

## NAMING AND THE EVOLVING CONDITION OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN IN *PERPÉTUE, WHO FEARS DEATH?* AND *AMERICANAH*

## EL ACTO DE NOMBRAR Y LA CONDICIÓN DE LA MUJER AFRICANA EN *PERPÉTUE, WHO FEARS DEATH?* Y *AMERICANAH*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper aims to study the condition of the African woman as it has evolved since the colonial period on the basis of three novels: *Americanah*, *Perpétue* and *Who fears death?* We suggest that there is a correlation between the way in which the authors depict the subjectivity of the protagonists of their novels, in accordance with the complexity of their identities, and the way in which the latter are named as well as the names they are given. From this point of view, naming appears to be one of the most efficient recourses the authors use in order to give symbolic weight and credibility to the portrayal of the protagonists of their novels.

**Key words:** African woman, subjectivity, naming, voice, *Americanah*, *Perpétue*, *Who fears death?*

### RESUMEN

El artículo tiene como objetivo estudiar la condición de la mujer africana tal como ha evolucionado desde el período colonial sobre la base de tres novelas: *Americanah*, *Perpétue*, y *Who fears death?* Sugerimos que existe una correlación entre la forma en que los autores representan la subjetividad

de los protagonistas de sus novelas, de acuerdo con la complejidad de sus identidades y la forma en que estos últimos reciben sus nombres, así como los nombres que reciben. Desde este punto de vista, el acto de dar un nombre parece ser uno de los recursos más eficientes que utilizan los autores para dar peso simbólico y credibilidad a la caracterización de los protagonistas de sus novelas.

**Palabras clave:** mujer africana, subjetividad, nominar, voz, *Americanah*, *Perpétue*, *Who fears death?*

Fecha de recepción: 29 de noviembre de 2023.

Fecha de aceptación: 29 de noviembre de 2023.

**Cómo citar:** Ambadiang, Theophile (2023): «Naming and the evolving condition of the african woman in *Perpétue, Who fears death?* and *Americanah*», en *Actio Nova: Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada*, monográfico 6: 113-131.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15366/actionova2023.m6.007>

## INTRODUCCIÓN

The paper discusses the condition of the African woman as it has evolved since the colonial period on the basis of three novels, one of them published in the aftermath of African independencies and the other in the first decade of this century. Our discussion suggests that the contextualization of the narratives from the point of view of identity and subjecthood correlates with the way in which their protagonists are portrayed and, furthermore, with the manner in which they are named and the names they are given. The protagonists of *Perpétue* and *Who fears death?* are portrayed so as to have a symbolic function, whereas their names carry meanings that depict their condition from different perspectives and, correspondingly, function as symbols of the African woman condition and more generally of Africa, imagined as a woman deprived of her voice or in the process of (re)conquering her voice. The simplification implied with respect to subjectivity in these novels is not possible in *Americanah*, however, because the subjectivity of the protagonist is irreducible due to the complexity of her identity. From this point of view, naming appears to be one of the most efficient recourses the authors use in order to give more symbolic weight and credibility to the portrayal of the protagonists of their novels.

After some considerations on the naming process and its implications from the point of view of alterity, we discuss its relationship with the portrayal of the main characters of the three novels as well as the effects of both processes with respect to the symbolic function intended by the authors for their main characters. In the third section we elaborate on the condition of the African woman as it is reflected in each of the narratives and, furthermore, briefly consider the latter together with an aim to grasp the way its evolution has proceeded since the colonial period. A brief conclusion sums up the most important observations of the analysis.

