, and Tolani is a bank clerk in contemporary Lagos. While Tolani initially thinks that her mother’s life contrasts with the awkward difficulties and complications of her own urban existence, Arike warns her: “I certainly do not have a simple existence. Is that ever possible? It is more likely

that a simple assumption has been made about my life’” (294). This remark confirms that the reader is meant to recognise parallels between the problems confronted by each woman as is suggested by the periodic interspersal of (parts of) Arike’s story in Tolani’s narrative. Tolani only hears her mother’s story as a single narrative at the end of the text. Through experiencing the entangled problems of her own life, Tolani has become receptive to the maternal narrative and able to recognise how, despite social change and different political frames (Arike’s being one of corrupt and sexually exploitative *obas* and Tolani’s that of corrupt rulers and sexually exploitative bosses), both women need to negotiate their national-cultural settings with care and can also educate each other. Tolani and her maddening, reckless but beloved friend and flat-mate Rose do not manage to do this; Rose dies as a drug mule for her criminal boyfriend, and Tolani barely escapes a similar fate, though the feisty Rose posthumously becomes her tutelary spirit (as her mother’s aunt has been for her mother and herself).

The title of *Little Mother* appropriately suggests this (third) text’s matrilinear aspect, which does not function exactly as the expression would suggest, as it points to the Somali term for the maternal aunt (usually of a child). By the end of the text, when Domenica/Axad (who is one of this text’s three main protagonists) has had a child, her cousin Barni becomes in effect the baby’s co-parent or second mother, as she had been the childhood “sister” and mentor of Domenica—even if she is only slightly older. Barni was also the person who gave Domenica (who has an Italian mother) her Somali name Axad. The cousins are reunited in Italy where they both settle, but they grew up almost symbiotically in Somalia: “My beginning is Barni,” Domenica says (1, 2), and adds: “My beginning seems to break that day when Barni is combing my hair in preparation for my departure” (3). Domenica’s mother, giving up the struggle to maintain her marriage to a political activist who is seldom around, decides to return to Italy with Domenica, abruptly rupturing the nine-year-old girl’s bond with Barni and the rest of the extended Somali family. In provincial Italy, Domenica/Axad attempts to become the perfect docile, Catholic daughter she senses her mother prefers her to be, despite her dark features that painfully

remind her mother of Somalia and her failed marriage. Domenica/Axad in the text's Prelude weighs her mingled ancestry and history. She does not regret her Italian heritage—yet she begins her narrative by citing and endorsing a Somali poet's words: “[s]oomali baan ahay” (1), which means “I am Somali.” The cousins are linked in their enduring affiliation to Somalia, despite the fact that the country's earlier state of tyranny, succeeded by social collapse and extreme, random violence, cost them their connection with their parents. Both their fathers were anti-tyranny activists and are destroyed in their attempts to rescue the Somali nation, and both their mothers suffered the grief of losing their spouses—Barni's father was executed and Domenica/Axad's disappeared in the violent aftermath of Siad Barre's fall. Nevertheless Barni in her turn states: “I hold my country close to my heart” (17). Barni articulates her indissoluble sense of Somali nationhood many years after leaving her motherland. The cousins are reunited in Italy after twenty years. They resume their loving relationship by telling each other their narratives of the time spent separately and are together at the birth of Domenica/Axad's baby. Domenica names the boy Taariikh after her deceased father and, despite her Italian doctor's disapproval, she has the little boy circumcised “to mark his belonging on his body.” She will speak to him in Italian first, “but when he gets a little older Barni and I will teach him Somali,” she declares (223). Thus the women share and maintain Somali nationhood, with Barni serving as the symbolic materfamilias along with whom Domenica and her son first reunite with the cousins' fathers' surviving brother, Uncle Foodcadde (also successfully settled in Italy), and then with Domenica's Italian mother, from whom she had become estranged. The fact that Barni makes her living as a midwife also points to her symbolic function in keeping their re-located Somaliness alive, even as they accommodate themselves to the fact of their life in Europe: “It's no longer possible to remain isolated; we seek to adapt and rebuild our path. Through living together, we can share the greater part of our pain” (226), Barni declares, balancing generosity and loyalty with nostalgia. In all three texts, the maternal-familial is thus closely intertwined with the sense of nationhood, and women share what they have learnt about accommodating

(or retaining or regaining) both cultural and political dimensions of the nation.

