

The Figure of the Older Woman in African Fiction

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(In loving memory of Agnes, who will never know first-hand what it is to be an older woman.)

Abstract

This article observes a discrepancy between the importance that older women are accorded by African societies and their relative absence from African fictional works. When older female characters do appear in African novels, these characters are often depicted very negatively. The article examines a selection of narrative texts which do feature older women, mostly in the roles of mother-in-law, aunt or grandmother: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Ousmane Sembene's *Xala*, Loretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*, Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*. Although most of the older female characters discussed exercise a malign influence over the course of events and the other characters, there are exceptions, such as the simple, wise and benevolent Mma-Millipede in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

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In Africa, gender relations do not exactly conform to the same patterns as those of the West. They may consequently be misunderstood if they are judged too simplistically by Western criteria. For example, African women have not been nearly as disempowered in traditional societies as some

Western feminists would claim (Oyewumi 2002; Nwoye n.d.; Okome 2000; Nnaemeka, 'Urban spaces' 1997:167; Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:31). Women's influence in these societies has mainly been limited to specific spheres (Kuper 1982:33-36; 59-63), but it has not been inconsiderable and it has tended to increase with a woman's age.

In fact, the general consensus is that the older African woman has always been a figure of significant influence, if not power, in traditional societies. According to Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome (2001), in some African groups gender is actually less important than age in assigning power to an individual. In these groups, older women share more-or-less equally with older men the reputation for wisdom and the status of authority.

In other groups the correlation of age and power is a little more complex. Okome points out that an African woman's influence and importance tend to vary according to the context under consideration. As paternal aunt, for example, a woman may enjoy as much power over her nieces and nephews as their father (her brother). Even from the beginning, as daughter of a house, a girl possesses certain privileges—and she is also valued in youth for her potential to bring in bride-price—but her power really accrues in maturity, after her brother's marriage and the birth of his children. The role of wife seems, in contrast, to be significantly constrained—particularly the role of junior wife or of wife without children, or without male children. But all wives, even the most junior, may greatly enhance their status by assuming the role of mother, for a woman 'has real power over her children, regardless of age' (Okome 2000). Phaniel Akubueze Egejuru claims that 'A woman ... accepts the temporary hardships and humiliation of marriage to ensure the more ennobling and permanent state of motherhood' (1997:16). Obviously, this desirable maternal role is not static, but increases in prestige with the age and relative importance of her children—particularly her male children. And when a woman's children are old enough to marry, her status may increase still further, for she can hope for the role of grandmother, the 'woman [who] is respected by all that are junior to her' (Okome 2000; Hill-Lubin 1986:258). But even before she achieves this venerable position of grandmother she will assume the role of mother-in-law, in which 'she has enormous power vis-à-vis her daughter in law' (Okome 2000) and even, in some cases, over her son-in-law as well. Thus, age correlates very positively with power in African women's lives, especially in the lives of those who have gone through the demeaning phase of being a

young bride in a husband's household and who have produced legitimate offspring.

Interestingly, despite the significant power and influence that older women exert in reality, they do not feature importantly as characters in many African novels. Mildred A Hill-Lubin, writing about the grandmother figure in African-American fiction, notes the rarity of this figure in literature from the African continent:

Though the grandmother has been important in most African societies, she has not found a prominent place in the creative works of the major African writers (1986:258).

Obioma Nnaemeka, deliberately echoing Trinh T Minh-ha, suggests that this is because the grandmother's most important function in African society has been to impart wisdom through story-telling and her stories do not always follow the norms expected of her by the ruling patriarchy (Nnaemeka Introduction 1997:8-10; Minh-ha 1997:28-29). Thus, she is ultimately marginalized in society and in art. The mother-in-law may be slightly better represented than the grandmother in African fiction, but she, too, is surprisingly scarce. This scarcity is of course not unique to African literature. Older women have not been of great interest in the Western canon either, though female authors such as Doris Lessing have recently been recuperating interest in them as subjects of fiction (Brennan 2004:3; Pezzulich 2004:10; Leonard 2004:14). Zoe Brennan, in her 2004 book entitled *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*, notes a tendency in Western literature and criticism for 'older women ... to be misrepresented or ignored' (2004:159), and this is largely true in the African context as well (*pace* Brennan's own unexplored exoneration of 'traditional African images of older women' [2004:5]).

