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# Bordered Imaginations: The Politics of Crafting and Reading Southern African Writers' Literary Texts in Transnational Spaces

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**Abstract**

Neither women's studies nor lesbian and gay studies offers an adequate theoretical or political base for disruptive scholarship. Reading and interpreting Southern African writers, especially Sindiwe Magona and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, promotes women's studies as an academic and political approach to both gender and the erotic. Drawing on genealogies of rupture and intergenerational studies, we argue that the feminist is a positionality that must be widely available to challenge heterosexual perspectives and become a catalyst for audiences to engage in nuanced analyses of discourses on places and genres—narrative in particular—where memories are rearticulated and elaborated. This article explores how the narratives of Magona, Ngugi, and Soyinka inform and complicate the erasure, erosion, and amnesia that accompany contemporary imaginaries of what is re/membered. We challenge the tendency to evaluate African feminisms as only either oppressive or empowering and read the selected texts and their prototypical characters as dynamic embodiments that inform gendered spaces across both the attachments that people hold to particular gender identities and styles and recognising the punitive realities of dominant gender expectations. The article takes a positionality on the often troubled relationship between feminism and femininity, a critical but generous reading that highlights the potential for an affirmative orientation towards identity politics. This study utilises the theoretical lenses of border thinking and decolonial and African feminisms to interrogate matrifocal borderlands and the sociohistorical and cultural dis/continuities of being and becoming. We explore notions of the entanglement of motherhood, daughterhood, wifehood, and sisterhood as morphing identities. These are identities at the margins of political, sociocultural, and gender normativities in African literature. Magona's "threshold people", like Ngugi's perfect nine, destabilise, disrupt, and refuse to be subordinated as they codify living differently in the in-between worlds. Magona, for instance, laminates the challenging discourse of contestation to map difficult, dangerous, and marginal spaces where women live at the borders of sociocultural, religious, ethnic, and gendered norms. These are spaces suffused with affective possibilities—defensiveness, shame, anxiety, anger, curiosity—and the women have to develop relational solidarities in negotiating hypervisibilities or (in)visibilities within the 21st-century global south.

**Keywords:** racial capitalism; gendered identities; precarity; liminal spaces; agency; patriarchy



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## 1. Introduction

*There and here: Bordered imaginations and specificities*

This paper examines the ways in which three doyens of African literature engage and wrestle with overwhelming disruptions to the configuration of nation, state, and

citizenship within the postcolonial cultural and political space/s. Sindiwe Magona (*When the Village Sleeps*) awakens the village of South Africa to become the reflexive insider who protects and nurtures the identities and dignity of a people whose lineage of woundedness and brokenness is a stark reminder of the violences of colonisation and the betrayals of the postcolonial oligarchy. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (*The Perfect Nine*) forges new words from the oral Gikuyu archive to re-imagine and subvert patriarchy, postcolonial inequity, and the implacable political and social machinations that camouflage current versions of autocratic dictatorships. Wole Soyinka (*Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*) chronicles a vexed vision of sabotage, narcotic power, and the shorthand of bankrupting national economies. Reading these three texts, all produced in 2021, one encounters drama, irony, satire, allegory, myth, and voyeuristic styles. We contend that each of the three writers develops rupture and suture as modes of literary representation, conveying the utterly bleak and disquieting ambience of the body politic of the postcolonial African nation (Hove 2026). Each of these writers disrupts the present and strives to suture solidarities that could transform the future. Each of them adopts writing as creativity that mints new wor(l)ds, supplanting colonial ethnographies.

We take cue from Smith and Watson (2020) in framing the principal question that this article strives to answer: To what extent do narratives and chronicles "affect the organisation of consciousness?" and our ability to voice and reflect upon ourselves as agents in the decolonisation process? We examine the ways in which three doyens of African literature (Ngugi, Soyinka, and Magona) disrupt shared spaces, routines, economies, and societies in their bid to recalibrate ways of becoming and belonging to ruptured cosmologies. They all dwell on the corruption, the moral decadence, and the imploding body politic of the postcolonial African nation. Each one of these writers exhibits a persistent determination to disrupt and question the present so that productive futures could be shaped accordingly. Their narratively embedded interjections and questions inaugurate a purpose-driven stylistic and ideological intention to transform the future so that hope and perseverance arise from the ashes of toxic masculinities, the coloniality of being, and imperialism.

