

# Prolepsis

## Twelve Telling Tales by African Women

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This introduction is dedicated to the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, whose maternal resilience in the midst of socioeconomic upheavals is inspiring.

In 2002, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, supported by Professor Ali Mazrui, enabled the selection of “Africa’s 100 Best Books of the Twentieth Century” regardless of the race of the writer and the language in which the book was written; it sparked off an African, millennial, can-do spirit. The move countered the sense of *déjà lu-déjà vu* aroused by the exclusivity of some Western lists of “100 Great English Books of the Twentieth Century,” even if it could not undo the slight offered when Africans were left off such lists. Infused with this invigorating attitude, two women scholars, including Nana Wilson-Tago, one of the contributors to this volume, joined fourteen male colleagues to constitute the committee mandated to pick out the books. The committee’s choice of twelve fictional works and one play by women among the one hundred “best” books acknowledges female literary endeavor, bringing it into a privileged circle. This point of departure of including women at a celebratory moment is noteworthy for officially establishing a female literary canon.

Here are the writers and the works that were singled out, arranged chronologically for those interested in questions of intertextuality and intersubjectivity.<sup>1</sup>

Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), *Anowa* (a play) (1970)

Bessie Head (South Africa–Botswana), *A Question of Power* (1974)

Nawal El Saadawi (Egypt), *Imraa Inda Nuktat Al Sifr* (original in Arabic; *Woman at Point Zero*) (1975)

- Aminata Sow Fall (Senegal), *La Grève des bàttu* (original in French; *The Beggars' Strike*) (1979)
- Nadine Gordimer (South Africa), *Burger's Daughter* (1979)
- Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979)
- Mariama Bâ (Senegal), *Une si longue lettre* (original in French; *So Long a Letter*) (1980)
- Assia Djebar (née Fatima-Zohra Imalhagene) (Algeria), *L'Amour, la fantasia* (original in French; *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*) (1983)
- Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), *Nervous Conditions* (1988)
- Sindiwe Magona (South Africa), *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night* (1991)
- Yvonne Vera (Zimbabwe), *Butterfly Burning* (1998)
- Ken Bugul (née Mariétou M'Baye) (Senegal), *Rivwan ou le chemin de sable* (original in French) (1999)

When the one hundred best books were chosen, the committee had another select list comprising what they considered to be the top twelve works. In spite of the contentious nature of categorizing works as “best” and the arbitrariness of having a list within a list, this model is emulated in the decision to concentrate on twelve of the thirteen texts in *Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings*. Elsa Joubert’s *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* was left out because of controversy surrounding the mediated status of the telling.<sup>2</sup>

The twelve works neatly map the continent and span the last three decades of the twentieth century, which gives the erroneous impression that nothing valuable predates them. Further, with its colonial frame of mind, the idea of a list is problematic, as it already hierarchizes, unwittingly mimicking the fractious, debilitating, Western exclusionism that marginalizes other invaluable works by these and other writers. I am fully conscious of the Catch-22 situation of compiling essays structured around the list-making I am criticizing.

The creative texts spring from a long writing tradition based on an oral fundament dating back to such globally recognized foremothers as the biblical Queen of Sheba—Ethiopia’s Makeda<sup>3</sup>—and the legendary raconteuse, Scheherazade. Also important in this dialogic affiliation are Egypt’s women activists, for example, Huda Sha’rawi and Nabaweya Moussa, who thrived early in the twentieth century. Nigeria’s first woman novelist, Flora Nwapa, Kenya’s Grace Ogot, and

her compatriot, Rebeka Njau, who tackled women's mystical powers fictionally, provide antecedents in English.

