

# Writing and Empowerment: Female Writers as Major Voices in Contemporary Africa<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*This article argues that unlike the previous generations of African writers, the new generation is dominated by African women writers whose narratives are interwoven around empowered and dynamic female characters. Apprehending these writers as major voices in the new trend of African literature and as spokespersons of their societies, it studies novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo as typical narratives of the last decades. Encompassing fictional characters, historical figures and political leaders, it assesses the validity of female writer's representation of strong female characters successfully struggling and upholding patriarchal roots in contemporary Africa. The analysis proves first that the narratives of female writers stem from a feminist consciousness and then that these narratives draw inspiration from historical and contemporary African realities.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment, contemporary Africa, female writers, history, Third Generation.

## **Introduction**

More than two decades ago, Micere Mugo pinpoints that “Book apartheid had tended to exclude women from among the masses of creators” (Mugo, 1998: 51) and that such a marginalization is due to the fact that “creative writing is empowering” (Mugo, 1998: 53). Similarly to Mierce Mugo, many critics in the field of African literature agree that the exclusion of women from writing in patriarchal African societies have contributed to maintain them in subjugation. Thus, their invisibility and their voicelessness in the early period of African literature are neither fortuitous nor unexplainable. By way of illustration, Buchi Emecheta recounts her experience in her autobiography *Head above Water* (1986) in which she stated that her husband burned the manuscript of her novel *The Bride Price* instead of encouraging and helping her to get it

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published. As understood by the female Nigerian writer, this is undoubtedly due to the fact that “the world, especially the African world, still regards serious writing as a masculine preserve” (Emecheta, 1981: 115). Consequently, the few women like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa (Nigeria), Grace Ogot (Kenya), Mariama Bâ (Senegal), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana) and others who were challenging gender hierarchies through writing were oppressed in one way or another.

The aim of this paper is to show that the new generation of African female writers strives to change the old order. Contemporary Africa witnesses the emergence of female writers who assert themselves as writers and own their rights as equal citizens to men. They even depict a new society characterized by the outstanding presence of women in decision-making and leadership in their communities. To what extent can these female writers be seen as major voices in contemporary Africa? How far is their writing different from that of the previous generations? Is it possible to assert that these writers draw inspiration from reality and history? Or is it more convenient to understand the process of self-assertion and empowerment initiated in their narratives just at the theoretical level?

In a literary historical perspective encompassing fiction and non-fiction, we argue that these female writers, emancipated as they are, appear as major voices in the new generation of African writers. Since the analysis seeks to understand how female writers impose themselves as important voices of the new generation of African writers, it is based on the theories of empowerment and feminism. First, it introduces the literary trends in African literature and shows how the empowerment process is at work in the novels of Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, two female Nigerian writers of the new generation whose narratives draw inspiration from history. Second, going beyond theory, the analysis establishes a tight relationship between dynamic female characters and outstanding female figures such as Madam Tinubu (Nigeria), Ellen Sirleaf Johnson (Liberia) and Sahle-Work Zewde (Ethiopia), three political empowered leaders in contemporary Anglophone Africa.

### **1. Female Writers as Major Voices in the New Generation of African Writers**

It is a real challenge to discuss the historical development of African literature. Indeed, critics tend to associate “literature” with “orature” when

dealing with African contemporary literary arts. However, for some critics such as Oyekan Owomoyela, “anyone with a passing acquaintance with discourses concerning African literatures is aware that the mention of the subject automatically suggests writing in European languages” (Owomoyela, 1993:3). While not underestimating this point of view, the writers who wrote their works in African languages are to be taken into account. Accordingly, the writers of the early-twentieth century such as Thomas Mofolo and Sol T. Plaatje (South Africa) and Reverend Samuel Johnson (Nigeria) are to be seen as the pioneers of African literature. For Lewis Nkosi, African literature was born during the colonial period and it emerged as a reaction against colonial discourse. The South African critic noted:

*Modern African literature as such can be said to have achieved its present status concomitantly with the maturation of the long struggle for political independence and the achievement of the modern state in Africa. The point needs emphasizing because modern African writing has its origin in the politics of anti-colonial struggle and still bears the marks of that struggle. (Nkosi, 1981:1)*