## 2. Rupture and Suture

We read the postcolonial state as a ruptured and wounded body politic that is sutured by the writer, in the tradition imagined by Okot p'Bitek, Chinua Achebe, and Ayi Kwei Armah, who all see the writer as a ruler, a healer (isanusi), and a teacher. Medically, suturing means surgically stitching a wound, etymologically derived from the Latin sutura—"a seam, a sewing together", from sutus, the past participle of suere, "to sew". If the advents of slavery and of colonisation constitute the first instantiations of rupture, then the subsequent moments of writing *back* significantly mark the African writer's suturing, teaching, and healing. We read the three texts therefore as invested in suturing, scripting, and circulating the complexities of being, belonging, and citizenship. These three writers participate in narrating the nation in four modes: representations, structures, textures, and connections. Though they markedly differ in narrative style and voice, the texts explore and expose how postcolonial citizens' identities are shaped, women in particular. Their characters are marked by the post-surgical wounds of violence, hostility, and marginality, having lived through colonial and postcolonial spaces and contexts. In these ethicopolitical and cultural narratives, the three writers wrestle with fragility, precarity, and hope as their diverse characters meet, speak, or remain silent in the spatiotemporality of postcolonial Africa. Ngugi and Magona repackage border thinking, orature, and its rich stylisations; they utilise strategies of orature and multilanguaging, suffused with unfettered agency and critical rationality (Farrugia 2013, p. 226). Through these vernacular styles, the writers circulate a deliberate *rewor(l)ding in process*, presenting a futuristic teleology of African

feminist repositioning that charts decolonial futures. Equally, this article utilises the frames of liminality theory to assess those experiences characterised by uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, contingency, ambivalence, insecurity, precariousness, instability, marginality, crisis, and affectivity in the three novels (Stenner 2024).

Soyinka, on the other hand, laments and cryptically asks,

> "Where is the last rational place left in the world, for heaven's sake?. . . Religion has become. . . in my part of the world,. . . centres of cabalism."

In an interview with Lebohang Mojapelo on 15 October 2021, Soyinka distinguishes between secular corruption and corruption that is endorsed by and purveyed through religious posturing. He snubs such deceit that mobilises religion for blessings of corruption. He chastises political leaders who indulge in white-collar crimes and seek both immunity and protection from Ekumenika and Chrislamabad. Using satire as a scalpel, Soyinka compares the rank corruption of the secular religious complex to that of a military industrial complex, which symbolically and practically spells doom for Nigerians and African societies.

Soyinka is unrelenting in his castigation of the entanglement between religion and corruption. He names the Ekumenika Healing Ministry as one that serves as a "spiritual prophylactic" at the intersections of an amalgam that he boldly calls Chrislamabad—an uncanny blend of Christianity and Islam (Soyinka 2021, p. 56).

The three selected narratives offer the opportunity to reread race, religion, class, and gender, giving voice to the underclass as part of the storytelling process.

### *2.1. Shifting Hearts; Shifting Faces: Reading When the Village Sleeps*

The blurb to this narrative by Sindiwe Magona states that "this is a visionary novel about what the loss of identity and dignity do to a people afflicted by decades of brokenness." The novel utilises a nuanced narrative modality where four generations of amaTolo women participate in this intergenerational narrative to explore, reframe, and dramatise the trauma visited upon its women "when the village sleeps". The polyphony of her storylines (each of the women has a part to tell) leverages the capacity of these women as embodiments of agency and an emboldened hybridity that stokes and speaks to an alter/native epistemology.

The title itself centralises the village as a space of "wokeness" and "sleep". The sleeping village of South Africa is evoked as different from one awake to the current socioeconomic and political challenges in the post-apartheid state. Sleeping and waking up are the binaries constituting the rhythm of life. The village is equally a metaphor of space and place, reinscribing an even broader theatre of life during and after apartheid in South Africa. Steeped in an oral storytelling tradition, the quartet of narrative voices is introduced in a lucid style:

> "Camagu! Livumile! Our wish is granted, the call answered. This is my story/it is also my mother's story and I/a long and winding road we shall travel. . .this is your story too/witness the crazy path to my birth/witness that/but know this/remember this/the meaning, the essence/far outweighs what the eye beholds/for the fruit is always in the seed/. . .what act fruits me?/oh the profligacy of men of power, men in the moment/men who forget the oneness, timelessness, the total/inter-relatedness/of all". (Magona 2021, p. 29)

Magona renders this entry point in isiXhosa, foregrounding "Camagu", a term meaning, "I am/we are/", "Thank you", "Let it be so", "I have heard", "I promise". This communal and village term heralds her orature-laced narrative style. MaKhulu embodies the oldest of the intergenerational experiences and memories. We are told that the narrator's story is also "my mother's story [and] your story". She also (re)connects with

the "*abantu ba kwa Ntu*" from whence the aphorisms "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/Munhu munhu nevanhu/Motho ke motho ka batho babang*" are derived. Through MaKhulu, we experience a timeless spirituality and interconnectedness that goes to the beginning of time, as well as the development of an African ontology on being and becoming. umuNtu is therefore the physical incarnation in which the spiritual form, the essence of Ntu, resides. Ntu carries the essence of life and being and connectedness, meaning humaneness, gentleness, hospitality, taking trouble for others, deep kindness, friendliness, generosity, toughness, and compassion (Prozesky 2003, p. 6; Mangena 2017).