The second trope discernible in all three texts is a way of seeing and depicting women's lives that can be broadly termed feminist, which here can be roughly identified as a politicised or political perspective on womanhood—a clear awareness of the struggles in which women are obliged to engage with (mostly) individual men in familial or professional situations and with institutions that are (patriarchally) gender-biased against them, or with complex and subtle hegemonies. In this way, too, contemporary African women authors like the three whose novels are featured in this essay write nationhood more challengingly than many of their predecessors, manifesting awareness of colonial-type attitudes and practices that persist in the postcolonial present to affect women's and hence the nation's wellbeing detrimentally. For example, Forna's *Ancestor Stones*, in its depiction of especially the aunts' mothers' lives (in the four narratives dated 1912, 1931, 1939, and 1950), shows how the power positions in the polygynous founding family are influenced by class and ethnic factors as well as by the increasing dominance of Islam that outlaws older, traditional cultural practices.¹³ Moreover, the wives are under the absolute reign of Gibril Kholifa, their husband, who also discriminates among them and is clearly unable to satisfy all of them—especially his younger wives—sexually. At this time, women who cannot pay back their dowries cannot get out of a marriage and remain in a type of bondage. Asana, the eldest aunt, unwisely marries a glamorous man who turns out to be as much of a marital sadist as he is a political sell-out (to the colonists). Yet in later years, Mariama gets an education (albeit in a convent school); Hawa looks sardonically upon the British mining boss who calls her Josephine Baker; and Serah, along with her idealistic boyfriend, works to try to make Sierra Leone's first elections a success (which they are not). As time moves on, the onset of independence impinges on the old privileges of the Kholifa estate and its razing by fire costs one aunt her wealthy fiancé as the workers avenge the years of exploitation by the landowner Gibril—some of whose wives and indentured workers had been given to him in [re]payment of unpayable debts incurred. Serah grows to despise her politically cynical

husband Ambrose and divorces him for adultery with her best friend, while Hawa is predictably abandoned by her much younger lover for a woman of his own age. In the failed relationships, all the women are shown to be at a disadvantage brought on or exacerbated by their gendered position in the family or broader society, though some overcome the loss of partners. During independence, it is Serah and her female friends who go out to (wo)man the election stations despite the real danger of assault by the soldiers pretending to safeguard the process, but the elections are in any case rigged at the behest of the power-hungry head of state and Redempta (Serah's best friend) is murdered along with her family.

In *Swallow*, much of the narrative concentrates on depicting circumstances at the bank in Lagos where both Tolani and her flat-mate Rose are employed. The young women's working lives are made a misery by their objectionable boss, who is as foul in his personal habits as he is ruthless in using his power to squash their protests against his sexual harassment of them. The fact that the same man fires first Rose and later Tolani without any of the other clerks (male or female) standing by them indicates the ugly sexism structured into the formal economy, where religious and cultural rights are protected but not women's. Atta also suggests that it is the sudden loss of income and employment that drives Rose to accept a dangerous man as her boyfriend; subsequently, Rose and then Tolani (who almost goes through with it) agree to act as drug mules for this ruthless thug, who drives Tolani out of the city under threat of murder after Rose's death. The awful and incompetent male bank boss, by destroying the two young women's careers, can be seen as indirectly responsible for Rose's death and also for Tolani in her desperation almost incurring the same fate (and still facing an uncertain future). Sexism is shown to be entrenched in contemporary Lagos, but it also operates in the village where Tolani grew up. She reports that she first heard the blame-the-female taunt in the question: "How could you let that happen to you?" when she was a schoolgirl of thirteen: "when a boy in my class at Baptist Missionary ran up and lifted my skirt" (87). Tolani at first cannot see the parallel when her mother describes to her a time "before military coups and independence," when local "[t]

