

Unsettling the Gaze: Cultural Dialogue in African Women's Writing

by Chemutai Kiplagat

The act of storytelling is inherently tied to the creation and invocation of an audience. For African women writers, this act goes beyond mere narrative technique – it becomes a mode of resistance and reclamation, allowing them to inscribe their readerships into the very fabric of their texts. Using strategies such as multiple reliable narrators, direct address, and the deliberate layering of diverse female viewpoints, African women writers complicate the notion of a singular, monolithic truth, instead offering a space where multiple, contrasting female voices coexist. This multiplicity challenges dominant Western and colonial frameworks that have historically silenced or homogenized African women's experiences, inviting readers to recognize and visualize the breadth of diverse experiences, even within similar sociopolitical contexts. As American writer and intersectional feminist Audre Lorde asserts in *Sister Outsider*, “In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower” (102). This sentiment reflects the narrative approach of these writers, who reject imposed separations and instead elevate differences as a form of solidarity and empowerment.

African women's narratives, grounded in the cultural and historical specificities of their characters, directly respond to critiques such as those made by Indian American Gender Studies scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Mohanty cautions against a “feminist discourse practice [which] is singular or homogeneous in its goals, interests, and analyses” (17). In the chapter “Under Western Eyes,” she critiques the performative tendency of Western feminist scholarship to make “brief forays into non-Euro-American cultures, [where] particular sexist cultural practices [are] addressed from an otherwise Eurocentric women's studies gaze,” reducing complex cultural

practices to mere examples of sexism (239). This Western feminist gaze often universalizes women's experiences, erasing crucial cultural and historical contexts.

In contrast, African women writers present localized, culturally embedded narratives that foreground the distinctiveness of their characters' lives. These narratives become a site for enacting Mohanty's vision of feminist solidarity, rooted in the recognition of specific differences rather than a flattening of experiences. Mohanty emphasizes that understanding differences across cultures can strengthen feminist connections, noting that "the lives of women are connected and interdependent, albeit not the same, no matter which geographical area we happen to live in" (241). This vision aligns with Audre Lorde's call in *Sister Outsider* to reject "mockeries of separations" that divide women and instead embrace the creative power of difference (31).

Having established the importance of culturally embedded narratives and the rejection of a universalized feminist gaze, I now turn to the ways in which authors invoke and engage their readers through specific narrative techniques. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, American literary critic Wayne Booth "distinguish[es] three kinds of implied readers," examining how authors strategically create and invoke different types of readers (422). Building on the work of comparative literature professor Peter Rabinowitz, Booth categorizes readership into three distinct types. First, there is the "authorial audience," which Rabinowitz defines as the "author's hypothetical audience" – the readers implied by the text, who are expected to understand the author's cultural references and narrative cues (422). This audience represents the group the author anticipates will grasp both explicit and implicit messages within the text. Second, Booth differentiates this from the "narrative audience," which consists of readers who suspend disbelief and engage with the story as if its events and characters were real. They align with the listeners

inside the narrative, momentarily accepting the story as a factual report (429). Finally, Booth identifies the “actual readers,” or what he calls the “breathing reader” – the literal person holding and reading the book, whose interpretation may vary based on personal experience and context (423). This framework helps illustrate how African women writers might craft their narratives with multiple readerships in mind, complicating the dynamics of who is being addressed and who is included or excluded by the narrative voice. By doing so, they continue the work of resisting homogenized representations, engaging their readers in a layered dialogue that mirrors the diverse experiences of their characters¹.

Building on Booth’s concept of the “authorial audience,” I contend that African women writers extend this strategy by crafting narratives with specifically African female readerships in mind. Rather than offering a singular, monolithic truth, these writers create a space where multiple, coexisting truths are presented. By featuring reliable yet dialectical female characters, whose differing perspectives reflect a diversity of cultural and gendered experiences, they challenge the notion of a single, universal narrative. In doing so, they allow their African readership to see themselves represented across a spectrum of standpoints, emphasizing that there is no single “correct” way to exist within society. These writers do not replace one dominant truth with another; instead, they offer narratives that invite readers to navigate the complexities of the characters’ beliefs, cultural contexts, and lived experiences. By rejecting the singular protagonist model as the sole voice of African female experience, they construct a narrative landscape that encourages African readers to envision themselves in the diverse realities of the characters, reflecting the complexities of their own lives. This strategy not only

¹ From my understanding, one person can embody all three types of readers simultaneously.

subverts Western expectations of a coherent, linear storyline but also fosters more fragmented, multifaceted narratives that reflect the fractured nature of postcolonial identity.