And, indeed, when older women do feature in African texts, they are all too often 'misrepresented' or stereotyped, their 'images ... largely pejorative in nature', just as Brennan claims of Western fiction (2004:159, 1-2). Most African novels include no important older women characters; in those that do portray them these figures are usually evil and destructive. Only the exception has a good, loving, and fostering grandmother or mother-in-law. This essay will look at how a handful of African novels (among the few that include older women characters) characterize them.

We will start our discussion with a survey of two influential older women from Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (translated by Modupé Bodé-Thomas as *So Long a Letter*), Auntie Nabou and Lady Mother-in-Law. Both of these characters assume the role of interfering mother-in-law in relation to their adult children. We will go on to consider the power that Yay Bineta from *Xala*, by Sembene Ousmane, assumes over N'Gone (her niece) and El Hadji (a successful businessman). This will be followed by an account of the relationships between Yaye Khady and Ousmane (her son) and his two wives, Mireille and Ouleymatou in Bâ's *Un chant écarlate* (translated by D Blair as *Scarlet Song*). Next we will look at the control that another mother-in-law, MaBiyela, exercises over Jezile (her daughter-in-law) in Loretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*. Then we will look at the portrayal of two very contrasting older women in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*, an unnamed grandmother and Mma-Millipede. We will end with a brief consideration of some older women in the township narratives, *Down Second Avenue*, by Ezekiel Mphahlele and *Mine Boy*, by Peter Abrahams.

In *So Long a Letter*, Auntie Nabou comes from a royal family. Back home in the Sine in her younger brother's kingly residence, she is of great importance as 'the elder sister of the master of the house.... Nobody adresse[s] her without kneeling down' (1982:28). Even in town Auntie Nabou tries to maintain that prestige. Unfortunately for her, her son Mawdo falls in love and marries Aissatou, a goldsmith's daughter. Auntie Nabou disapproves of intermarriage between the different social classes and makes it her mission to save her family's status. She is firm with her credence, as Ramatoulaye, Aissatou's friend states: 'She swore that your existence, Aissatou, would never tarnish her noble descent' (1982:28). She wants the goldsmith's daughter out of her family. Without telling anyone her motive, she acquires young Nabou, one of her brother's daughters, as a protégé and takes her back to town to mould her into an obedient wife for her son. Ramatoulaye, the narrator, tells us: 'Her aunt never missed an opportunity to remind her of her royal origin, and taught her that the first quality in a woman is docility' (1982:29). Young Nabou yields to Auntie Nabou's authority and Auntie Nabou's plans become successful. The older woman then puts pressure on her son to marry a second wife, pointing her finger at young Nabou. Auntie Nabou knows that Mawdo truly loves Aissatou but she does not care. She petrifies him and says that she will die of shame if he does not marry young Nabou. Mawdo conforms to his mother's wish; agrees to marry

young Nabou and loses the love of his life. ‘Stripping [her]self of [Mawdo’s] love’, Aissatou takes her sons and leaves the marriage forever—retaining her ‘dignity’ at the expense of her heart (1982:32). Aunty Nabou becomes very happy that she has succeeded in maintaining the family status. She does not care about her son’s happiness and clearly triumphs in the pain and discomfort inflicted on Aissatou..

In the same novel, Lady Mother-in-Law is another mother who does not care about her child’s happiness. She is not concerned about the child’s education, either: ‘Her parents want to withdraw her from school, with only a few months to go before the *bac.* to marry her off to the sugar-daddy’ (1982:35). Lady Mother-in-Law comes from a very poor and low background. When she realizes that her daughter Binetou has found a ‘sugar-daddy’, who can afford anything, she grabs the opportunity of living a better life. She cannot let go regardless of what Binetou says. Ramatoulaye’s eldest daughter Daba, who is Binetou’s best friend, observes:

Binetou is heartbroken. She is going to marry her sugar-daddy. Her mother cried so much. She begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house, and the man has promised them (1982:36).