raditional rulers had not yet been totally undermined by the colonials” and when the *oba* or village chief decided that he would marry any local young woman who took his fancy—a threat also to Arike herself, countered only when her forceful, widowed aunt led other women to take a determined stand and put a stop to the practice (90, 93-96). Tolani’s difficulty in striving to marry her devoted but economically constrained boyfriend, who borrows all of her savings and loses them in a foolish venture, is in many ways a counterpart of Arike’s married life with Tolani’s father, who was a talented musician but wasted family resources by his excessive, careless generosity. He even took Arike’s hard-earned savings to give to an unsavoury couple, his friends, without thinking of this as stealing, and humiliatingly denounced her for attempting to throw the freebooters out of their home. She also learns accidentally (before she has fallen pregnant with Tolani but after a number of years of marriage) that her husband “has tried to test his virility each time he travels, to no avail” (151). Yet Arike’s business success and the fact that she rides a Vespa (in the village this is considered shockingly unfeminine) are blamed for the couple’s childlessness and she is forbidden by her husband’s brother (the family head) from continuing to ride her scooter. This uncle is possibly Tolani’s genetic father, according to the system of “[t]raditional African sperm donation” as Rose calls it (203), a practice meant to save face for infertile or impotent husbands. It is suggested that Arike was obliged to have sexual intercourse with her husband’s bullying brother so that her husband’s infertility would not be exposed. More importantly, Tolani (who had been deeply troubled by her aunt’s suggestion that her father did not beget her) at last recognizes the centrality of her mother’s role in their family and how much she can learn from her.

Barni in *Little Mother* remembers her parents’ marriage as exceptional, ideal. Whereas “[i]t is the agreed custom,” in her view, “everywhere” for men and women “to live very separate lives [in] roles that cannot be interchanged,” “the two of them discussed things a lot, as equals, man to man, woman to woman” and she considers her mother to have been “an independent and emancipated woman” (154). Sadly, her father was shot by a firing squad for anti-regime activities and her mother died in

despair not long after, possibly by suicide. The heart of the extended family was maintained by the cousins' aunt Xaliima and her husband Foodcadde. Although exile is not the only cause, Barni perceives the diaspora (necessitated by the violent political chaos after the fall of Barre) as much more difficult for Somali men to deal with than for the women.¹⁴ In exile, they fail "to invent a role for themselves. To redefine themselves. To adapt. To accept themselves. [And even, t]o humiliate themselves" (29-30), presumably because the familial and socio-political scheme of their society propped up their egos in the way supporting scaffolding can prop up weak structures. Taageere, who was first married to Shukri and subsequently gets married to Domenica, was an unsatisfactory and philandering husband to Shukri and fails to provide support for their son (his first); she leaves him and Somalia before he does, but his attempts to reconcile with her are at best unconvincing. Farah inserts a long chapter in which a garrulous Taageere speaks to Shukri by telephone to prepare her for the revelation (only at the end of his lengthy call) of his second marriage: he needs her co-operation to get their divorce recognised in the Italian legal system to allow him to get a visa and join his second wife Domenica (who has Italian citizenship) and their baby son. He also wants her assistance to help Domenica locate his sister, a recently arrived refugee in Rome. The almost entirely one-sided "conversation" is an outpouring in which Taageere's fecklessness (involvement in hashish peddling, foolish money-making attempts, and a spell in jail) and rampant sexism are made obvious, as are his youthful enthusiasm and capacity for warm feeling. In contrast with Barni's father's conversational "recognition" of her mother, he says to Shukri: "I'd like to do all the talking but you keep interrupting me. You argue. I need to speak to you about important things" (57). Even though they are divorced and living on separate continents, Taageere is evidently acting upon bred-in male habits acquired in Somalia. Having himself married the half-European Domenica/Axad, he finds it necessary to tell Shukri that by marrying a European, she has soiled her reputation and is now considered a *sharmuuto* (prostitute). Warning Shukri not to "cling" to their son which would turn him into a mama's boy, he refers to the boy (who is nine years old and has never met him) in almost the same breath