Serendipitously shoring up the female literary terrain, the twelve texts are telling for their candor and encyclopedic coverage in three Africanized lingua francas (Arabic, English, and French) that globalize women's conversations with the heterogeneous continent. The writers tackle the hierarchies of power (in all the regions of Africa, North, West, South, and East) arising in gender matters, different religious and political affiliations, diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures. In the process, they traverse three historical phases. To bypass the rigidities and alien nature of colonial chronology, I refer to the initial phase as *the reconfiguration*. This covers early, internal migrations, fueled by wars and economic deprivations, across borders, which have remained porous. The attendant turmoil instituted by these indigenous displacements and the outsiders' intrusions and remapping led to the vulnerability that enabled the slave trade and the official scramble for Africa toward the end of the nineteenth century. The second phase I see as *the resistance* throughout the continent. This refers to the widespread wars against the colonizers and their local stooges and imitators in the twentieth century. The last phase is the *fin de siècle*, *the rebirth*, amidst the millennial hope cultured in the ancestral blood sacrifice throughout the ages.<sup>4</sup>

I use this division to place the books. *Anowa* and *Fantasia*, with their historical sweep, location, and bewilderment, feature under *reconfiguration*. Preoccupation with female fighters who become casualties of an undeclared internal war places *Woman at Point Zero*, *Burger's Daughter*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *Butterfly Burning* under the category *resistance*. *Rebirth*, with its labor pains implicit in the interrogations of the status quo and the joyously mixed outcome, is the thrust of *A Question of Power*; *The Beggars' Strike*; *So Long a Letter*; *Nervous Conditions*; *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night*; and *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*.

These books memorialize the past, circling painful memories that prompt the reshaping of the continent for an economically just Africa. Their global circulation has catalytically helped in giving birth to the appearance of women as leaders in the public domain, notably Kenya's Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, Liberia's President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Tanzania's Asha-Rose Migiro, as the United Nations' deputy secretary-general, and Nigeria's Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, as a World Bank managing director. The placement of women in intellectual,

social, and political positions of power bodes well for the future, just as this literary canon opens fresh vistas for new, award-winning, creative writers in the twenty-first century, such as the light bearer, Nigeria's Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ghana's Armah Darko, and Senegal's Fatou Diome. In the chaotic orderliness of Africa, I imagine the selection of a list of "100 Best Books by African Women" that would include these emerging women and, most importantly, the prolific Nigerian playwright, Tess Onwueme, and Cameroon's Calixthe Beyala.

The diverse trajectories emanating from the creative works have also prompted the critical response in this book, one that looks at familiar material with new eyes. In their thickly layered, revelatory scripts and distinct thrusts, the women writers place Africans, especially women who have endured failed male leadership, at the center of their storytelling. This subjectivity and narrative power to tell the self is at the core of such voiced texts as *A Question of Power*, *Woman at Point Zero*, *Nervous Conditions*, *So Long a Letter*, and *Rivun*, works that are psychically energizing. The women writers address those areas their male counterparts left out in pursuing their version of nation and the fight for its realization; remarkably, they present their female characters as daughters with inalienable rights to participate in reconstructing the nation as partners, not mere dependents. This revisionary history and storytelling demonstrate that women have always actively participated as citizens, daughters, sisters, wives, othermothers, and mothers in the reproduction and evolution of the self, family, community, and nation. By concentrating on these aspects and on the private world as it impinges on the public, the writers deal with the bedrock of nation building, foundational matters for a healthy continent.

Their interests are wide-ranging: the moral, spiritual, political, and economic issues rooted in the slave trade and slavery as reproduced in contemporary versions of democratic capitalism; gender in the scheme of African affairs; indigence; educating the modern woman-child; revising historical documentation to include women; ethnic, racial, class, and caste diversities; (mental) health problems; polygyny; motherhood and the childless woman; prostitution; migrations, especially the "been-to," that doubly exposed migrant who has traveled out and returned home. Considering these trajectories, how can women be seen not merely as a problem while making optimal use of their strength for African development? By reframing issues, amnesic or concealed, the writers publicly reach out to a large constituency, bringing to light key matters of

twentieth-century African diaspora life that encourage critical thinking. These topical concerns constitute the core of an African women's literary tradition—the fare for college courses with a womanist thrust, as a look at the twelve texts demonstrates.