To explore how African women writers imagine and inscribe their readerships, I turn to three works: *The Dilemma of a Ghost* by Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo, *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad* by Nigerian author Damilare Kuku, and *Woman at Point Zero* by Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi.

Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, first performed in 1964, is a pioneering work of African drama that explores the cultural and generational conflicts between a Ghanaian family and a Black American woman who marries into it. The play centers on Ato Yawson, a young Ghanaian man who returns home after studying in the United States, bringing with him his African American wife, Eulalie. Their marriage becomes a site of tension and misunderstanding as Eulalie struggles to adapt to Ghanaian customs, while Ato's family grapples with her outsider status and differing cultural expectations. Through this dynamic, Aidoo examines themes of cultural identity and the disconnect stemming from Western education and its impact on familial and societal roles.

In the following excerpt, we witness a confrontation between Ato and his mother, Esi Kom, where the clash between traditional cultural values and a modern, Western-educated perspective comes to the forefront. Esi's concerns underscore the deep-seated cultural emphasis on family and lineage, while Ato's attempts to defend his wife reveal his own struggle as a patriarch to mediate between his family's expectations and his wife's more individualistic approach. This scene captures the intricate negotiations of identity and belonging that define the play:

ESI: But why should she behave in such a strange way?

ATO: I slapped her.

ESI: You slapped her? What did she do?

ATO: She said that my people have no understanding, that they are uncivilized.

ESI: *[Exclaims colly and nods her head]* Is that it? *[She paces round then turns to*

ATO] My child, and why should your wife say this about us?

ATO: I do not know.

ESI: But do you never know anything? I thought those who go to school know everything ... so your wife says we have no understanding, and we are uncivilized ... We thank her, we thank you too ... But it would have been well if you knew why she said this.

ATO: *[Miserably]* I only asked her to come to the Thanksgiving with me. But she refused and ...

ESI: And will she not refuse? I would have refused too if I were her. I would have known that I can always refuse to do things *[A pause]* Her womb has receded, has it not? But did you make her know how important it is for her to...

ATO: But her womb has not receded!

ESI: *[Unbelieving]* What are you telling me?

ATO: If we wanted children, she would have given birth to some. (The Dilemma of a Ghost, 50-51)

In this scene, Aidoo skillfully presents a layered, tension-filled interaction between two strong-willed women: Esi, Ato's mother, and Eulalie, Ato's African American wife. Their

confrontation is mediated through Ato — and through the mother and son’s dialogue, Aidoo explores the clash between traditional African values and Western ideals, inviting empathy for both women while complicating the reader’s positioning. The conflict between Esi and Eulalie serves as a microcosm for broader cross-cultural tensions, illustrating the limitations of a “monolithic Black womanhood” identity or experience. Their exchange becomes a site where the intersections of race, gender, and culture are brought to the fore, exposing the divergent perspectives that can emerge even among women broadly categorized as part of a homogenous group.

Carol Boyce Davies’ assertion in *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* that “non-Westernized African peoples negotiate the terms of their identities in ways other than only representing Blackness” is crucial for understanding Aidoo’s portrayal of cross-cultural conflict (8). The narrative presupposes an inscribed readership, one that must engage deeply with the cultural tensions presented in the scene to fully grasp its implications. Booth’s concept of the “authorial audience” is particularly relevant here; the reader is required not only to follow the surface-level exchanges but also to interpret the complex cultural frameworks informing each woman’s behavior and attitudes. This nuanced angle asks the “authorial audience” look deeper to understand the layered, conflicting cultural identities at play.

The conversation begins with Esi’s surprise at Eulalie’s refusal to attend a family gathering, prompting her to ask, “But why should she behave in such a strange way?” The use of “strange” highlights Esi’s confusion, signaling her belief that Eulalie’s refusal reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Ghanaian cultural norms. However, when Esi later responds passively to Eulalie’s rejection with the rhetorical question, “Is that it?” her nodding suggests a resigned acknowledgment of Eulalie’s actions, as if silently consenting to the situation. This

moment marks Esi's shift from indignation to reluctant understanding, reflecting the tension that arises when cultural pride encounters conflicting values.

Esi's nonchalant reaction to the accusation of "uncivilized" leveled by Eulalie further exposes this cultural clash. Her non-verbal response – "[*Exclaims colly and nods her head*]" – conveys disbelief and acceptance, but her shift to saying, "We thank her, we thank you too" represents a slightly ironic but a willing acknowledgment to negotiate with Eulalie's differing cultural perspective. Esi's dismissal of the term "uncivilized" reflects her resistance to the Western gaze that seeks to define what is "civilized." Aidoo uses this moment to critique the imposition of Western standards on non-Western cultures, showing how African women like Esi reject these external constructions². Esi's comment, "But it would have been well if you knew why she said this" (51), underscores the importance of cultural understanding in bridging divides between women from different backgrounds. Although Esi is reluctant to accept Eulalie's rejection of traditional norms, she recognizes that understanding the reasoning behind such actions is crucial. The reader, as a key component of this narrative interaction, must engage with this call for understanding and negotiate their own position within the larger cultural discourse at play.