as “[m]y child, my possession” (65). Yet Taageere is probably more bluff than bite, hence Domenica approves of his “weak will” in contrast to her male cousin Libeen who for years had virtually taken over her life. With Taageere, Domenica feels a “tenderness” (116), as she tells Barni. Two further examples of unsatisfactory spousal conduct by the Somali men in exile are shown in the text. We hear about Barni’s husband’s brief presence in her life; he leaves her partly because he is ashamed that she is the only breadwinner and partly because their respective clans are at enmity. A joint acquaintance of the cousins, Taageere’s friend Saciid Saleeban, betrays both his lover (from a different clan) and his young wife (from the same clan) by marrying the latter woman when she is sent to him by his family and having three children with her; these children are still very young when their mother commits suicide, knowing herself unloved by her unfaithful husband. Farah demonstrates that the gendering socialisation that is presented as characteristic of Somali nationhood feeds into and works along with the terrible national fissures of implacable clan enmities to compound the damage done to the nation and to Somalis who have lost their motherland. It is the women who best and most wisely understand this, she suggests. Although they are not (as Barni acknowledges) necessarily free of it themselves, some do work against it and so attempt to knit up the ravelled fabric of Somali society in exile.

My third trope and an interesting parallel among the three texts is that they all use the first-person narrative voice and all make use of multiple narrators. In one sense, such a combination of testimonies indicates variety and eschews the single homogenising perspective of a monolithic nationhood; from another perspective, each voice is given a narratively equal turn to express its sense of what it was¹⁵ or is like to be Sierra Leonean, Nigerian, or Somali. Embedded in most of these vividly individualised narratives is an evaluative intelligence that holds their societies to account even as the narrators honestly assess their own lives. The first-person narrative style lends an air of authenticity to what we are told about the portrayed societies. The style achieves this authenticity in the individual narratives as well as in combination; the composite or mosaic quality of the three portraits—the way they speak both in unison

and against one another—gives a convincing quality, an authority or validity, to how each nation is depicted. In addition, the deep fondness for their people exhibited by the authors through their characters, the irrevocable connectedness felt with their compatriots, lend poignancy to these texts and help to endow them with the “illocutionary force” of which Lara speaks. From the perspective of this essay, these stylistic features make the three women’s novels *documents* in and of nationhood characterised by affiliative critique; the characters are all portrayed as ineluctably Sierra Leonean or Nigerian or Somali, people whose represented critical and analytical assessments of their nations and their people carry conviction and appear “representative.” Tones of speech, modes of discourse, cultural references, social conduct, and dearly held beliefs and values are indelibly coloured by the three kinds of (African) nationhood portrayed here, but this kind of recognisable affiliation is part of what makes the characters and their lives seem accessible, understandable, admirable, reprehensible, despicable, or forgivable (as the case may be) to the reader. We also apprehend the narratives as significant because they are involved in the battle for women to have equality of rights and of status—especially and at least in their own nations and families.¹⁶

The final trope shared by the three novels noted in this piece is the quality of the national vision conveyed in their texts. The authors do not romanticize their nations and national affiliations. Though commitment to the nation is powerfully present in the texts and characters, it is distinctly, even severely non-celebratory. The first glimpse that Forna provides of Sierra Leone (through the eyes of Portuguese explorers) is of the fruit orchards and vegetable gardens planted near the shore and tended by the wives and workers of Gibril Kholifa, which the chance European visitors mistakenly think to be a natural, pristine “Paradise” (6). Such a romanticising view is quickly replaced by the “bloodied,” “bruised,” and “burned out” (8) images shown on television during the civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2002. The composite, chronologically structured narrative shows the trajectory from the very founding moment of the Kholifa estate after the trek through the forest (paralleling the nation’s origins) to the burning down of the

estate and its bleak aftermath (paralleling the nation's disintegration), with a very faint hope of new cultivation and reconnection glimmering at the end. In *Swallow*, Atta shows us a contemporary Nigeria where the rot of greed, lust for ostentation, and rampant power abuse produce a shallowness and dangerous shortsightedness in those who are better off, whereas the poor and the maimed live lives of shocking precariousness. Atta uses neither academic discourse, journalistic discourse, nor symbolic equivalents but vividly *exemplifies* the dense tapestry of daily lives of the urbanised Nigerian people. In the hairdresser's salon owned by Rose's sister (formerly a prostitute in Italy) and patronised by the wives and daughters of the powerful, Tolani observes the following:

I finally saw the face of the customer with the fake hair. . . . Violet [the owner] told her the "Diana Ross" looked wonderful. The customer held up an empty Coca-Cola bottle and asked, "Um, does anybody want to take this to the Coca-Cola woman outside? You get to keep the um, redemption-thingummy." She was looking at me. The redemption money for an empty bottle of Coca-Cola was a few kobos. Couldn't she find a beggar to give? Children of the elite were rather dumb. Out of common sense, why wouldn't they care about what was happening? They saw others looking hungry, poor, frightened, and all they cared about were foreign clothes. The whole country could be in flames, and they would be trying to get on the next flight out, packing their Ferragamo and Fendi into their Louis Vuitton bags, yet they couldn't sleep peacefully at night for fear of armed robbers. Wasn't that enough to think about? The Diana Ross customer laughed and brushed stray hair off her clothes. She was in her late teens and wore blue contact lenses. . . . She didn't look like Diana Ross at all. She resembled a witch. (200-01)

The fierce indignation¹⁷ fuelling the above evocation, the power of moral detestation of utterly selfish and indifferent lives lived amidst others' sufferings, illustrate the criminally uncaring attitude of the wealthy riding for a fall that would, unfortunately, bring the entire society to the edge of collapse. It is at this very moment that Tolani gives

Violet a message for Rose: “Tell her I’m reconsidering.” Violet has no idea that this is Tolani’s coded signal to Rose that she will, after all, swallow cocaine packets in condoms to smuggle the drugs out to the UK—for a fee that is pocket money to the drug dealer, while potentially (and in Rose’s case, actually) fatal to the drug mule. Juxtaposing the two young women in the above passage—the spoilt scion of a corrupt family and the desperate person teetering on the edge of committing a life-threatening crime—makes this powerful scene politically and nationally *analytic*. Not that Tolani is on the edge of starvation—she, too, loves fashionable clothes and sexy shoes—but (as she admits) women like herself and Rose do not resort to begging in the street. Thus Tolani acknowledges: “We were not poor enough” (206), for she does see and shows us many of Lagos’ truly desperate beggars.

Life in this nation presents hard choices, especially for women—in the past as it does in the present. Whether Tolani will—in her “home-town [now] filled with battered abandoned cars” (256) and urban detritus—be able to make a living with the money her former boyfriend has managed to refund and her severance payment from the bank and by marketing her mother’s beautiful textiles and making garments from them remains to be seen. The future will not be easy, and although she has deeply reconnected with her mother, she has lost her two dearest friends. Rose reappears in her mind, giving her cheery and unconventional encouragement, whereas she recalls Johnny, another close friend, admonishing the three of them: “We the people. We deserve the government that we have,” and “our country, our continent, could be everything we dreamed, . . . if only we used the power we had” (216). “That was the last time I saw him,” Tolani adds (216). It seems Johnny died of AIDS or tuberculosis—another victim of Nigeria’s dysfunctional health support system.

Rose does not know the words of the national pledge she and Tolani were obliged to intone on a daily basis, promising to “*serve*” Nigeria and to “*defend her unity and uphold her honor and glory*” (232; emphasis in original). Rose declares that she was not prepared to pledge to “a country like Nigeria” (215); she “thought she was born in the wrong country” and hates the theft habit permeating society (11; 23). Nevertheless, this

maddening, vital, reckless, angry, and loveable young woman, flamboyant, foolish and fiercely loyal to Tolani,¹⁸ may yet (in the paradoxical mixture of her nature and conduct) be the closest thing to a representative Nigerian in Atta's text. Articulating a strong critique of Nigeria—both of traditional rulership as experienced by Tolani's Christian mother and her traditionalist father and of the contemporary government and people—Atta's evocation of a small but representative group of Nigerians exudes her strong but discerning loyalty to this country. In that sense, her text, too, is an example of a young, diasporic author who (eschewing a primarily ethnic identification) nevertheless conveys an unmistakable sense of committed nationhood.