Following the committee's open acknowledgment of women's contribution to African literatures, the works now deservedly have pride of place in literature curricula throughout Africa and the diaspora, most especially in women's literary studies. This fine literature forms the core of a female literary canon which includes other books by these same writers and many others that did not make the "100 best" list.<sup>5</sup> Yet there is a problematic paucity of scholarly material to support teachers and students at the graduate, undergraduate, and advanced secondary levels that want to and should study these and other works by African women. *Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings*, a collaborative effort in the true African spirit, remedies the situation.

After Tuzyline Jita Allan consented to be a coeditor, both of us were moved by the haunting theme of being an African, critical in the committee's commitment. This led to a significant point of departure in the process of selecting the participating scholars. We compiled a list of ten African women we knew intellectually: fellow collaborators, colleagues, and former students. For a diversity of approach, we chose scholars—African, African Arab, and African European—located in different institutions and different parts of the globe: Botswana, Canada, Egypt, England, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United States.

Since these scholars are not outside observers but participants in the burgeoning of the continent, putting the book together became a heroic act, for African women reading African texts in a scholarly fashion with the particular visions they bring to the reading is revitalizing. The multifaceted thrust, I believe, contributes immensely to spearheading the serious reading and teaching of African women's creative works. The twelve contributors' suggestions for the book title reminded me of the communal Yoruba naming ceremony. The divergent details embedded in the titles show a community pool, deep and broad, that attempts to represent African diversity. The different points of view indicated in their suggestions demonstrate not just the scholars' intellectual responses to the literature but the multiple mothering of the resultant text.<sup>6</sup>

The literary tradition that the scholars unveil speaks to the plight of an indigent underclass, particularly the majority of women excluded

from full participation in nation building; the psychological repercussions of ignoring the wounding from the past, when the continent was humiliatingly occupied and nearly denuded; the trauma and indeterminacy attendant on a continually failed African leadership that still allows the continent to be milked; the divisive issues of race, ethnicity, gender, caste, culture, language, and religion; and the closed, colonized, distrusting mentality operating vulnerably in a complex global scene.

Following the rethinking of the historical schema noted earlier, part 1 of *Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings* concentrates on the spatial and philosophical movement toward modernity and nation formation. *Anowa* and *Fantasia* address this reconfigured Africa.

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* captures a historical moment through a marriage (standing in for Ghanaian/African union) rocked by the couple's participation in the horrendous trans-Atlantic slave trade and the African version of slavery. The ensuing psychological disabling speaks to African male political and entrepreneurial leadership, for through the disoriented wife, Anowa, Aidoo presents woman as the conscience of the continent. In this cautionary drama, selling one's people (past and present) is counterproductive and suicidal. In "Modernity, Gender, and Agency in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*," Nana Wilson-Tagoë reconceptualizes the idea of modernity. Referring to the play as a "drama of marriage," she looks at unequally yoked couples debating issues in a communal context. *Anowa*'s unstable marriage doubles as the troubling mixing of Akan and European cultures that birthed Ghanaian modernity in the nineteenth century. As the modern woman, Anowa, interrogates the self, the power dynamics between women and men, the issue of agency, the nature of capitalism, the link between internal slavery and the slave trade, all unfold. These conversations with the self and the other provide the philosophical base for the movement toward modernity and the idea of the Ghanaian (African) nation.