Esi's ambivalence toward modernity is also evident in her reflection, "I would have known that I can always refuse to do things [*A pause*] Her womb has receded, has it not? But did you make her know how important it is for her to..." By acknowledging the cultural differences that enable Eulalie to refuse participating in compulsory activities, Esi seems to be contemplating how her own identity might change if she were in a similar position. The "[*A pause*]" reveals

² Edward Said's, *Orientalism* comes to mind: In *Orientalism*, Said deconstructs how Western views of Asia and the Middle East have been filtered through the artificial construct known as "Orientalism".

Esi's internal conflict, highlighting her thinking and consideration. The repeated reference to the statement, "her womb has receded" indicates her choice to hold onto traditional ideals, where womanhood is defined by childbearing, despite changes in the social landscape. This moment highlights the tension between adhering to tradition and responding to modern changes in gender roles. Her question to Ato, "Did you make her know how important it is for her to...", reveals her return to the fixation on reproduction as the defining aspect of womanhood, which echoes colonial and patriarchal anxieties still present in her worldview. Here, Booth's idea of the "authorial audience" becomes apparent – the reader must recognize the complex interplay between tradition, modernity, and the power dynamics inherent in these cultural practices.

This emphasis on childbirth as the ultimate expression of womanhood complicates Esi's relationship with Eulalie, who prioritizes her autonomy and challenges the patriarchal framework Esi upholds. Aidoo critiques this different conception of womanhood, subtly using Esi's words – "I would have known that I can always refuse to do things" – to comment on Esi's awareness of the societal pressures women face within the confines of cultural traditions. Eulalie's refusal to conform to these traditional expectations further complicates the feminist discourse within the play. Here, the "authorial audience" is again invoked: the reader must grapple with these ideological differences, recognizing that solidarity is not straightforward in a world where cultural norms and expectations differ drastically. The complexity of the scene requires the reader to interrogate their own assumptions about womanhood, understanding that Aidoo does not present a monolithic feminist perspective but instead invites the reader to critically examine the cultural contexts that shape these women's experiences.

At this point, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism in "Under Western Eyes" becomes relevant. Mohanty argues that feminist solidarity cannot be assumed

based on shared gender alone; rather, it must be grounded in an understanding of “how we conceive of definitions and contexts, on what basis we foreground certain contexts over others, and how we understand the ongoing shifts in our conceptual cartographies – these are all questions of great importance in this particular cartography of Third World feminisms” (45). Esi and Eulalie’s differing views on womanhood and motherhood challenge the notion of a common context. By presenting the contrasting yet equally valid perspectives of Esi and Eulalie, Aidoo illustrates that solidarity cannot be assumed based on gender or racial identity alone; it must be forged through a deep understanding of the historical and cultural contexts shaping each woman’s experience. Thus, the reader – the authorial audience – must not only witness the clash between these two women but actively engage with their differing worldviews in order to fully comprehend the complexity of their struggle.

In *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad*, Damilare Kuku delves into the challenges women face within oppressive structures. In “The Anointed Wife,” Kuku contrasts two women’s responses to patriarchy: the Pastor’s Wife, bound by her public role, conceals her husband’s infidelities, while the “girl” openly acknowledges the affair, defying the social codes that restrain the Pastor’s Wife. Kuku situates this familiar narrative within a broader examination of gender expectations and societal judgment, challenging readers to consider how patriarchal systems shape and restrict women’s roles. Uniquely, the story unfolds from the perspective of the Pastor’s Wife, who defends her complicity, offering insight into her choice to uphold the status quo. Through her inner dialogue and carefully measured external actions, Kuku employs Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of “defamiliarization”³, which asserts that “the technique of art is to make things ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms obscure, so as to increase the difficulty and the duration of

³ Victor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*

perception" (12). By presenting the Pastor's Wife as both complicit in and critical of patriarchal structures, Kuku disrupts the reader's automatic perception of her, forcing a reevaluation of the complexity of women's roles within oppressive systems. This unfamiliar vantage point forces the audience to slow down and consider the layers of her internal conflict, making her motivations and experiences more visible, complex, and challenging to interpret. Rather than presenting a direct retelling, Kuku invites us to navigate the social roles the Pastor's Wife performs and the emotional turmoil simmering beneath her composed exterior:

I feel sorry for the girl. Didn't she know that a lady never speaks about such matters in public? Well, she was no lady but still, I wanted to snatch her from the screen, put her across my knees and spank decency, decorum, and coyness into her. Instead, I had watched with no expression with the PR team because I knew if I give away a hint of distress, Tade and the church would suffer.