Drawing on this historical perspective, we can go along with Tanure Ojaide who contends that “contemporary Africa conflates the literary works of three major generations of writers” (Ojaide, 2015:19). In fact, the new generation, also referred to as the “Third Generation”, absolutely implies the existence of a “First Generation” and a “Second Generation” which are worth being presented. The first generation of African writers published their books from the 1940s to the 1960s. This is composed of writers like Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Chistopher Okigbo, Amos Tutuola (Nigeria), Camara Laye (Guinea), Léopold S. Senghor, Sembène Ousmane (Senegal), Peter Abraham (South Africa) etc. As can be observed from this list, this trend of African literature is dominated by male writers and the presence of female ones is insignificant due to patriarchal culture in full force in every domain of African life. As far as their issues and themes addressed are concerned, Adesanmi and Dunton opine that the textualities of the first generation writers are a form of anti-colonial nationalism (Adesanmi & Dunton, 2005:14). This means that these writers’ concern was to assert the value and validity of African culture presented by colonialism as savage.

The second generation writers' concern was not so different in light of Adesanmi and Dunton's contention that the first and second generation "were mostly born during the first five decades of the twentieth century when the colonial event was in full force. Their textualities were therefore massively overdetermined by that experience" (Adesanmi & Dunton, 2005:14). Actually, most critics and writers agree that independence first years are to be seen as the starting point of this generation. For instance, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o refers to this period as "the age of independence" (Ngugi, 1993:60). The literary works of the second generation writers were dominated by the mood of disillusionment and despair, and the writers insisted on socio-political mismanagement, pervasive corruption and "all the symbols of broken promises of the independence" (Ngugi, 1993:67). Indeed, from the 1960s to the 1980s, second generation writers like Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor, Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Ben Okri, Femi Osofican, Niyi Osundare, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Nuruddin Farah (Somalia) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o address issues such as social injustice, putsches (in Nigeria and Ghana for example) and disillusionment.

The third generation of African literature was born in the late 1980s. However, it originates from the earlier generations. Ogaga Okuyade argues that "the experiences of the third generation of Nigerian writers are not too distant from the first and second generations of Nigeria novelists, except the political atmosphere that differs. The temper remains the same (Okuyade, 2010: 3). He thus goes along with Oluwole Coker who observed that "third-generation Nigerian novelists are indeed entrenching a tradition, which is obviously deeply rooted in the political direction of the early Nigerian writers which achieved some radical bite by the succeeding generation" and that in Nigeria, this trend is characterized by "a faithful representation of social consciousness and political activism that run through the third generation of novelists (Coker, 2017).

As far as third-generation female writers are concerned, writing appears as a means to fight against various kinds of gender-based discriminations. While most of the literary works from earlier generations were written by male writers, the new generation is dominated by female ones. Compared with pioneer second generation female writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa or Buchi Emecheta, diasporic African writers including Amma Darko (Ghana), Tsitsi Dangaremba (Zimbabwe), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria) appear as major voices in

contemporary Africa. They fight against the marginality and the voicelessness of African women and their writing appears as a holistic and realistic depiction of contemporary African issues.

In this perspective, Mariama Bâ asserts in an interview with Barbara Harrel-Bond: "We cannot go forward without culture, without saying what we believe, without communicating with others, without making people think about things. Books are weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon" (Bâ, 1980: 214). This statement is made clearer by Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi in an analysis about African women's writing when she writes: "Bâ insisted on women taking charge of their destiny in order to disrupt the patriarchal establishment's predestined hierarchies" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 148). From this, it is noticeable that for third-generation female authors, writing is a weapon. This idea is underpinned by Yvonne Vera in the preface of *Opening Space: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* in which she argues: "If anything is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for most women – much freer than speech. There is less interruption, less immediate and shocked reaction. The creation of a world, its proposals, its individual characters, its suspension of disbelief" (Vera, 1999: 3). Writing thus appears as a space of freedom and a means of free expression. In the same vein, it is no longer necessary to recall here that the narratives of these women writers stem from a feminist consciousness. They fight for gender equality and challenge individually and collectively their status, roles and rights in African modern society.