Historian, novelist, and film producer Assia Djebar circumvents a babel of languages (Berber, Turkish, Arabic, and French), creating a fantasia of opposing voices that translate the oral/aural, the visual, and the remembered into the written in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Invading metropolitan spaces as she raids the archives of colonizing countries, interrogating and revising their accounts, she writes women into Algerian (African) history, from the ancestral and nomadic to the national, acknowledging their contribution to wars

of liberation. "Charting the Nation/Charting History: The Power of Language in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*" is Nada Halloway's mapping of Djebar's struggle with the French language and the rewriting of Algerian history from a female perspective. Djebar's 2006 induction into the Académie Française creates hope for newness in this male bastion that controls normative language usage. Halloway reads the French language as a war zone: liberating as well as oppressive, it provides a space for subjectivity for silenced women. Djebar the historian uses this inimical language to rewrite French (and other) versions of Algerian (and African) history that make her account wholesome.

Part 2, which focuses on the casualties resulting from differing attempts at resistance, is composed of essays on *Woman at Point Zero*, *Burger's Daughter*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *Butterfly Burning*. The texts establish women's momentous lives and the inexorable journey to the end. By harnessing patriarchy and other forms of domination, the texts act as oppositional sites that demonstrate women's power in the face of apparent injustices.

From an African Arab, female perspective, the Egyptian Islamic world unfolds as a prison in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. Through economic, sexual, and sociopolitical lenses the psychoanalyst-turned-novelist brings into focus the plight of her ironically named Firdaus (Paradise), a prostitute and murderer languishing in the web of an unrelentingly patriarchal religious world. Amira Nowaira's "Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* within the Context of Arab Feminist Discourse" deals with feminism and women's place in the nation in an Egypt that straddles Africa and the Arab world. She presents the text as groundbreaking in its advocacy rather than condemnation of Firdaus as a prostitute. El Saadawi's feminist, liberatory zeal speaks to the situation of women as a confined group, zeroing in on women's underdevelopment because of incapacitating sexual, socioeconomic, and religious inequalities. This emphasis distinguishes her from her upper-class female predecessors, who focused, like their male contemporaries, on national liberation, ignoring gender matters and women's place in the nation.

Dealing with imprisonment and death in prison from Egypt to South Africa, El Saadawi and Nadine Gordimer see women as freedom fighters. In a complementary move that acknowledges her bold compatriot, Bessie Head, Gordimer homes in on the politics of South African antiapartheid whites in *Burger's Daughter*. She stakes a claim

for the inclusion of whites in a new South Africa, examining this heritage from the perspective of a daughter who returns, after her flirtatious European sojourn, to a home not yet ready for white embracement of Africanness. Nobantu L. Rasebotsa looks at the intersection of the personal and the political in “Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*: Consciousness, Identity, and Autonomy.” Operating in multiple cultures affected by gender, sexuality, and race in African and European contexts, Rosa’s self-scrutiny vis-à-vis her parents, who conscientiously resist the extremely oppressive, racist climate, drives her sociopolitical metamorphosis. To Rasebotsa, Rosa’s activism, evolving through her changed perception, her growing awareness of the need for genuine South African liberation, and her consciousness of the processes at work, constitute the core of her reeducation—Gordimer’s seed for a new white South Africa.

Contrastingly, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, set in a Nigeria under siege, focuses on an extended family (Africa) reeling from the turmoil of coping with crippling poverty, alien and confining urban spaces, and destabilizing polygyny—familial and national, as the country struggles under an invisible British mistress, controlling yet controlled. True to her calling as a sociologist, Emecheta expands the discourse by incorporating women’s unappreciated and unrewarding role as caregivers who reproduce the family and nation at the expense of self. Tuzylene Jita Allan’s “Dreams of (Dis)order: Competing Visions of Colonial Nigeria in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*” addresses the issue of indirect rule, the British dream of invisibly and effortlessly controlling its empire. The locals, especially Nnu Ego, the archetypal mother, have their different dreams, whose treacherous deferment leads to dreadful consequences for all involved.