Lady Mother-in-Law refuses to allow her daughter to continue with her education and enjoy her young life. She pressures her to marry the older man (who happens to be Ramatoulaye’s husband Modou) for the sake of money and shelter. Binetou has to sacrifice her chances of education and real love in order for her mother to be happy. Modou also has to sacrifice his first family to be able to satisfy all the demands that Lady Mother-in-Law has laid down for him to fulfil. He has to forget the thirty years of married life with Ramatoulaye and make sure that Lady Mother-in-Law is satisfied. He never looks back; he stands Lady Mother-in-Law and her husband a trip to Mecca, gives Binetou a large monthly allowance for getting married to him and pays for the house and the flat he has built for them. Binetou follows her mother’s orders but when Modou dies, they are left with almost nothing. And for Binetou the loss is more than financial; she appears quite indifferent, for ‘she is already dead inside’, having lost her youth to pay for her mother’s avarice (1982:71). Like Aunty Nabou, Lady Mother-in-Law has simply used her

offspring to satisfy her personal goals. Both are—at least temporarily—successful but their children suffer the consequences.

Xala, by Sembene Ousmane, includes a character whose situation is similar to Binetou's. N'Gone is a young girl who comes from a poor family. She does not do well at school, so she has no choice but to get married. Yay Bineta, her paternal aunt (known as the Badyen), organizes a marriage for N'Gone in order to achieve a better life for the family. N'Gone is obliged to obey Yay Bineta because she is a paternal aunt and, 'according to traditional law the brother's child is also his sister's daughter' (1976:5). In the household of her brother Babacar, Yay Bineta is a very powerful person, and she makes it her duty to find a suitably wealthy husband for N'Gone, in order to restore the fortunes of the family, which are at a low ebb. After retiring, Babacar is 'finding it impossible to keep his large brood of seven children on his tiny quarterly pension' (1979:6). Yay Bineta manages to trick El Hadji, a successful middle-aged businessman, into believing that he needs to marry N'Gone as his third wife: 'The man slowly succumbed. A change in his feelings began to take place' (1976:8). Yay Bineta becomes excited about the marriage and organizes everything. She also controls N'Gone, telling her what to do and how to behave. She acts as if she has the right to know everything that is happening to El Hadji. She does not care about the feelings of either El Hadji or N'Gone – or of those of El Hadji's other wives and his numerous children. To her, things must happen her way. Unfortunately, the marriage is a disaster, never consummated due to the '*xala*' or curse of impotence that assails the bridegroom from the wedding night. The reader surmises that this *xala* is at least partly Yay Bineta's fault, for she attempts to keep tight control over El Hadji and N'Gone. They have no privacy as a married couple. But when it turns out that El Hadji's business has failed, Yay Bineta is quick to make him divorce her niece. The marriage had been proposed entirely for the money and influence that it would bring her family, and when these seem to be unlikely, she withdraws at once, again without concern for the people whom she hurts. She makes nothing of referring to El Hadji as 'not a man' in front of several people, emphasizing his humiliation (1979:104). When Yay Bineta aims for a goal, she makes sure that she achieves it, regardless of the obstacles. That this ruthlessness is not uncommon among older women in her position is suggested by El Hadji's chauffeur, Modu, who, in listening to this Badyen, is reminded of his own

aunt, ‘nicknamed ‘The Termite’ because she eroded people from the inside, only leaving the shell’ (1979:104).

In African fiction, potential mothers-in-law usually think that they have the right to choose a wife for their sons or a suitable husband for their daughters. Sometimes the wife is not good enough for the son so they have to do something about it. This may occur in real life too. Older African women have the power to decide who fits within their families and who does not. And this power and influence is recognized by the younger generation, especially by sons, who may not value women of their own generation at all. According to Egejuru, when an Igbo man is asked: ‘If your wife and your mother are drowning, whom do you save?’ he would unhesitatingly answer: ‘My mother’. As Egejuru explains, ‘They rationalize that they can dispose of their wives and remarry, but there is only one mother and she must be saved’ (1977:15).