## **2. Empowerment in African Women's Fiction: The Case of Adichie and Ezeigbo**

The term 'contemporary Africa' used in the title of this work refers to the third generation of African writers, the trend of writers whose works are published after 1980. More precisely, it is to be applied to the writers who came recently to the African literary scene in the last two decades. This trend includes migrant writers such as Moses Isegawa (Uganda), Biyi Bandele, Chris Abani, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria) and Amma Darko (Ghana). Most of them explore the cultural and social complexities of their country of origin, but they examine other themes as well, among which immigration to Europe and America.

For Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, their narratives are characterized by “a multicultural and transnational frame” (Adesanmi & Dunton, 2008: vii).

Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie belong to this generation of female writers who appear as major voices in the new generation of African writers. Their female characters challenge gender hierarchies and patriarchal norms. Actually, their strong female characters can be seen as empowered female figures. In fact, for Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès, the term ‘empowerment’ “refers to principles, such as the ability of individuals and groups to act in order to ensure their own well-being or their right to participate in decision-making that concerns them” (Calvès, 2009:736).

Ezeigbo’s and Adichie’s novels give a voice to their female characters. Though these characters still live in patriarchal environments, they make use of “flexible gender ideologies” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 151) to assert themselves in their communities. For example in Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), though barren in the Igbo society which regards barrenness and childlessness as a failure, the female character named Chieme strives to emerge as a leader in her community. She hence transcends her so-called gender handicap to own her rights and live her life fully. Similar female empowerment can be observed in her novel *House of Symbols* (2001), especially through Eaglewoman. This female character is so successful in life that she becomes indispensable for men and women in her community, socially, economically and even politically speaking. Through her life and the important qualities she is endowed with, we agree with Ezeigbo’s narrator that “power is greater than power” (p. 398). In other words, women’s power can annihilate the gender status quo caused by patriarchal power. Furthermore, Aziagba, another female character in the same novel, is also an evidence of female empowerment. In fact, she has been able to challenge tradition and convert to Christianity so as to protect her twins seen in her tradition as an abomination and so should be killed.

As for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, she depicts empowered female characters in her representation of Nigerian postcolonial society. Though insisting on the impact of patriarchal African societies on the marginal status of modern women, she shows that this predicament is not irremediable. The destiny of African women is not prescribed, it is rather a challenge. In her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Adichie shows the ability of female characters such as Ifeoma and her daughter Amaka “to reclaim the power of speech, sometimes usurping it” (Nfah-Abbenyi,

1997: 151). Indeed, apart from Beatrice, most of her female characters break the patriarchal codes of the Nigerian society. For instance, for being truthful and critical with the faculty members at the university where she teaches, Ifeoma had to resign and fly to the United States for her survival. Amaka is not different from her mother at all. This is certainly what justifies Oluwole Coker's contention that in *Purple Hibiscus* she "exemplifies female empowerment" (Coker, 2017).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie's second novel, female characters like Olanna, Kainene and Miss Adebayo do not respect social conventions presenting them as inferior. These women are as strong as men with whom they share their daily lives. For instance, Kainene's father's statement that "Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two" (Adichie, 2006:22) is an evidence of gender reevaluation in Adichie's literary vision. This is certainly what makes Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi contend:

*The ability of these women writers to reinscribe postcolonial women, as speaking subjects whose identities, sexualities, and subjectivities are constructed as valuable sites of difference within feminist discourses, makes their texts invaluable testimonies to herstories and the politics of feminism.*  
(Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 152)

Nfah-Abbenyi's standpoint is indicative that female writers of the new generation of African writers use writing to fight their own war as women but also that of all African women. This is a feminist perspective which differs from that of the first and second-generation female writers like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta for example. Indeed, as Mobolanle E. Sotunsa noted, the aim of the third-generation female writers is to "counter the impaired picture of African womanhood by reversing the roles of women in African fiction written by men. African female writers began to present protagonists who are pitted against all odds, yet emerge liberated and determined to exist with or without the man" (Sotunsa, 2009: 174). Moreover, this goes along with the idea according to which the project of "committed literature" (Fraisie and Mouralis, 2001: 154) which targets a political and social shift of the world gives a voice to African female writers.