Yvonne Vera, like Emecheta, chooses the life of a woman to target a moment in a national history. Her *Butterfly Burning* centers on a fatherless black Rhodesian girl and the roles of men and the fatherland in her development. Without access to the nursing profession because of her (pregnant) body, Phephelaphi represents the African woman denied social mobility; thus, her potential contribution to African health and development remains unexploited. These acts of omission are abortive, a miscarriage of fair play, ending in premature deaths, though the dawn, Vera reminds the reader, holds a new promise for Zimbabwe. Sisi Maqagi’s “In the Pauses of the Historian’s Narrative: Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*” highlights the

torment generated by changes in gender roles as they intertwine with the psychological devastation resulting from white control, manifested in the lack of black land ownership. These traumas, with their racist and sexist undertones, find temporary relief in the rejuvenating spirit of kwela music. Phephelaphi's rebellion against patriarchal appropriation of her body through pregnancy and the sexist, racist stifling of her professional ambition to participate in nursing the community/nation back to health becomes tragically manifested in abortion and suicide. To Maqagi, Vera rejects the totalizing tendencies of historians by telling the stories of marginalized women, who must be commemorated in order for there to be a new national beginning.

Part 3 of *Twelve Best Books by African Women* pinpoints the pains of rebirth, the resilience, and the tentative movement toward a meaningful, revisionary, African approach to regenerating power in different walks of life—a precursor to national rehabilitation for all areas of governance. The works in this category are *A Question of Power*; *The Beggars' Strike*; *So Long a Letter*; *Nervous Conditions*; *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night*; and *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*.

Bessie Head's autobiografiction, *A Question of Power*, depicts apartheid South Africa's psychological and spiritual chaos as experienced by its biracial product, Elizabeth. Migrating to Botswana, she exhibits her internalized schizophrenic heritage, hallucinating dysfunctions emanating from global and historical economic, political, religious, and racial inequalities. *Question* is a psychic release, artistically framed for the therapeutic outcome necessary in caring for African lives out of whack. In "Mapping a Female Mind: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and the Unscrambling of Africa," I trace Elizabeth's critical reappraisal of male discourses on power. Elizabeth, the activist, stands in for an Africa resisting under siege, manifested in her schizophrenia, outsider status, poverty, and gender. Head reinstates her as a revolutionary writer and intellectual in those spheres from which she was excluded or where she was rendered ineffectual, rewriting the racial, psychoanalytic, economic, and religious scripts by presenting the recuperating Elizabeth as a new type of pan-Africanist prophet, the bearer of the gospel of an assuaged, humanized Africa. Head's interrogation and feminizing of religion—African Traditional Religions, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—accentuate a sense of belonging.

Islam is equally critical in the Senegalese imbroglio of gender, capitalism, politics, and a leadership indifferent to the masses; these

aspects form the core of Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*. Sow Fall contrasts modern government with the more inclusive governance to be found among the novel's beggars, ironizing the former's irresponsible attitude toward mendicancy and the relief mandated by Islamic almsgiving. With great economy, she simultaneously addresses African poverty and knee-jerk local and global responses. Chioma Opara takes a deconstructive approach in "A Drama of Power: Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*," dismantling binaries to trace power shifts in governance in the family, the community, and Senegal as a whole. The empowerment of the beggars under female leadership, which institutes changes in the nation's governmental policy, is noteworthy. Opara sees Fall's work as subversively feminist, with the private sphere impinging on the public as the excluded—women and the underclass—indirectly participate in nation building, undermining crass capitalists and leaders who flirt with spiritual figures affiliated with a patriarchal religion that promotes self-serving almsgiving.