As Hove (2026, p. 78) argues,

> "Ba kwa Ntu spans the length and breadth of Africa, from the Nguni in the south to the Igbos in the west, Luba, Sukuma, Kikuyu of central parts of Africa and many others. . .. Just as the amaXhosa say Camagu!, all the other ethnic groups have their own sayings reserved for greeting and acknowledging the ancestors. Camagu, like Khulu, 'is the glue that holds both the characters and the narrative together'."

The genealogy of the narrative voices of Busi, Owam, Mama, Phyllis, Lily, Luvo, Thandi, and Kwanele amplifies the genderised positioning of children begetting children. Magona centralises these narrative voices to reframe and circulate a novel oral aesthetics. These women are carved out of the 19th, 20th, and 21st century mobilities, born in the urban mire but also allowed entry points into the village to constitute an orchestra where

> "everyone in my family has *a heart full of wounds*. They live to starve in '*a land of gold and platinum*' and, as Phyllis says, '*corruption is rife [and] the formerly dispossessed continue to blame history, while the present is but a mirror thereof [where] graft is king*'". (Magona 2021, p. 70; my italics)

Even when Makhulu's husband dies, we understand that she "has a heart full of wounds". Magona decides to promote MaKhulu as the centre of the narrative. She expertly brings the wisdom and vast historical archive to weave a narrative that binds the readers to ubuntu African spirituality, a narrative that venerates the ancestors and focalises a coeval possibility rather than lack and deficiency. This invocation of the ancestral plane challenges modernity's sacrilegious distancing from this world of mediation, regulation, and connectedness. When all the village sleeps, Magona crafts Mandlakazi in a trance, where she becomes a revealing signifier of the process of life and death in African spirituality—that life does not begin and end but rather it transcends to another plane of existence:

> "I am called back/the Old demand my presence/the only way back is through deep sleep/unconsciousness the fleshlings deem it/I knew/I was going back/making my way to the old/my fellow people of the unfleshed world/not an easy ride/that of the spirit. . ./I am but the instrument of the Old". (Magona 2021, p. 99)

*When the Village Sleeps* recalibrates the AmaTholo women to constitute a regimen of narratology that concentrates on identity re/construction and self-reflective articulation: "*I am but the instrument of the Old.*" Magona crystalises small stories—elliptical, ongoing talks—in a repurposed dialogue (Georgakopoulou 2006; Bamberg 2010; Stenner 2013). Bamberg (2010, p. 109) and suggests that "to stumble upon someone recounting [their] whole life from a distant past to the present moment is an extremely rare occurrence." Magona charts this through MaKhulu. She is an archive in herself, comparable to the cultural and institutional memory of the village. MaKhulu has the idioms, proverbs, and deep knowledge of indigenous practices that are, indeed, metatexts and paratexts in this novel. As the central voice, MaKhulu inhabits and animates the rehabilitation of *bantu* selves that are reinserted within the metaphysics and dynamics of the village. Indeed,

context and the medium "frame" and "carry", respectively, these small stories. In the case of the village, forms of self-representation and social networking sites (SNSs) provide audiences with an unprecedented opportunity to investigate the multiple self-narratives and autre that vie for privilege in this magisterial oeuvre.

Magona deftly uses the collective plural "we" to express the sense of collectivity, the village that subsequently steers the storylines into a pithy assessment of the "state of the nation" after apartheid:

> "But although we may and do move around, the places where we have lived inhabit us too. . .never have I seen anything like that. . .the atrocious conditions people in the Eastern Cape suffered. . .Entire towns had run out of water. . .Those cars the officials of the Education Department drove—one each. Each of those 4 × 4; each worth more than the paltry buildings of most of the village schools. Posh cars for officials of education, but no school buildings worth the name, not even latrines—what evil times they lived in!". (Magona 2021, p. 209)

Magona's novel reconceptualises cultural and representational processes through two diverging articulations of visibility and visuality. Visibility entails the social reconstruction and mobilisation of women's bodies in the text to recuperate agency. We witness this in the "posh cars" and the absence of "school buildings and even latrines". Visuality, on the other hand, speaks to the emotions, the anger, the anxieties and images triggered in the readers, who cheer on these characters as they pursue something of value in their lives. Put differently, visibility deconstructs, while visuality creates (Callahan 2020, p. 19). The case for visibility and visuality is therefore amply summarised in Chinua Achebe's observations on the efficacy of the oral narrative. To demonstrate the power, influence, and significance of a story, Chinua Achebe said,

> "It is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story. . .that saves our progeny (off-spring) from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us". (Achebe 1987, p. 50)

And so, for Magona, her orature and literary crusade reinforce the place for indigeneity. The web of the novel recentres indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) that have all the time been "underrepresented" in the western canon. IKSs are systematically excluded and invalidated from all epistemological conversations and spheres of social existence within the colonial archive, and, in repurposing this epicentre, Magona not only valorises the dialogic but generates crucial conversations on what vulnerability, insecurity, and authenticity mean. In the multiplicity of her narrators, Magona informs and complicates the erasure, erosion, and amnesia that accompany contemporary imaginaries of decolonising narration and the nation.