The mother in Bâ’s *Scarlet Song* is Yaye Khady, whose son is Ousmane. She is not happy with the fact that her son has married a white woman. She would prefer a black daughter-in-law who would treat her mother-in-law like a queen. She states:

A Toubab [white person] can’t be a proper daughter-in-law. She’ll only have eyes for her man. We’ll mean nothing to her. And I who dreamt of a daughter-in-law who’d live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking over the management of the house, and now I’m faced with a woman who is going to take my son away from me (1986:66).

Yaye Khady becomes very hostile towards Mireille, her French daughter-in-law. She enters Mireille’s bedroom unannounced and provides unimportant reasons to be there. Mireille has no privacy at all in Yaye Khady’s house. Yaye Khady also checks every move that Mireille makes and offers negative comments on it. Mireille decides that she needs her privacy and finds a flat for herself and Ousmane. Unfortunately for Mireille, Ousmane has to go and see his mother every day. If he does not come, Yaye Khady goes to the flat to remind him of her presence. She ‘burst[s] into their bedroom’, taking away the enjoyment of privacy. Yaye Khady makes sure that, during her visits, she behaves in a manner that will raise an argument between the couple. She knows that Ousmane loves her and will stand by her

no matter what his wife says. The narrator states that: 'Ousmane stood up for his mother' (1986:81). She successfully ignores Mireille's presence in Ousmane's life. She takes care of him when he becomes ill. She even lies about Mireille, claiming that Mireille has thrown her out of her [Mireille's] house. All these incidents have a negative impact on the love between Mireille and her husband.

Yaye Khady believes that Mireille does not deserve to be her in-law as she does not comply with the idea of treating her in-laws as if she is in their debt morally. Yaye Khady wants her son to find an African wife who will bow to all her mother-in-law's demands. She points out that:

A black woman knows and accepts the mother-in-law's rights. She enters the home with the intention of relieving the older woman. The daughter-in-law cocoons her husband's mother in a nest of respect and repose. Acting according to unspoken and undisputed principles, the mother-in-law gives her orders, supervises and makes her demands (1986:72).

Yaye Khady finds that the community of local women supports her plan to destroy the interracial union. Mother Fatim and Ouleymatou's mother encourage Ouleymatou to seduce Ousmane and have a love affair with him. These older women agree to the idea of a secret marriage and, at the baptism of Ouleymatou's child, they celebrate their victory. After this, Yaye Khady finally occupies the centre of attention as she wishes. She bestows numerous gifts on Ouleymatou's family, who for the sake of dignity will return their value to Yaye Khady doubled. Her dreams of having an African daughter-in-law are now fulfilled. She does not care about the feelings of Mireille, who becomes mad with grief and despair and stabs her son to death. Yaye Khady, as an older woman, has the power to manipulate her son's and her daughter-in-law's lives. The breakdown of many African marriages can be ascribed to interference by the in-laws. But older women also exert benevolent power over the young; it would be refreshing to encounter a kind and relationship-affirming mother-in-law in a novel sometimes.

Perhaps the closest that we come to such a figure is in Loretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*. In this novel, MaBiyela is an example of a mother-in-law made even stronger than usual by the absence of older men in the community. At the beginning she is very harsh on her daughter-in-law,