In addition, these women's narrative techniques are worth being assessed. In fact, the textualities of the new generation of writers including those of Adichie and Ezeigbo are closely related to the writing styles of the first-generation writers. In this regard, Oluwole Coker writes:

*Just like the Achebe's generation of writers who are representatives of their ages through the cultural cum socio-historical learnings of their works, the third-generation writers are radiating elements of intertextuality which qualify them as "Achebe's grand-children". Actually, one notices deliberate attempts by the writers to associate aesthetically with the Achebe tradition. (Coker, 2017)*

The first sentence of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* recalls Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Indeed, Kambili, the narrator states: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion" (Adichie, 2005:3). This means that though the third generation of female writers is revisionist, there is an ideological continuity between the major trends of African literature.

Furthermore, these writers address political issues regarded as taboos for earlier generations of writers, especially female ones. In other words, issues female writers like Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta did not dare to address, are openly dealt with by Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Amma Darko and many others. For example, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie is highly critical of the Nigerian post-independence leaders, whose mismanagement of public affairs brings about multiple putsches and wars. Adichie uses an agora composed of intellectual men and women (Odenigbo, Professor Ezeka, Miss Adebayo, etc.) as mouthpiece to unveil political mismanagement. The blame is on African leaders who are still dependent on the former colonizers. This can be seen in Odenigbo's request in *Half of a Yellow Sun* that "it is now that we have to begin to decolonize our education! Not tomorrow, now!" (Adichie, 2006: 47).

Like Adichie, Ezeigbo is also politically committed in her novels. In *House of Symbols* Eaglewoman breaks gender stereotypes and emerges as a successful politician. Similarly, her female characters in *The Last of the Strong Ones* are not excluded from the political leadership of Umuga. In fact, they are as committed as their male counterparts in the political fight against the colonizers. Ezeigbo here presents the consequences of colonialism as negative change in African society at large and in Nigeria in particular. Her narrator is neither obsessed nor afraid of change, he only condemns the nature of the change imposed by the British colonizer: "Change by itself, is not a threat. But what lays heavy on our soil was the nature of the change sweeping through the land like rain-bearing winds.



Positive change is creative and constructive, it is not seen as disruptive. But the manner of change in Umuga was not positive." (Ezeigbo, 1996:1)

Furthermore, though female writers in the new generation of African writers speak for themselves, they also represent a collective voice. This is linked to African woman's traditional role of story-teller. Mucere Mugo argues:

*African women have always dominated African orature tradition as cultural workers, story-tellers, singers, dancers, riddle posers, dramatists, and so on. As creators, educators, guidance counselors, family historians, (...) women artists become, so to speak the collective memory and streams of consciousness that links a specific social unit from one generation to the other. (Mugo, 1998: 47)*

From this statement, it is noticeable that women as writers are bound to have an impact on the formation of a collective memory in contemporary Africa. Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo does not overlook such a noble role. In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, the Nigerian female writer endows her female characters with this ability. Indeed, two women in Umuga are chosen as "the memory of the story-teller and the guardians of tradition" (Ezeigbo, 1996:18) and one of them states:

*The choice fell on me and another of the younger women who was a gifted singer and story-teller. So we become witnesses, custodians and critics of the unfolding events. The success of our new task into both the past and the future and recording the present with an unfailing skill. (Ezeigbo, 1996:2)*

Being the guardian of tradition and the spokesperson of the people is a leadership skill traditional African woman owns and Ezeigbo chooses to foreground this aspect in the novel. This is an exercise she does with a view to showing female empowerment in traditional African society. Thus, her female characters have voices which are quite audible in their communities in light of Chieme's depiction as a traditional singer. Chieme's role is similar to that of the two women above. The narrator reports that "Chieme had a very good voice and plenty of talents" (Ezeigbo, 1996:82). However, her popularity rests on the communal nature of the issue she addresses in her performances. She sings about multiple social problems and so attracts people from different social backgrounds. This obviously empowers her in the community. Nfah-Abbenyi is right when she writes that "if this custodianship is empowering to women in

oral cultures, then the act of writing, the act of accepting the task of spokesperson, becomes a subversive act that is empowering not only for the writer, but also for the community for and about whom they write (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997:150). As a consequence, women who rewrite about women and give them back this communal role represent major voices in African literature. Their subversive narratives aim at restoring truth and justice in contemporary Africa society.