### *2.2. Look for Me Among the Oppressed: The Epic of the Perfect Nine*

*The Perfect Nine* (Kenda Muiyuri: Rugano Rwa Gikuyu Na Mumbi) chronicles Ngugi wa Thiong'o's abiding interest in the worldview and languaging practices of the oppressed. If we consider the genealogy of Rugano Rwa Gikuyu na Mumbi, we establish connections to Magona, where wa Thiong'o blends poetry, songs, folklore, and allegory into a tapestry of quest and courage in the nine daughters of Gikuyu and Mumbi. Stylistically, Ngugi renders a refreshing narrative and oral aesthetics that is both dramatic and cinematographic trope. The first-person narrative voice is deliberately employed to chart Ngugi's mission and purpose:

> "I will tell the tale of Gikuyu and Mumbi
>
> And their daughters, the perfect Nine,
>
> Matriarchs of the House of Mumbi,
>
> Founders of the nine clans,
>
> Progenitors of the nation". (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [2018] 2021a, p. 3)

Ngugi acknowledges that

> "this story has been told and retold as part of the lore of the Gikuyu people. I have gained a lot from all of those tellings. . .[this] is my retelling and interpretation. . .on languages and the development of Kenya and Africa and on the migration of African peoples". (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [2018] 2021b, p. 228)

The communal and human circle in Ngugi is primed by a feminist ambience and presence that accounts for the connectedness that humans have with maternity, the matrifocal, and a disruption of patriarchy. This is the essence of ubuntu, orature, and spirituality. This entry point harps to the essence of life and the supreme energy in the creation of the universe, leveraging identity construction and negotiation. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's rendition of Kenda Muiyuru: Rugano Rwa Gikuyu Na Mumbi metaphorises an African renaissance that retraces the genesis (origin) of present-day Kenya. The return to the genesis as suggested in this narrative and Magona's *When the Village Sleeps*, travelling the road of the matriarchs and patriarchs, generates a nuanced understanding of the current African space and time (Waita 2020, p. 1). This, Ngugi advises, does not mean an Edenic past, but could eventually lead to the recreation of a stable and just Africa ridden off the curse of both colonial and postcolonial ogres of cultural and economic domination.

The retelling and interpretation that Ngugi offers in this story reclaims the Gikuyu myth of creation where orature has it that Ngai (God) gave Gikuyu and Mumbi the entire world and on the slopes of Kirinyaga (Mt. Kenya) where they settled. Gikuyu and Mumbi were blessed with nine daughters, and Ngai provided nine suitors for these daughters, after Gikuyu sacrificed to Him. This mythopoetic version recurs in various shades in *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, and *Matigari*, when the suitors agree to marry the daughters and live on the land bequeathed to the daughters under a matriarchal system. From each of these daughters arises the nine clans of the aGikuyu named after them. Ngugi masterfully connects the aGikuyu to universal humanity in time and space, specifically reaching out to the rest of Africa and Ancient Egypt. For all humanity, "time is linear, but life is circular" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [2018] 2021a, p. 9; Mbiti 1969).

It would be prudent to name the perfect nine:

> "Wanjiru (the matriarch of the Anjiru clan; Wambui (matriarch of the Ambui clan weaves her baskets as she counts the stars), Wanjiku (matriarch of the Agaciku clan a courageous warrior and an indigenous medicine person), Wangui (matriarch of the Angui clan, and a singer of note), Waithira, also called Wangeci, (matriarch of the Thira clan, diligent worker with remarkable problem-solving skills), Njeri (matriarch of the Cera clan, a seeker of truth and justice in the mould of Matigari of the eponymous title), Mwitaga (matriarch of the Ethaga clan, rainmaker, with magical powers), Wairimu (matriarch of the Thigia clan is a mũũmbĩ, clay potter and smith, Wangari (matriarch of the Ngari famed for her invincibility and bravery, a protector of the weak against oppression by the strong) and Warigia, also called Wamuyu (matriarch of the Muyu clan)."

To illustrate that these nine also have human foibles, Ngugi carves Wamuyu as one who became pregnant out of wedlock. In *The Perfect Nine*, she is an outstanding heroine who shoots without missing even though she was born with a physical deformity.

In the ecologies of possibility, Ngugi invests in the perfect nine the following values: assertiveness, productivity, and land-based African feminism. This presentation challenges the colonial archive suffused with women who exhibit contingency, ambivalence, insecurity, precariousness, instability, marginality, and crisis. Ngugi presents each of the male suitors in their contestations to marry these stellar women. This narrative roots for an alternative feminist formation that dislodges patriarchy. Without being prescriptive, the retelling introduces the ultimate test that would determine the successful nine suitors: the journey to retrace Gikuyu and Mumbi's footsteps on the journey from the top of Kirinyaga from whence Ngai bestowed the land upon Gikuyu. The suitors must climb up Kirinyaga and bring *runyaga*, the icy water from the "pot of God". These suitors are clearly tasked to bring back a strand of hair at the tip of Mwengeca's tongue, the king of the ogres who speaks with a forked tongue and is invested with dishonour and deceit. This strand of hair is the only medicine that could cure Warigia, Gikuyu's last-born daughter, of her illness. This is vernacular storytelling that allows a rhizomatic structuration, integrating humour, jokes, and the innuendo of political, social, cultural, and economic inequalities characteristic of postcolonial Kenya.