Farah's text, too, is hardly celebratory even as it portrays *Domenica/ Axad's* suggestion that in the "tangled mass of threads" (of Somalis who are living diasporically, as refugees or exiled from their homeland by dreadful violence and a collapsed state), those looking carefully would have it "reveal[ed that] the knots, clear and tight, . . . though far from each other, do not unravel" (1). Yet Barni indicates another way of looking at Somalis' continuing entanglement by showing how she and her people carry their inter-clan hatreds with them even into the other countries through which they are scattered. She describes those Somalis who implacably uphold the clan enmities as "constru[ing] plots and threads" (152), causing fellow exiles to fear disentangling themselves from such a "knot" or "expiat[ing]" (154) it, lest they thereby become "just a loose thread" (154). It is as if their cultural and national belonging, even their very sense of personhood, depends on continuing to conform to this vengeful ethos. By eventually admitting to a Somali woman in Rome against whom she had developed an intense suspicion of alliance with the young thugs of another clan, what had caused her initial unfriendliness, Barni herself discovers that "[t]here are some knots that are loosened only when you reveal them" (158). She and this woman become very close friends, but such a resolution of an inter-clan animosity is evidently not common. Farah is also well aware that although there were some other factors that played a role, it was mainly Somalis themselves who destroyed the tolerant urban cosmopolitanism of Mogadishu (or Xamar—Somalis' own deeply affectionate name for

their most important city), “shroud[ing it] in silence” (120), as Taageere puts it in his moving lament for the devastated metropolis.¹⁹ In exile, men like Taageere become eaten up by “rage” and self-disgust (84) as well as exilic depression, so that life is reduced to day-to-day living—like “an animal” (71). Domenica/Axad likewise confesses to being “disgusted with [her]self” for years, carrying the burden of “a sadness that has no name, with no way out,” feeling “empty to the very core” (88). Taageere refers to being considered both “crazy” and shameless by fellow exiles, and Domenica/Axad becomes mute and resorts to self-harming. Only by forming new alliances and overcoming the old fissures or regaining a sense of nationhood are they able to heal, Farah suggests.

“In the process of rendering context in sufficient detail,” writes Neil ten Kortenaar, “the writer hallows the setting he writes about and makes it equivalent in importance to other such storied landscapes” (100). These words apply to what the three writers featured in my article do for their own peoples and countries—although, unlike ten Kortenaar’s suggestion of laudatory (and male) evocations, the three novelists’ portrayals balance (implicit) denunciation of misrule and civic irresponsibility with appreciative evocation of what is finest in their culture and people, inevitably intertwined as the good and the bad may be. The women writers hold the nation to account even as they indicate their allegiance to it; governments *and* people are critiqued by all three.²⁰

Not slow to register female (like male) perfidy and failure, the novelists complement older writers’ more androcentric portrayals of their nations with their gynocentric orientation, which makes space for different, previously unsung forms of female heroism. The formative role of women in society (and not primarily or only domestically) emerges into “recognition” (Lara, *Moral* 5) in these texts. The “national” is not homogenized but discerningly individuated. Knowledge of the authors’ actual relocation to other countries deepens readers’ sense of the poignancy of reconnective gestures in these texts. The featured novels are not epic foundation myths but engagements with the messiness of social existence within old or new national borders where life must be made more liveable for ordinary women, men, and their children. These novels do educative work for their readers—within as much as beyond

national borders. Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Somalia are three among the African continents' nations that have acquired especially bad reputations. Though they delineate their respective nations' ills, the three authors in the texts discussed here *also* write recuperatively, to indicate the normality and humanity of their nations and to show how their compatriots have struggled and continue to battle with the ills besetting their societies. While interrogating the causes of the plight of each nation, the novelists indicate that nationhood is a relationship carrying responsibilities rather than a mere label or an encapsulation. The authors fulfil the injunction of Botswana writer Unity Dow (novelist, legal authority, and human rights activist):

Africa, why are you so stoic, hugging your hurts to yourself?

Are you afraid they will dislike you?

Africa, why are you so secretive, burying your ills deep within yourself?

Are you afraid they will judge you?

Let them dislike you;

Let them judge you;

But Africa, do like yourself; and

Above all, Africa, do judge yourself.

(*Heavens* Frontispiece; n. pag.)

As Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper conclude in their monumental *Empires in World History* (subtitled *Power and the Politics of Difference*): “[t]he challenge for the future is to imagine new polities that recognize widely held desires for political belonging, equality of opportunity, and mutual respect” (459). Or, as Chinua Achebe put it long ago, “ultimately, I think what literature is about is that there shall not be misrule” (“Mapping” 25).

Notes

- 1 When Wilkinson's interviews, *Talking with African Writers*, appeared as recently as 1990, only two of the fifteen featured authors were women. In the twenty-first century, a number of book-length studies that concern themselves with African women's writing indicates a turning of the tide; see, for example, studies or edited

- collections by Bull-Christiansen (2004), Ogunyemi (2007), Cole et al. (2007), Cooper (2008), Ogunyemi and Allan (2009), Diaconoff (2009), Coly (2010), Browdy de Hernandez et al. (2010), Andrade (2011), and Kruger (2011).
- 2 Nkosi, who was generally appreciative of Head's writing, nevertheless labelled her as having "moral fluency" but appearing "politically ignorant" (99), stating: "[she] is not a political novelist in any sense we can recognise; . . . she is generally hostile to politics." He claimed that "[t]his lack of precise political commitment weakens . . . [her] grasp of character" and even diagnosed Head as suffering from "confusion as soon as she enters the realm of political ideas" (102).
- 3 Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) deserves the tremendous interest critics and commentators have shown in this text, but her novel has perhaps been allowed to overshadow texts by other African women writers doing comparable work, hence the present essay's focus on less well-known novels. In her article on *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Andrade notes that "the prose of female novelists has increasingly become more politically engaged" in recent times and that "the best female novelists no longer hesitate to represent the nation in explicitly political terms" without "abandoning" full "female characterization" ("Adichie's Genealogies" 93). See also the articles by Norridge and Marx for interesting discussions of *Half of a Yellow Sun*—coupled by Norridge with Forná's second novel, *The Memory of Love*, and by Marx with a number of other texts.
- 4 Saïd's useful distinction between "filiation," indicating one's being linked by "blood"—in the familial, racial, or national classificatory sense—and "affiliation," suggesting an elective, *chosen* linkage or voluntarily established commitment (22-24), is the source for the first term in "affiliative critique," the expression coined to articulate the central point of this essay. The purpose of the expression is to indicate the balance between an affective commitment on the one hand and clear-eyed socio-political analysis on the other hand in the novels discussed—and on the part of their authors. (Notably, both Forná and Farah have one parent of European origin, but like Atta's, their novels indicate an African affiliation.)
- 5 Green-Simms notes both endorsement and demurral about this system of classification ("New"). See also Bekers, who writes: "As I showed in *Rising Anthills*, the female protagonists of novels such as Nawal el Saadawi's *Two Women in One* (1971/1991), Nuruddin Farah's *Sardines* (1981) and Calixthe Beyalá's *Tu t'appellenas Tanga* (1988) simultaneously condemn their nations' undemocratic governments and their societies' patriarchal gender systems, thus seeing their fight against both as inextricably intertwined" (93). Bekers's article shows how Kourouma's first novel (*Les soleils des independances*, 1968) does something similar.
- 6 In a contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Gikandi recently makes the point that "although postcolonial theory has provided us with some powerful critiques of the nation and nationalism, its engagement with