Moreover, the multiple female voices in the new generation of African writers are finally an evidence of female leadership. Nowadays, women have broken gender barriers and penetrate and even dominate literary sphere long regarded as a male preserve. We may assert that female writers represent major voices in the new generation of African writers. They are quite visible through their subversive and revisionist perspective as far as gender issue is concerned. This positions women as leaders in the new literary world, in congruence with their emancipation project in contemporary African societies at large. As a consequence, African female writers' representation of women is not but fictional as it goes beyond imagined realities and reminds that female African leaders do existed and still exist in Africa.

### **3. Beyond Fiction: Drawing Inspiration from Female Leaders in Contemporary Africa**

The legitimacy of African female writers' fight through their writing needs to be emphasized. In fact, the struggle for visibility of prominent political female figures and cultural icons is all the more legitimate as the African collective memory primarily celebrates male leaders. However, it is not a hard task to demonstrate that some women have played outstanding roles in the development of pre-colonial and modern Africa. Though they are inferior in terms of number in comparison with men, their struggle is not to be overlooked. Assessing just a historical female political figure and two contemporary ones enables us to see the validity of women's representations of strong and dynamic female leaders in their narratives.

In *Reines d'Afrique et Héroïnes de la Diaspora* (2004), Sylvia Serbin points out that the idea of writing this historical book emerged from her eight-years old girl who asked her why the other countries have famous women while black peoples have not. Indeed, knowing that the Indians have Pocahontas, the Americans Calamit, the French Jeanne d'Arc, and the

English Queen Victoria, the little girl wonders: "What about black people? Did we not exist?" (Serbin, 2004: 9). As it can be noticed, Serbin's daughter has raised her consciousness on the invisibility of African female leaders. Therefore, she decides to write a historical book so as to restore justice and introduce major historical African figures from francophone and Anglophone Africa.

As far as Anglophone Africa is concerned, the heroism of the Nigerian woman Efunroye Tinubu (1805-1887) can be highlighted. She is remembered as a business woman and a political leader of the nineteenth century. Tinubu's success in business starts in her early childhood when she helps her mother in selling maize porridge. Then very soon, she leaves her native village to Badagry a flourishing coastal city, west to Lagos. Her objective was to develop herself a business with her small saving. In the city of Badagry, Tinubu will prove that she is determined to thrive. Too dynamic and ambitious, she did not contend herself with her small trading, she soon ventures in slave trade, but as an intermediary Tinubu at that time was the only woman in that activity. This is an evidence of her atypical nature and her breaking of gender barriers.

Yet, Tinubu is not so pleased with slave trade which undermines her own clan, and soon gets involved in the trading of palm oil, a product emerged from industrial revolution. She will later develop an Import-Export company, selling palm oil to white businessmen and imported goods to the local people. In two years, Tinubu becomes indispensable in the palm oil sector and is presented as the most important intermediary in the trading between Europe and Africans in Lagos and Abeokuta. Serbin noted that "this quasi-monopoly provided her with an unequalled power in the female folk... Even the Europeans in Lagos, though said to have little regard for natives, respectfully called her Madam Tinubu" (Serbin, 2004: 132). This gives her regard and respect from all people in her community. Her social status is indicative of the top level of respect a woman can achieve in colonial Africa. This is all the more significant as the term "Madam" used to refer to a black woman in that period is not granted at all. Tinubu shows that a woman who is involved in a money-providing activity and gets her financial independence is sufficiently empowered to break all patriarchal and even racial barriers. She therefore owns her liberties thanks to her economic independence acquired, as a self-made businesswoman.

From this aspect of Tinubu's life, we contend that self-assertive, prosperous and powerful women depicted by women writers in their narratives are based on history. Indeed, women can also own qualities and assets seen as male ones in patriarchal societies. Thus, in any case, Aidoo's contention that "the notion that some women in contemporary African literature are stronger, more articulate, and more independent than 'real' African women is a widely held view" (Aidoo, 1998: 17) is rather to be put into perspective. In fact, this is truer for the writers of the second generation (1960-1980) than for those of last two decades. Indeed, Tinubu's life as a leader demonstrates that women depicted in recent narratives as successful and strong figures are nothing but the reflection of African historical figures. For example, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *Eaglewoman* in *House of Symbols* as a political figure matches with Tinubu, the real Nigerian female politician of the XIXth century.