Tade removes his arm from my shoulder and kisses my cheek. He returns to his side of the bed and within minutes he is fast asleep. (Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad, 39).

Here, Damilare Kuku uses the Pastor's Wife's narrative to complicate the gender dynamics of patriarchal oppression. The line, "Didn't she know that a lady never speaks about such matters in public?", directly addresses the implied readership, setting up a contrast between the Pastor's Wife and the "girl" involved with the pastor. Kuku uses this direct address to subtly position the reader against the girl, reinforcing the social code that dictates a woman's silence on such matters.

Through the Pastor's Wife's inner dialogue, Kuku employs Viktor Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization". Rather than offering a straightforward retelling of events, Kuku allows us access to the narrator's psychological complexity, revealing how she balances her outward composure – her role as the dutiful wife – with the emotional turmoil of betrayal. This defamiliarization technique forces readers to reconsider the public/private split and the ways women must perform socially acceptable roles, even when those roles come at the cost of their emotional well-being.

The Pastor's Wife embodies survival through manipulation, while the "girl" challenges societal norms by openly acknowledging her affair. The Pastor's Wife's desire to "snatch her from the screen, put her across my knees and spank decency, decorum, and coyness into her" reveals her internalized adherence to patriarchal values. Yet, this wish to discipline the younger woman complicates her position – she is trapped in a system she seeks to uphold, protecting her social security at the cost of confronting her husband's infidelity. Her reluctance to face his betrayal, paired with her desire to impose decorum on the "girl," reflects the ways women internalize and perpetuate oppressive structures to maintain their status. Kuku deftly places the reader in this tension, complicating our sympathy for the Pastor's Wife by exposing the nuanced survival mechanisms she employs. Further, her "watching with no expression" while the PR team observes underscores the dissonance between outward composure and internal conflict, compelling readers to engage with the competing emotions women navigate within their constrained roles.

The section's ending – where the Pastor's Wife ultimately aligns with her husband and the church – underscores the difficulty of disrupting a deeply ingrained system. This decision contrasts with Audre Lorde's call for solidarity among oppressed women in *Sister Outsider*.

Kuku's portrayal of the Pastor's Wife reveals the complexities of such solidarity; even with good intentions and an understanding of the need for change, the social and economic repercussion of defying the patriarchy is too costly, making resistance a deeply fraught choice⁴.

Ultimately, by presenting two women on opposing sides of the patriarchy, Kuku invites readers to reflect on their own responses to these structures. Is the Pastor's Wife wrong for shielding the church and Tade, given her entwinement in the system? Kuku's narrative challenges us to consider the complexities of navigating patriarchal oppression, where resistance often requires sacrificing social and economic security. The "fast asleep" pastor contrasts sharply with the women whose lives are shaped by their need to survive within the system, underscoring the security afforded to those who perpetuate patriarchy without consequence.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi offers a profound critique of societal oppression, presenting Firdaus' life as both an act of resistance and a tragic consequence of the systems that control her. Set against the backdrop of post-colonial Egypt, this passage encapsulates the novel's broader message about the personal cost of truth and the inevitable clash between individual integrity and a society built on lies. Through Firdaus' narrative, El Saadawi illustrates that standing up against oppression often comes with immense personal sacrifice yet remaining silent or complicit proves equally destructive.

This passage serves as both a climactic and symbolic moment in *Woman at Point Zero*, where Firdaus' final act of resistance crystallizes the novel's exploration of the devastating consequences of living in a system that silences the truth:

⁴ This nuance aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of how capitalist and patriarchal structures shape the lives of women, (in this case, Lorde, and the Pastor's Wife), differently depending on their socio-economic context.

For suddenly the door was thrown open, revealing several armed policemen. They surrounded her in a circle, and I heard one of them say:

“Let’s go... Your time has come.”

I saw her walk out with them. I never saw her again. But her voice continued to echo in my ears, vibrating in my head, in the cell, in the prison, in the streets, in the whole world, shaking everything, spreading fear wherever it went, the fear of the truth which kills, the power of truth, as savage, and as simple, and as awesome as death, yet as simple and as gentle as the child that has not yet learnt to lie.

And because the world was full of lies, she had to pay the price.