- the decolonized nation and its literature has been minimal” (“Poststructuralism” 118).
- 7 Compare the resonant but discernibly androcentric evocation by the elder from Abazon in Achebe’s *Anhills of the Savannah* (1987), who analogically evokes the writer as the member of the community (in contrast with both warriors and workers) “whose part is to wait and when the struggle is ended to take over and recount its story” (123), because “in *his* new-found utterance our struggle will stand reincarnated before us” (125; emphasis added). Also compare Parpart’s reference to the concentration on “race, land and male power” as “central tropes of nationalist discourse” in Zimbabwe (108).
 - 8 Samuelson’s acclaimed *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition*, while insisting on recognition of the function of literature in providing texts that complicate and restore “complexity to the notions of national and gendered collectivity,” approves of and reaches towards writing that allows us “to imagine—or fabricate—new ways of being gendered in *and beyond* the nation” (241; emphasis added). My perception of the novels appearing from female authors of diverse African origins is that they seem preoccupied with possible ways of being “gendered in” rather than “beyond” the nationalities they embrace or with which they reconnect themselves. See also Coly’s book on Francophone African women’s writings in which she takes a stand against the foregrounding of migrant experiences in “contemporary cultural criticism” and the “apprehen[sion of] home and nation as negative discursive currencies,” insisting on “the endurance of national identifications in the postcolony” (xi; xiii). She concurs with Gikandi, who in an earlier essay warns that “we need to rethink modes of reading and analysis . . . focused so much on the familiar tropes of postcolonial theory—globalization, transgression, and hybridity—that they fail to take notice of unfamiliar, but equally powerful, local scenes of being and belonging” (“Globalization” 639).
 - 9 Mignolo could be seen as reprising Fanon’s point in writing that “*Decoloniality* (to distinguish it from decolonization during the Cold War) refers to a set of projects that, based on identities, are open to humanity at large” (179; emphasis in original). This indicates that postcolonial nationhood is (ideally) a cosmopolitan rather than an insular condition.
 - 10 Writing about contemporary Nigerian women’s texts, Okuyade observes that their “novels are women-centered and they explore women’s experience in both the traditional and contemporary societies” (5-6).
 - 11 Compare the special issue of *Africa Today* on “Everyday Life in Postwar Sierra Leone” edited by Ibrahim and Shepler, who refer in their Introduction to “the remaking of gender, generational relationships, and urbanizations” as the topics addressed in this issue (viii). The importance of establishing a Sierra Leonean memorial “archive” is similarly mentioned in Jarrett-Macauley’s splendid novel *Moses, Citizen and Me* by the central (female) narrator (255).

- 12 The term “illocutionary force” is an expression Lara adapted from speech-act theory and transposed to the literary sphere in order to evoke writing or speech which by its affective intensity and vividness of expression becomes an essential tool for the persuasion of publics or of those with established power in order to effect social change.
- 13 **After attending a fiery sermon by a visiting fanatic Muslim leader whose followers burst into homes to confiscate and destroy what they see as “idols”** (the symbolic objects treasured by adherents to traditional African belief systems), Gibril discovers the “ancestor stones” treasured by one of his least loved wives, who is Mariama’s mother. Despite her heart-breaking pleas, he is ruthless in casting them away among the pebbles on the river bank; Mariama is later able to retrieve them, but she loses her mother because of Gibril’s act, for the mother is driven insane and out of the relative if very meagre security of her marital room and starts roaming the woods. Each of the stones represents one of the mother’s (and Mariama’s) female ancestors, and the mother had brought them with her for comfort when taken in marriage by a man of a different culture.
- 14 **Nuruiddin Farah, Cristina Ali Farah’s older (male) compatriot and fellow novelist,** makes a similar point in his non-fiction text *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000).
- 15 **Forna in the opening sentence of her “Acknowledgements” states:** “Many women from among my family and friends spent hours sharing their memories with me of how it was to live as a woman in our country’s past” (n. pag.).
- 16 Referring to other narratives than those addressed in this article, Lara writes of “stories by women from non-Western cultures, and their struggles for recognition, as questions related to social justice” (“Globalizing” 63).
- 17 Compare Khamis’s reference to “the degree of wrath depicted by the writers of the new novel [in Swahili]” (95).
- 18 It is worth noting that Atta identifies Rose as a member of the Ijaw people and hailing from Rivers State, whereas Tolani is Yoruba; the two friends therefore speak English as their only lingua franca.
- 19 Barni says that Ardo (her Somali friend that she had at first resented) reminded her that “what was truly terrible about the war was that it had created this blind hatred among us”—whereas in “cosmopolitan” Mogadishu, “Somalis, Italians, Indians, Russians, Pakistanis, Yemenis, Chinese, Persians, Kenyans, Americans, and Indonesians” had been able to live in harmony (155).
- 20 Kruger, writing of recent Kenyan and Ugandan women’s writings concerning the AIDS pandemic, refers to the desire for “the ethical reimagination of community” and states: “the nation is part of a larger project that desires to transform the space of death into the site of radical renewal and reproduction. As responsible cultural actors are mobilized to assist in the restoration of public health, the search for an ideal speech community continues” (194, 195).

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