Another Senegalese, Mariama Bâ, spotlights in *So Long a Letter* how the society and nation shortchange women emotionally, intellectually, economically, and politically, particularly through the institution of polygyny and status of widowhood. Ramatoulaye fights back by modifying and reinscribing gender roles. Mimicking the authority of the social critic, she promotes herself through writing, simultaneously exposing her self and her sister travelers' lives. Exploring competing meanings of "traverse," Modupe Olaogun, in "Aesthetics, Ethics, Desire, and Necessity in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*," generates a reading of spaces where aesthetics and ethics intersect and fissures occur in a character, numerous pairings of characters, and incidents. Whether gendered, class- or caste-based, localized or globalized, private or public, philosophical, moral, or political, these splits tend to emphasize difference, glossing over similarities that intensify textual complexity. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's envisaged reunion is a case in point that deemphasizes their divergent approaches to comparable problems. Further, Ramatoulaye's subjectivity identifies her as a griotte (though she spurns Farmata, the tradition-bound "griot woman"), creating traverse spaces that enhance female solidarity.

Echoing this political thrust in rethinking gender matters, Tsitsi Dangarembga, in *Nervous Conditions*, proposes sisterhood-in-community as a counter to the psychologically debilitating factors of colonization on the black Rhodesian populace. Though she emphasizes the need to guarantee a productive place for the woman-child through equal ac-

cess to modern education, she alerts us to the limitations of a Western-style model for African development. In the novel, the subaltern gets to tell her story, one which provides an alternative model for intellectual and mental recovery. Rather than interpret *Nervous Conditions* as a straightforward feminist novel, Helen Mugambi's "Reading Masculinities in a Feminist Text: Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*" pays close attention to male and female characters whose masculinities and femininities overlap. Mugambi demonstrates the limitations of predictably gendered readings, as neither male nor female characters are necessarily confined by the imagined boundaries conventionally separating them. Dangarembga's characters performatively drift toward unexpected roles, blurring gendered lines and dramatizing the complexities of masculinity and femininity, mandating a creative rethinking of "female" and "male" as categories.

Like Dangarembga, Sindiwe Magona, in *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night*, moves away from Head's and Gordimer's foci on the individual to concentrate on the community, as she explores the sociopolitical implications of black women's work and lives in apartheid South Africa. In this collection of short stories that can be read as a novel, with South African urban communities as a composite central character,<sup>7</sup> black maids in white households and black girls negotiating violent, racist, and sexist cultures get narrative space as they stumble toward liberation. M. J. Daymond's "Sindiwe Magona: Writing, Remembering, Selfhood, and Community in *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night*" focuses on the self as speaker and writer, operating within the confines of the family and community that give it credence. Taking off from Magona's autobiographical works, Daymond locates *Living* in the South African subaltern effort to tell a life-in-the-community, which mimics the traditional stories associated with the family circle. However, the politics of overwhelmed black women working in white households tend to undermine the emergence of a strong community for liberatory purposes. The initiation of young girls into racist and patriarchal systems keeps reproducing violence against women, as the community hesitantly moves forward and ambivalently accepts the end of the pass laws.

Finally, in her Senegalese autobiografiction, evocative of Head's earlier account of migration, Ken Bugul in *Rivwan ou le chemin de sable* addresses the intricate role of the "been-to" in the place of origin. The been-to's choice to return home and avoid straddling the schizophrenic African-European divide brings fresh insights into cultural

and political awareness, in this instance opening up the discourse on polygyny as the complex politics of re-assimilation and husband-sharing unfold through the returnee's experience. In "Every Choice Is a Renunciation: Cultural Landmarks in Ken Bugul's *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*," Aissata Sidikou charts Bugul's fictionalized autobiographical trajectory as a been-to who returns to Senegal to become spiritually and culturally integrated into her community. Renouncing Europe, she establishes her identity and finds a place of her own, blurring lines that separate the westernized African from others. The central character's marriage into a polygynous household, a rehabilitative return to origins, enables her to interrogate the complexities of monogamy and polygamy, as Bugul advocates international conversations to disrupt discourses from the center.

I hope that the rupture generated by reading these iconic (even if iconoclastic) works and this companion volume will awaken interest in other books by these and other African women creative writers, thereby releasing the magical power of literature to lead the way to affirmation and transformation. On behalf of the contributors, I present to you *Twelve Best Books by African Women: Critical Readings*, a pathbreaking collaborative effort by twelve African women, all cultural been-tos, that is rewardingly provocative and helpful in grappling with these twelve telling tales. Twelve apostolic mothers, imbued with the authority inherent in our predecessors' works, we, as scholars, encourage continued intellectual activism. Spread the word: twelve women (and more) are writing the world.