Jezile—though never as malign as Yaye Khady. MaBiyela is portrayed as a woman who is permanently vigilant and armed with authority and custom: ‘Conscious of her power, not only within the family, but in the community as well, she had to set an example—her daughter-in-law simply had to toe the line’ (Ngcobo 1999:17). She not only has authority in her own household but also outside her dwelling. She makes sure that her daughter-in-law Jezile knows her position, and at times makes Jezile’s life a misery. MaBiyela complains that she wants a grandchild soon, but when Siyalo (her son) comes home, she makes a point of disturbing the young couple’s privacy so that conceiving a child becomes impossible. It is as if asserting her primacy in the household is more important than any intimacy between the husband and wife. In fact, making the wife’s life difficult is seen as something of a duty on her part. MaBiyela seems determined not to allow Jezile to achieve the desirable status of motherhood; her efforts appear to be aimed at keeping Jezile stuck as long as possible in the unenviable role of young wife without offspring (1999:4). Eventually, Jezile solves her problem by visiting Siyalo in the city where he works and becoming pregnant far away from the homestead presided over by MaBiyela (1999:21-37). But when MaBiyela discovers that Jezile has delivered her baby at a hospital instead of at home and that the traditional rituals have not been followed, there is more trouble; she is outraged, scolds Jezile and upsets her by suggesting that the baby will be unlucky and ‘vulnerable’ (1999:73-75).

Later, however, MaBiyela becomes quite protective of her daughter-in-law. She looks after Jezile’s firstborn, S’naye, when Jezile is in jail (1999:105-108); she allows Jezile to sleep at her house when soldiers are around the village (1999:187); she confronts the police with loud outrage when they conduct a pass raid in the middle of the night, saving Jezile from being arrested (1999:79-80); she takes the decision that Jezile should go and work for Mr Potgieter while she (MaBiyela) looks after Jezile’s children, whom she loves and looks after as if she were their mother. She makes sure that they go to school and that they eat proper food. When Jezile returns from Bloemfontein with a child fathered by Mr Potgieter, her white employer, she accepts excommunication from her church for supporting Jezile and the new baby (1999:216).

MaBiyela is thus a complex character, who grows and changes as her narrative progresses, and as her role of mother-in-law expands to include grandmotherhood. Since we can identify both good and evil in her, she is an

exception to the manner in which older women are usually portrayed in African novels.

Though the normally neglected role of grandmother is not usually as maligned as that of mother-in-law, it is sometimes portrayed in the same way. Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* includes an example of a wholly evil grandmother. She is very impatient and rude towards Makhaya, the main character. She stares into Makhaya's eyes, shouts at him and demands money for providing shelter for him for one night. She is also exposed as a woman who encourages her granddaughter (about ten years of age) to sell her body. The child says: 'My grandmother won't mind as long as you pay me' (1995:9). This statement shows the importance of money to this woman. She has no morality and no sense of humanity. This makes her destroy the child's morality as well. This child grows up with the idea that she has to use her body sexually in order to gain possession of money. If there are no men to buy her body, then she will starve to death as there are no other plans for survival taught to her. This kind of nurturing destroys the community as it promotes prostitution and reliance on men.

However, the same novel also includes a character who breaks the mould of the typical older woman of African fiction. Mma-Millipede is a completely unselfish, benevolent, humble and wise character. Though she has suffered in her own long life from disappointment and rejection, she believes fervently in the brotherhood of mankind and in the obligation of humans to help one another. She is the one to whom younger women such as Paulina and Maria turn for help and counsel concerning matters of the heart. When she talks to them she does not pontificate but asks questions that make them more aware of their own feelings. An example of this is evident when she interrogates Maria about her feelings when Maria has quite unexpectedly agreed to marry Gilbert the next day. Mma-Millipede's gentle probing suddenly makes Maria say 'I don't care about myself, but nothing must harm Gilbert' (1995:85). At this moment both women become fully conscious of the rightness of the marriage, despite its haste and unconventionality. Mma-Millipede then goes on to take charge of the practical matters of the wedding, calling of course on the help of the other women in the village.