I got into my little car, my eyes on the ground. Inside of me was a feeling of shame. I felt ashamed of myself, of my life, of my fears, and my lies. The streets were full of people bustling around, of newspapers hanging on wooden stalls, their headlines crying out. At every step, wherever I went, I could see the lies, could follow hypocrisy bustling around. I rammed my foot down on the accelerator as though in a hurry to run over the world, to stamp it all out. (Woman at Point Zero, 183)

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi captures the devastating cost of resisting a society built on lies through Firdaus’ final moments. The abrupt intrusion of “several armed policemen” marks the climax of her resistance. The shocking event – “the door was thrown open” – disrupts the narrative’s introspective, dreamlike tone, signaling the end of Firdaus’ story and the violent return to the harsh realities of a patriarchal system that punishes truth. The phrase “Let’s go... Your time has come” underscores the finality of Firdaus’ fate, marking her defiance

of societal norms with its ultimate consequence. The officer's simple words carry the weight of centuries of systemic oppression, highlighting the inevitability of punishment for those who challenge the status quo. The abruptness of the intrusion forces the reader to confront the harsh realities Firdaus seeks to escape. The narrator's reflection that Firdaus' "voice continued to echo in my ears" signals that the truth spoken cannot be ignored or silenced, entangling the narrator in Firdaus' struggle. Her voice reverberates not just in the narrator's mind, but in the "prison", the "cell", the "streets", and the "whole world", creating an inescapable sense of urgency and unrest. El Saadawi's description of Firdaus' truth as "the fear of the truth which kills" underscores the paradox of resistance in oppressive systems. The truth is both "savage" and "simple," reflecting Firdaus' revelation's power to disrupt the existing order while remaining pure in its clarity. The comparison to "the child that has not yet learnt to lie" sharpens the contrast between truth's innocence and society's corruption, highlighting how oppressive systems force individuals to forsake honesty for survival.

After Firdaus is taken away, the narrator's internal conflict deepens, marked by a profound sense of shame and self-awareness. This "feeling of shame" forces her to confront her complicity in a world of lies and hypocrisy, reflecting Booth's concept of narrative intimacy⁵, where the reader gains access to the narrator's psychological state. Her unshakable shame signals a transformation: she can no longer remain detached from the systemic injustice she once ignored. The bustling streets and "newspapers ... crying out" symbolize the pervasive lies of society, now inescapable and impossible to ignore. The narrator's final act of "ramming [her] foot down on the accelerator as though in a hurry to run over the world" symbolizes the frustration and helplessness of confronting systemic violence. Her futile attempt to escape

⁵ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*

through speed mirrors the inner turmoil of realizing that Firdaus' truth cannot be outrun. This moment marks a shift in her relationship with the world – and the reader – forcing both to confront uncomfortable truths and reckon with their complicity in a system that punishes those who speak out. By embedding this passage within the broader narrative of *Woman at Point Zero*, Saadawi intensifies the exploration of truth's cost. Firdaus' sacrifice contrasts with the narrator's initial passivity, challenging readers to confront the implications of personal integrity in a world bent on destroying it. Firdaus' resistance is both heroic and tragic, revealing the devastating consequences of defying a system of lies while underscoring the transformative power of truth for those who confront it. El Saadawi's portrayal of the narrator's transformation in *Woman at Point Zero* reverberates the novel's core message: the personal cost of resistance is high, but silence and complicity are equally destructive. The narrator's shame and her confrontation with Firdaus' life force the reader to confront the uncomfortable realities of patriarchal and colonial oppression. Saadawi's narrative demands that, like the narrator, we face these truths and reckon with the consequences of choosing between complicity and resistance.

African women writers challenge dominant narratives of female identity by employing diverse narrative strategies that prompt reflection on the sociopolitical and cultural forces shaping women's lives. Through fragmented structures, shifting perspectives, and complex characters, they subvert the linear storytelling imposed by colonial and patriarchal systems. This creates space for readers to explore the complexities of female identity in postcolonial contexts. Drawing on Booth's "authorial audience," they complicate reader alignment, challenging simplistic constructions of gender and race. By transcending traditional narrative strategies, these writers invite readers to interrogate their positions within feminist and postcolonial frameworks, fostering a dynamic space for engagement and empathy.

Works Cited:

- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. New York, 1965.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Boyce Davies, Carol. *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. New York, 1994.
- El Saadawi, Nawal. *Woman at Point Zero*. Zed Books, 1983.
- Kuku, Damilare. *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad*. Short Story Day Africa, 2019.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." *Theory of Prose*. Archive Press, 1990, pp. 1–18.