As suggested in the title of this article, Ngugi is the Gikuyu language activist–artist. The journey motif inscribes a meta-myth that reflects the conflicts and the monumental struggles against colonial and postcolonial forces, especially in the project of languaging and re/creating the nation. This narrative trope enables the reimagining of the physical and political practices, aesthetics, and economies in a southern context. National rebuilding, for Ngugi, means that the individual and the collective must connect with the maker of Kirinyaga. The same narrative and emic technique is explored in Sindiwe Magona, where the cosmos and humanity are in tune, and the cycle of life connects past, present, and future.

In Ngugi, the suitors are compelled to retrace the steps to the "centre of the Kikuyu Universe" to seek integration and consequently provide continuity for the nation, symbolised by the solidity and permanence of Mount Kirinyaga. In this ritual of initiation and retracing (Ukuthomba in the isiXhosa cultural practices in Magona; khomba in tshiVenda), Ngugi ensures that the suitors encounter mammoth challenges in overcoming a series of ogres: "the ogre of spitting fire, the ogre of defecation, the ogre of great darkness, the ogre of the basket that never fills up". In a humorous rendition of this fabula, there are the attractive female ogres in false bodies that distract the suitors from their challenge. Such ogres complicate the retracing of the footsteps of the patriarch and the matriarch: they stand for the sociopolitical and economic challenges of the postcolonial nation. Healing Warigia (who embodies the postcolonial nation) can only be performed when the strand of hair is obtained, as it then symbolises the principal terminus ad quem of identity and belonging.

In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's narrative, the healing element is on the tongue of the ogre. Taking on the metaphor of the tongue as language and multilanguaging, which is Braj Kachru's enchanting title in *The Other Tongue*, it is productive to read Mwengeca's power as residing in voicing and agency. The nine daughters and their suitors, led by Wanjiru, retrieve the healing hair and rupture the ogre's tongue into nine strands. Symbolically, by cutting off the strand of hair at the tip of the ogre's tongue, the perfect nine, with their suitors, collaboratively sever the bondage to foreign languages. This has been Ngugi's eternal struggle in Africa—to break free from the colonial languages that have been the yoke of culturecide, linguicide, and economic imperialism. This resonates with Ngugi's stance on multilanguaging Africa and the diaspora. In his lectures and essays in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Something Torn and New*, (2014) Ngugi insists that colonial languages disrupted Africa. In reimagining the slave ship and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Ngugi

sees the first Pan-African constellation, where the "language of cries and groans became the singular modality of resistance". By retrieving the healing hair from the tongue of the "Mwengeca ogre", Africa decouples itself from the inanity of "the postcolonial".

I want to highlight that the "ogre agenda" as crafted in *The Perfect Nine* stretches the elasticity of symbolism to its utmost in Ngugi. The "links that bind us" are evident in the postcolonial corruption, moral depravity, cultural challenges, and setbacks contained in the figuration of the ogres (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986, 2006, 2014). The ogres are defeated invariably through the concerted collaboration of male and female agents that nurture and sustain humanity (Wanyonyi et al. 2025). This symbolic trope of the humanizing struggle against the ogres represents complex impediments to democracy and justice-oriented agendas, calling for endurance, fortitude, and creativity against the coloniality of being. *The Perfect Nine* becomes, ipso facto, a narrative of redemption suffused with an alter/native aesthetics. In the confrontation with the ogres, the text reflects on the African journey through time, especially the disruptive secessions, cessations, military coups, dictatorships, looting bureaucracies, and corrupt malfeasance (Waita 2020) characterising the African postcolonial state. In the reimagined world, the perfect nine sisters embody a transformative and justice-oriented counternarrative. The lesson for *The Perfect Nine* is that ogres are not fireside fantasies but degenerate and destructive particularities that should be exterminated for the realisation of true liberation.

### *2.3. Rank Corruption and the Macabre: Soyinka's Chronicles*

Wole Soyinka sets this narrative in an imaginary Nigeria. Sarcasm, satire, and caricature are stylistic and narratological devices that Soyinka exploits in rendering the chronicles from the land of "the happiest people". Tongue-in-cheek, this 444-page tome is unsparing in depicting the minutiae of moral decay, corruption, and rank disruptions that make Nigeria perhaps the unhappiest nation. Verses from both the Bible and the Quran are manipulated (2021:35); a cunning entrepreneur procures and sells body parts stolen from Dr. Menka's hospital (2021:111). These body parts are used for inane ritualistic practices, characterising the "dark world" in postcolonial Africa. Dr. Menka shares the grisly news with his oldest college friend, Duyole Pitan-Payne. Duyole is about to assume a prestigious post at the United Nations in New York, but a cut-throat contender taps into ethnicities to undermine such an appointment. This scenario replicates the very insidious and spectral politics in Nigeria, characterised by cronyism and fractal ethnicities. Neither Dr. Menka nor Duyole can locate a rational logic for such a dissembling architecture of "serial rape. . .murderous rage", where the casting of political pearls before the village swine (2021:153) becomes the "Brand of the Land" under the ruling party, People on the Move (POMP).

*Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* is at once a magisterial literary patent, a wily satire, and an unrelenting indictment of ethnic, religious, political, and social corruption in Nigeria. This critique extends to the continent, postcolonial Africa, and its deeply fractured states. The novel could also be read as a Wole Soyinka manifesto against the abuse of religion, power, and patriarchy. Perhaps, in the moulds of both Magona and Ngugi, we encounter writing as a process of "de-silencing", where it "becomes a mnemonic device of preserving lives that are 'vulnerable, exposed and hopeless.'"

In its promotion of the book, *The Guardian* appraises several qualities of the *Chronicles*: a multidimensional story of a secret society dealing in human parts for sacrificial uses; a lampoon of the political and religious figures in Nigeria, such as the oddly named Godsown (and beyond); a novel that ruptures the criminal racketeering of gross proportions operating in an African nation. Soyinka does not shy away from presenting the crude anatomy of a political landscape riddled with venality and unscrupulous deviousness. The more scatological ruination is the spiritual landscape marred by fraudulent perversions that are disquiet-

ingly rendered through state-sanctioned murder. *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* traduces beyond satire to become a veritable spectacle on the dividends of political democracy (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/27/chronicles-from-the-land-of-the-happiest-people-on-earth-by-wole-soyinka-review-a-vast-danse-macabre, accessed on 12 May 2026).

Okri (2021), himself an accomplished writer, observes that Soyinka is at his most scathing of the moral and political decadence in Nigeria in this novel, penned fifty years after *The Interpreters*. Papa Davina embodies the religious elite, who have corporatised religion; the assemblage Ekumenika is an elaborate labyrinthine of the sordid and monstrous. Papa Davina racketeers with the head of state, Sir Goddie (God in the diminutive), to such an extent that this secret society retails and retains the entire power structure of the land (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/27/chronicles-from-the-land-of-the-happiest-people-on-earth-by-wole-soyinka-review-a-vast-danse-macabre, accessed on 12 May 2026).

We read this entanglement as a metaphor for the rampant corruption and falsehoods that strangle Nigeria as a potentially great nation, endowed with oil and innumerable natural resources. As metaphor and satire, the novel dwells on the unspeakable. In telling the unspeakable, Soyinka censures Nigeria for its failure to adapt and thrive, its descent into a disorienting and fractious state where doctoral-degreed venalities like Dr. Merutali function as the "chief image makers and scriptwriters" of a ruptured and plundered state (2021:141).

*Chronicles*... projects a quartet of friends, the fraternity called the Gong of Four, depicting how they carve state ruination as they swirl (and swell) in the maelstrom of economic plunder and political strife. The Gong of Four is a microcosmic portrait of how a generation betrays and is betrayed by the prevailing ethos of moral entropy. We read *Chronicles* as Soyinka's revenge against the insanities (and profanities) of the nation's ruling class. The novel intentionally generates shock and revulsion at the practices performed by the ruling elite and the religious fraternity: hypocrisy, cheating, ritual murders, child raping, child sodomy, mutilations, siphoning the national treasury, underworld deals, and an inane atrophy in the crafting of justice-driven legislation. Soyinka sums up the situation that he is trying to capture well in Duyole's comparison of his homeland with the United States, where plasticity reigns supreme. Having gained political independence from Britain, Nigeria has exploited ethnic identities and notions of (un)belonging, and, in the process, it has lost its collective soul and lustre. It is a broken state, a shattered jewel that cannot be pieced together. When Soyinka contends that "Nigeria cannot be put back together", he is wrestling with suturing the economy of wor(l)ds to chide the poli(t)ricks of Nigerian history (Soyinka 2021, p. 133).

Wole Soyinka uses satire to castigate male chauvinism and the persistently incorrigible marginalisation of women in Nigerian society. There are innumerable characters in *Chronicles*, reflecting perhaps the large population in Nigeria, but, unfortunately, the number of women in this tour de force does not even exceed five. This under-representation of women also speaks to the systemic precarity of the gender across political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres. Despite making up roughly half the population, women remain severely underrepresented in governance, struggle with unequal property and land ownership rights, and endure high rates of poverty and workforce discrimination. One stark omission in Soyinka is the naming of women: one crucial character of the book is only referred to as "the seeker" in the company of the spiritual leader. Mama Kressy and Bisoye suffer from violent male machismo. Mama Kressy's husband harasses her; her role in the family is trimming the crooked toenails of Poo-of-Ages (a sullen invocation of Rock-of-Ages). Soyinka presents him to the readers as both uncaring husband and irreverent head of

the family. The most alarming (but lived reality) is that Nigerian men invariably think that women are subalterns with no voicing space in the home, close family matters, and decision-making. There are simply no dividends of democracy for women in the fractal party politics in Nigeria:

> "If Bisoye said you should bury her husband in Austria, she was not herself. The dead man belongs to the family, and the widow's wishes are really dependent on what the family says". (Soyinka 2021, p. 321)

In this novel, Soyinka uses satiric attack to disrupt notions of happiness. As we read the novel, happiness is the most elusive construct in this land. Reading the book keenly leaves seminal questions unanswered on women's positionality and agency. Religious practices are male-centred; the women wail and sing, fostering gender inequality and frustrating national and international strategies aimed at gender equality. Religion in Nigeria is intricately intertwined with the cultural, socioeconomic, and political lives of its people. Consequently, the intersectionality of religion, politics, and laws augments gender discrimination. The writer tears and mocks to pieces the compass of happiness eponymous in the title. Soyinka is unrelenting in suggesting that no amount of prayer could offer deliverance (2021:41). This creative packaging mocks the idea that, when African citizens "deem their most accomplished thieves as the most electable, then they must lose the right to complain when theft becomes the national creed" (Modibo Keita 1975). Soyinka chronicles many cases of disease, corruption, forgery, fires, epidemics, exploding tankers, collapsed churches, diabolical paedophiles, road carnage, and ritual killers (Soyinka 2021, p. 38). Those aspiring to political office are, in Soyinka's eyes, men whose rights from their names, parentage to forged education, and sources of wealth are questionable. All these shades of malaise and deprecation confirm versions of a postcolonial society doddering on the verge of political, cultural, and economic collapse.

### *2.4. Akakho Umntu Yedwa: None of Us Is Complete Without the Others*

In centring ubuntu as the logos of her text, Magona helps us to understand borderlands, liminality, and lives lived at the margins of political, sociocultural, and sexual normativities in South African literature. Magona calls her characters "threshold people": they are the most marginalised, who inhabit in-between spaces and wor(l)ds. Their wo(r)ds are challenging and often dangerous. Busi's father was a non-event, completely absent. Mandlakazi is made in the heat of Busi's sexual experimentation and a desire to earn the child grant in South Africa. Her epileptic and transubstantial inhabiting of marginal spaces challenges all who nurture her, and, even when she eventually dies from a police shooting in the denouement of the novel, we realise that living at the borders of sociocultural, religious, sexual, ethnic, or gendered norms comes with possibilities. The entire canvas of characters amplifies unique ways of seeing and understanding the liminal worlds and (in)visibilities within which South African women live. Through her central voice, Magona insists that Akakho umntu yedwa: none of us is complete without the others.

Gray (2021) reads the novel as stoking this ontological orientation where none of us is complete without the others. Umuntu is metaphysical, with or without a body, and, in being metaphysical, therefore, umuntu never dies. The body is physical while the ntu is metaphysical; birth makes umuntu visible; death makes umuntu invisible; death is a rite of passage to a higher form of existence. This explains why, when one dies, in Camagu! and amongst amaXhosa, the AmaZulu, and other Bantu communities, they say, "usitshiyile" ("the one who was living has left us. . .passed on"). She adds, "despondency, and blame. . .greet the crying baby's birth, recited in utero by the damaged foetus". "Dazed with grief", Khulu (un)names the disabled baby's birth. MaKhulu hesitates to name her great-granddaughter, but, recognising the miracle of her birth despite "[t]he signs of

malfeasance" (Magona 2021, p. 152), MaKhulu names the baby Mandlakazi, in isiXhosa meaning one "Coming from strength, with strength,/Coming to strengthen those who will listen to her truth" (Magona 2021, p. 153). It is a name that foreshadows futures. It also means the "power resident in woman". Such naming is indeed the high point in this novel, which describes Khulu nurturing the child into the world and health with adoration.

Added to this affectionate bonding, MaKhulu invests in the traditional healing of Mandlakazi back in her matrifocal home village. Mandlakazi is identified as a gifted seer, in spite of the alcohol-induced physical deformity and her lapses into "another world of ancestors". The omniscient storyteller confirms to the audience that the newborn's outward physique is "slightly palsied", marked by her "trauma in the womb". Alluding to the archetype of the eyes as the window to the soul, we learn of Mandla's squint in "especially the eyes that, if one looked carefully, always seemed a little out of focus" (Magona 2021, p. 176). It could be challenging to identify what this symbolism stands for as Magona at times becomes quite cryptic. As such, this fierce feminist writer creates a scene where, in a trance, Mandla reveals that "I am but the instrument of the Old" (Magona 2021, p. 180). This is a space where she confirms her writerly delineation of the orality with "This is my story/it is also my mother's story/what we will go through, my mother and I?" (Magona 2021, p. 28). When the village sleeps, the author indeed blends the mesmeric, the apocalyptic, and the aural as expressive styles that revoice hope and promise, demonstrating that we are storytelling human beings—homo fabula.