## Notes

1. The following works by women were also chosen for other categories:

Amadiume, Ifi (Nigeria). *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*.

Doorkenoo, Efua (Ghana). *Cutting the Rose*.

Krog, Antjie (South Africa). *Country of My Skull*.

Mama, Amina (Nigeria). *Beyond the Mask: Race, Gender, and Identity*.

Al-Homi, Hayam Abbas (Egypt). *Adventures of a Breath*.

Tadjo, Veronique (Côte d'Ivoire). *Mamy Watta et le monstre*.

2. For a detailed study of this work, see Margaret Lenta, "A Break in the Silence: *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*," in *Momentum: On Recent*

*South African Writing*, ed. M. J. Daymond, J. U. Jacobs, and Margaret Lenta, 147–58 (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984). Also, David Schalkwyk, “The Flight from Politics: An Analysis of the South African Reception of ‘Poppie Nongena,’” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 1986): 183–95. Works by South African women writers—Bessie Head (1937–1986; *A Question of Power* [1974]), Nadine Gordimer (1923–; *July’s People* [1981]), and Elsa Joubert (1922–; *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* [1980])—serve as precursors to contemporary, black South African women’s writing. See also Ellen Kuzwayo (1914–2006), whose revisionary autobiography *Call Me Woman* (1985) is noteworthy in this context.

3. See 1 Kings 10:1–13 (King James Version) for an account of the visit. The Ethiopian version is in the *Kebra Nagast*: see Ogunyemi’s *Juju Fission* (2007).

4. Following the rehabilitative spirit of Djebbar’s *Fantasia*, I shift from using Europe’s economic, political, and cultural interactions with Africa as historical referents, implicit in the terms “precolonial” (consider *Africa reconfigured*), “colonial” (that is, *Africa resists*), and “postcolonial” (or *Africa regenerated*). This removal of Europe from the center of the discourse is necessary for a rebirth that entails trauma and the emergence of a new body.

5. Of particular interest is the Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala, who may have been left out of the “best” list because of the issues of plagiarism compromising her writing career.

6. The range of suggested titles indicates the diversity of the scholarly thrust:

“African Women Writers and Their Texts: Twelve of the Best”

“African Women Writers between Self and World: Twelve Best Texts”

“African Women’s Writing: The Twentieth Century’s Best”

“Beyond the Silence: The Twelve Best Books by African Women”

“A Century of Multiple Voices: Twelve Best Novels by African Women”

“A Crowning Achievement: The Twelve Best Literary Books by African Women”

“Daughters of the Words: The Twelve Best Books by African Women”

“Imagining, Engaging, and Recasting the World: African Women’s Twelve Best Literary Books”

“Jarring Voices, Transforming Visions: Twelve Best Texts by African Women”

“Making the Cut: The Twelve Best Literary Books by African Women Writers”

“Rethinking African Literature: The Twelve Best Books by African Women”

“The Twelve: Spreading the Word: Women Writing the African World”

“The Twelve: Spreading the Wor(l)d: The Best in African Women’s Writing”

“Voices, Politics, and Poetics: Twelve African Female Writings”

“We Live, We Create, and Do Several Things Besides: African Women’s Twelve Best Literary Books”

“Written into History: African Women’s Twelve Best Literary Books”

“Writing the Nation, Self, and Community: The Twelve Best Literary Books by African Women”

7. Like Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), one can teach *Living* as a collection of short stories or a novel.

## Works Cited

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. 2007. *Juju Fission: Women’s Alternative Fictions from the Sahara, the Kalahari and the Oases In-Between*. New York: Peter Lang.