Tinubu's political experience starts with her contact with King Akintoye from Lagos, when freshly ousted from the thrown by his nephew named Kosoko. Tinubu as a rich and self-confident woman proposes her service to Akintoye and promises him much fortune. In fact, she regards King Akintoye as her relative because they are from the same clan. She therefore wants him to get back the power and this effectively happens five years later. So, Tinubu as a woman who empowers man shows that female empowerment is real. Akintoye as a grateful man asks Tinubu to come to Lagos, the capital city of the Yoruba kingdom. Officially presented as the "niece" of the king, Tinubu with her wise decisions and pieces of advice soon becomes an influent and indispensable character in the court. She is trusted by the king and is regarded as the unofficial holder of power. In this regard, Diabaté Tenin Touré rightly puts that some women "have had the opportunity to play a considerable role in the political leadership of their society. The examples of powerful queens, queen mothers, kings' wives and sisters, are multiple in the real or magnified history of the continent" (Touré, 2010: 314). If this is true, then writing about women such as Tinubu is a way of rewriting African history in order to make visible heroic women in collective African memory. This can certainly bring new generations to reconsider their view on African woman. Thus, writing can empower women in society.

Tinubu's power and influence in the royal court will bring about jealousy and hostilities from local people but also and above all from British authorities, who realize that she is an obstacle to their imperialist

actions. They therefore try by all means to get rid of her by banishing her from the kingdom. But, as a self-assertive and resilient woman, Tinubu challenges British authorities through a mobilisation of a great number of people around her. This leads to a riot plotted by Tinubu, whose political skills are hence recognized by the British authorities. This aspect of Tinubu's life recalls the Igbo women war of 1929 depicted by Ezeigbo in her historical novel *The Last of the Strong Ones*. These women rebel against the colonisers who overused authority in their indirect rule. The revolt also known as the Aba women riot is an evidence of women's authority since colonial period.

Tinubu's heroism and political commitment triggered by her economic power and independence, positions her where other women and even ordinary men in African society cannot be. She is therefore awarded a national recognition. When she dies in 1887, she is given national funerals. Though she had no child, her life in general was productive and successful. To perpetuate her name and her struggle for the well-being of Nigerian people, two symbolic sites bear her name: the Tinubu Square in Lagos and the Lyalode Square in Abeokuta.

As a historical female figure, Tinubu has certainly inspired many Nigerian women and African female leaders. Indeed, women of power are a little more numerous nowadays than in the past. In Anglophone Africa, these women who embody political leadership include Ellen Sirleaf Johnson (Liberia) and Sahle-Work Zewde (Ethiopia). Indeed, Johnson, who was born in 1938 in Monrovia, later becomes president of Liberia from 2006 to 2018. But how can a woman reach such a level of socio-political ladder in a so patriarchal society?

In fact, Johnson's empowerment has been possible thanks to her education and her determination to stand by herself. In her autobiographical book *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President* (2010), one learns that after the college of West Africa in Monrovia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf went to the United States, where she studied Economics and Business Administration, and passed in 1971 a Master's degree in Public Administration. This high level of education opens her multiple doors in her native country. She therefore occupies many important positions in Liberia. Helen Cooper, in *Madam President: The Extraordinary Journey of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf* (2017), points out her multiple positions. First, as an Assistant Minister of Finance in Liberia from 1972 to 1973 under the governance of President William Tolbert, then

as Finance Minister from 1979 to 1980 when Samuel Doe was ruling the country as president. However, in this biography, Cooper argues that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's integrity led her to a short stay in prison and that she had to leave the country after her release. During her exile in Kenya, which lasted twelve years, she worked as an economist for the World Bank and also for many other international financial institutions. Johnson Sirleaf was the director of the Regional Bureau for Africans of United Nations Development Programme from 1992 to 1997.

With such national and international responsibilities, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf appears as sufficiently experienced to aspire to the presidency of Liberia. Her qualities and abilities are highlighted by Cooper who explains that after a first failed attempt in 1997, she finally won the presidential election in 2005 in front of the famous footballer Georges Weah. During her term, she faces many challenges such as poverty, corruption, nepotism and many other social wrongs. As an experienced and empowered woman, she succeeds in bringing back hope to Liberian people. This enables her to have a second term during which she brings numerous positive changes recognized by Liberians and the international community.