### *2.5. Liminal Worlds and (In)Visibilities: Betwixt and Between*

Magona, as a writer, chides the village to wake up and confront, like the palsied Mandlakazi, the corrupt South African sociopolitical milieu. For three decades, corruption, graft, and gender-based violence have assailed the nation and Magona cannot allow this to continue unabated. She utilises translanguaging as a narrative and stylistic technique to negotiate identities and processes of becoming, fusing poetry with prose to elevated renditions, characterised by rhythmic language, proverbs, chants, and symbolic naming. Ngũgĩ, as if in affirmation and endorsement, repositions the mythical and epical to reimagine and reinstitutionalise orality (Waita 2019) that addresses the languaging crises confronting contemporary postcolonial Africa. The epic subverts patriarchy and reconnects to Ngũgĩ's postcolonial philosophy of globalectics, where the epic mode itself engenders the language of prophecy that is highly figurative and ritualistic. For both Ngugi and Magona, their styles allow them to probe into themes of family, collective memory, the traditions and values of the community, and the human experience from a polycentric and multivoiced perspective.

The journey motif in Soyinka, Magona, and Ngũgĩ is central and replete with a montage of dreams and meanings. This journeying enacts as much as it exposes the agency and heroics of females in the face of adversity. For Magona, we have the rural–urban binaries, and journeying from one geography to another lends not just spatiotemporal knowledges but a rediscovery of the connectedness of becoming. Ngũgĩ reimagines the Gikuyu creation myth, reconstructs the epic journey to subvert patriarchy and the phallocentric narrative. We witness female empowerment in the perfect nine; there is evidence of cultural reaffirmation and the generation of new ontologies. The journey takes centre stage as the suitors seek the hands of Gikuyu and Mumbi's daughters, each facing complexities that test their worthiness. As argued before, writing becomes a process of "de-silencing"; it "becomes a mnemonic device of preserving lives that are vulnerable, exposed and hopeless".

The focus on the oneness of existence in both Magona and Ngũgĩ highlights the interdependence of all life forms. Ubuntu encourages the rethinking of the dialectics of the self, others, and the divine. In view of this, *Chronicles*, *The Perfect Nine*, and *When the Village*

*Sleeps* transcend classification as only narratives of struggle against political giants: they elaborate the ideals of affection, empathy, cooperation, and reverence for nature, to which all liberatory paths converge. For Soyinka, it is quite clear that poverty (and happiness, therefore) is a gendered phenomenon. Not only this, but Soyinka reinscribes, like Achebe, that *The Trouble with Nigeria* is that it is ruled by a collective of nearly the same bandits—civilian or military. Magona refuses the (un)naming of women as Mosadi, mamgobhozi, meddie, bird, sjanga, slender, mfazi, slay queen, slaza, samjita, sfebe, thick thighs save lives, Jezebel, Paghistani, stekkie, legosha, stokvel, MaBhebeh(za), Nkosazana, Nandidwa, stoko. . .all of which commoditise, marginalise, and peripheralise women in South Africa. Both Ngũgĩ and Magona reject the principles upon which colonial powers and totalitarian regimes were established. This aligns with the perspective of British cultural theorist Venn (2002), who argues that modernity sprang from colonialism and that decolonisation necessitates the rejection of all types of exploitation associated with colonialism, such as transnational corporate capitalism, patriarchy, and ethnicities.

## 3. In Closing

Ultimately, in reflecting on Magona, Ngugi, and Soyinka, it is possible to read their orality and erudition as purpose-driven. Oral teaching, like political teaching, is apparently inextricable from historical and cultural teaching. The nexus of historical, cultural, and political teaching is revolutionary re-Africanisation; it is reappropriating the land and its languages and constitutes, therefore, decolonisation in situ. The situation in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa is peculiar because these countries are endowed with fertile land and natural resources yet with the majority of their populations living in abject poverty, marked clearly in the matatus, the shanties in Abahlali base Mjondolo, and the reprehensible high rates of femicide. For Soyinka, on the other hand, it is the unfathomable propensity for devious religious practices and corruption and brokenness that characterises postcolonial Africa that begets the despair in *Chronicles*. Regardless of governmental efforts to render ethnicity invisible, this novel shows that civil society in Nigeria is ferociously oriented to ethnicity and ethnic identification. This means that social categorisation based on ethnicity permeates the lived experiences of employment and is perceived as largely accounting for privilege and disadvantage in Nigeria. In South Africa, xenophobia has taken a sinister turn, targeting foreign nationals as causes for the polycrises in unemployment, drug trafficking, and gender-based violence. The unspeakable constitutes the story of postcolonial Africa, a cycle of repression and ugliness and the dystopic. For the sustainable development of women and the postcolonial nation, gender equality is not negotiable; it is imperative. The urgency to give equal access to participation and decision-making in the social, political, and economic life of the nation requires advocacy and sensitisation, as consolidated in the decolonial threads suturing the three texts assessed in this article.

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