But Mma-Millipede features in *When Rain Clouds Gather* not just as a guide and advisor to other women—nor simply as an example, in her earlier life, of stoic female acceptance. She is a companion and inspiration to men, too. She is the respected friend of Dinorego, the old man whose

unconventional prescience allows him to welcome the agricultural changes devised by Gilbert, and she is also the beloved advisor and foster-mother of Gilbert, the British socialist-agriculturist himself. And, more importantly, she becomes the spiritual mentor of Makhaya, the novel's most central focalizer, the refugee who brings the bitterness of South African apartheid into peaceful Botswana. Only to her is Makhaya able to unburden himself of this bitterness, focused on his imaginary identity as 'Black Dog', who 'sat on the chair and shivered with fear while they lashed out with the whip' (1995:125). She is horrified by the 'torrent of hatred' of which he is capable when he speaks, however allegorically, about his experiences in South Africa. Nevertheless, by talking tentatively about her own faith, which she has derived both from her reading of the Tswana Bible and from her personal observations of life, she succeeds in mitigating his rage and confusion. He is amazed that 'an old woman in the Botswana bush' is able to move him so much, not only emotionally but intellectually, for he is an educated man. But her quiet talk of human helplessness in the face of 'life' and of her own inability to 'put anyone away from [her] as not being [her] brother' awakes in him his own humanistic belief in 'generosity' and allows him, in a dark hour, to be warmed by the 'fire inside her that radiate[s] outward' (1995:126 - 128).

Mma-Millipede – the ideal grandmother – is not in fact a real grandmother to any of the characters whom she nurtures and advises. Her power is in the end due to her specific personality and the unusual circumstances of Golema Mmidi, which is not a traditional village in the true sense, despite the fact that many of its inhabitants are traditionalists. Golema Mmidi is a new village, focused, unusually for Botswana, on the growing of crops, and all of its people have been displaced from elsewhere within the previous fourteen years. Relationships in the village are thus more fluid and creative than tradition would have made them and Mma-Millipede, like Makhaya, Gilbert and others, is able to assert her individuality over traditional roles.

In a less benign manner, the unusual circumstances brought about by apartheid as depicted in some South African novels also create opportunities for older women characters to assert their individuality. Men and women were often separated during the apartheid years, usually because men would go to the cities or mines to work and their womenfolk would not be allowed to live with them there. As we have observed in *And They Didn't Die*, the absence of older men in their families or communities tended to make older

women more influential. A few township novels such as Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* portray strong women, mainly for this reason. In *Down Second Avenue*, Ezekiel's two grandmothers and a number of other older female relatives are very dominant in his childhood (1959:11-21), but become much less so when he grows up. Thus, the earlier parts of the memoir include vignettes of these older women, but they tend to disappear from the narrative and their influence on the main character does not seem profound. In contrast, Leah in *Mine Boy*, a middle-aged woman thrown on her own resources by her husband's imprisonment, is one of the central characters – and she is certainly the strongest personality depicted in the novel. Ma Plank, an even older woman, is also an important character. However, the main point of *Mine Boy* is to show how a racist capitalist system corrupts and changes social roles. Leah claims the relation of 'mother' to the innocent rural Xuma, despite the fact that he is more-or-less of her own age, and she justifies this by telling him that 'the city makes you strange to the ways of your people' (Mphahlele 1946: 10). Hence, we must conclude that the power that Leah enjoys is not specific to African society – or any society, for that matter. It is a result of the perverted social situation brought about by the wrenching apart of traditional communities and her own individual resourcefulness.

Thus we see that older women, when they appear in African fiction, tend either to be depicted as malign characters, selfishly bent on pursuing their own ends at the expense of the happiness of the young or, if they wield any positive social influence, to be presented as anomalies, created by adverse circumstances which have reduced male hegemonic power unnaturally. Even more often, they are absent altogether. As Hill-Lubin states of all women characters in African and African-American literature:

Too often we have overlooked female characters, perhaps in an effort to counter the accusations that to describe strong women would help to support the matriarchal theory which says that black females castrate their men (1986:268).

This is especially true of older women, who are more important in African societies than younger women. As we know, older women in Africa play a far more significant nurturing, supportive, and advisory role than men in the family context. Older women typically spend most of their time with their

families, play a major part in educating the young and also serve as pillars of support for the younger generation. This has to be acknowledged and appreciated. In fiction as well as in reality, older women should be given the opportunity to show their power for good. We should have more older women as main characters in novels as they are crucial to our communities. Let us focus on them as important people within African societies.

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