In recognition of her good leadership, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in February 2011 and in 2017 the Ibrahim Prize for achievement in African leadership. Through her two terms of presidency, it cannot go unnoticed that female leadership becomes real and inspiring in African societies. This is confirmed in Mo Ibrahim's words when he learnt the outcome of the Prize Committee's deliberations:

*I'm delighted that the Prize Committee has decided to make Ellen Johnson Sirleaf an Ibrahim Prize Laureate. In very difficult circumstances, she helped guide her nation towards a peaceful and democratic future, paving the way for her successor to follow. I am proud to see the first woman Ibrahim Laureate, and I hope Ellen Johnson Sirleaf will continue to inspire women in Africa and beyond. (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2018)*

Ethiopia can be seen as the first Anglophone African nation that draws inspiration from the example of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Indeed, through courageous political actions, the country has enabled to witness the emergence of Sahle-Work Zewde, another inspiring and dynamic female leader in contemporary Africa. Born in Ethiopia on February 1950, Sahle-Work Zewde studies at the University of Montpellier in France and is successively appointed Ethiopia's ambassador in France, Djibouti, and

Senegal and at the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Elias Gebresellasie in his article "Who is Sahle-Work Zewde, Ethiopia's First Female President?" (2018) noted that in addition to her three decades as a skillful and experienced diplomat, this stateswoman served as a United Nation's top official at the African Union.

As a result of her dynamism, Sahle-Work Zewde appears as experienced and reliable as men who rule African countries. However, her access to presidency is exceptional as it does not emerge from elections. She was voted by the Ethiopian parliament to replace Mulatu Teshome who unexpectedly resigned. The choice of a woman by a male-dominated parliament shows the recognition of female empowerment and leadership. This certainly justifies the statement of Fitsum Arega, then Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, who puts that "in a patriarchal society such as ours, the appointment of a female head of state not only sets the standard for the future but also normalises women as decision-makers in public life" (Ahmed and De Freytas-Tamura, 2018). Thus Sahle-Work Zewde promised to eradicate social injustice and gender inequalities in Ethiopia: "I know today I have said a lot about female empowerment, but expect me to be even more vocal in the coming years about female rights and equality" (Assefa, 2019). This ambition is neither different from those envisioned by Ellen Sirleaf Jonhson and Madam Tinubu nor opposite to the perspectives projected by Adichie and Ezeigbo through their female characters.

### **Conclusion**

African female writers have progressively moved from invisibility and voicelessness to self-assertion. Compared with early African female writers, they can be seen as major voices in contemporary Africa. Indeed, as introduced in this article, they speak and write with much more authority and there is multifaceted dynamism of empowerment which is perceived in their novels through their female characters. Though oppressed, their characters strive to overcome patriarchal laws and most of them are empowered women whose role of leadership is obvious in their communities. By way of illustration, Adichie and Ezeigbo are introduced as two major writers of the new generation of African writers who represent empowered female characters in different contexts. They depict realistic characters with strong personality traits in places and situations where they

are politically and socially committed. Whether in their daily lives or in war times, women's involvement in public decision-making and their socio-economic actions are both evidences of their leadership skills in the Nigerian society.

The analysis showed through Adichie's and Ezeigbo's female characters that women get empowered when they are economically active and independent on men. Female characters such as Olanna, Kainene and Miss Adebayo in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ifeoma and Amaka in *Purple Hibiscus* and Eaglemother in *House of Symbols* emancipate themselves from patriarchal oppression and emerge as major voices in their families and communities thanks to their economic independence. These representations of women in fiction match with female leaders in the history of Africa and in contemporary Africa. To compare imagined and concrete realities, the analysis has explored women's political and socio-economic leadership through Madam Tinubu (Nigeria), a historical female figure, women presidents Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia), and Sahle-Work Zewde (Ethiopia), two major leaders in contemporary Anglophone Africa. The combination of fiction and historical works in an interdisciplinary perspective has proved that "women from Africa have not been swallowed by history, that they too know how to swallow history" (Vera, 1999:2).

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