## 1. NAMING AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

An interesting factor from the point of view of intersubjectivity relates to the relevance of the process of naming, particularly in the African context (Anchimbe, 2011; Mulo Farenkia, 2011) On the one hand, it is generally the case that the birthname given to an individual is predictable only to a limited extent, as it depends on the social network -within or beyond the

family- in which the individuals who choose and give the name are involved. Thus, a mother or a father may name their child after any of the relatives or even a friend. The birthname given to a child results generally from an agreement between the elders involved in the process, mainly the mother and the father. African human names, moreover, correspond to nouns or verb forms and thus carry a meaning that, however, is not subject to a literal interpretation. This suggests that naming is a relevant part of social interaction in the sense that names carry social messages which reflect the intersubjective relationships within a network, since the name chosen in each case results either from a negotiation process between the one who chooses it and the one who is named after or from what the one who gives a name thinks about their relationship with the group. In other words, a name carries a more or less implicit message addressed to the members of a group based on interpersonal relationships (Anchimbe, 2011; Mulo Farenkia, 2011). Thus, depending on the name received, a child may, for instance, be the father or mother of their biological mother or father which means, from a social point of view, be their own grandfather or grandmother. It is not strange, therefore, to hear a father or a mother call their son or daughter «daddy» or «mummy» or to hear brothers and sisters call each other «brother-in-law» or «sister-in-law». This also explains why the nouns of some animals such as lions or panthers are used as names for humans.

On the other hand, besides their birthname an individual may also adopt or be given another name, generally a nickname or a pseudonym. Whereas (traditional) birthnames carry meanings generally relating to a defining feature, perceived, implied or intended, in the individual who receives a name that do not allow a literal interpretation, in this case, nicknames or pseudonyms generally carry a meaning based on what may be considered a defining or essential feature, real or intended, of either the individual who receives the nickname or the individual whose name is adopted, and thus send an explicit message to the members of a group. Names given to domestic animals such as dogs and even to some fruit trees also contain a meaning of this kind. In many cases, nicknames subsume what can be considered the essence of the entity associated with the original name, as the case with a nickname such as «Maradona» used in relation to a special skill at playing football, which may lend them a compensatory effect, as occurs oftentimes with the use of names such as «Santa Barbara», «Dallas» or «Petit Paris» in reference to places and sites whose essential characteristic has to do with squalor.

We contend that the titles of the novels discussed in this paper, *Perpétue, Who fears death?* and *Americanah*, which are also the names of their respective protagonists relate to such a process of naming and, moreover, that they contain each a meaning and a message of the kind just alluded to. As will noted in the paper, the effect of the naming process shows some variation in the three

novels, beginning with the title. Thus, the title of *Perpétue* has two parts, the second of which functions essentially as a gloss and thus is an equivalent of the first (Deltel, 1990), despite the presence of an additive conjunction between them: *Perpétue et l'habitude ou malheur* (*Perpetua and the habit of unhappiness*). In the case of the second novel, the English title is the translation of an Igbo verb-based enunciation («Onyesonwu») which is used in the narrative as the name of the protagonist. In *Americanah*, the name given to the protagonist has to do with the fact that she has been in America. In the three cases, the name, pseudonym or nickname contained in the title of the novel relates to content that may be considered essential in the narrative and, more specifically, condense the portrayal of the main character as a way to convert it into a symbol or give it a symbolic value in a sense that will be discussed below.

## 2. WHAT IS IN A TITLE? NAMING AND SYMBOLIC PORTRAYAL

As already noted, the titles of the three novels discussed in this paper are also the names of their protagonists. In the case of *Who fears death?* Onyesonwe may be considered as the birthname of the protagonist: it is a name given to her by her mother and, moreover, she has no other name in the novel. *Perpétue* may only be either a Christian name or a first name given to a girl together with an African birthname, or a pseudonym. The way in which the character is portrayed in the novel suggests that the title has more to do with a pseudonym than with a mere use of a Christian name. Lastly, *Americanah* has much of a nickname, as it refers to circumstances that are considered as descriptively specific to the person so named, as she differs from those who give her this name in «having been» («coming from») America. In this sense, these titles are consistent with the idea that the names included in them condense, albeit to a variable extent, symbolic representations of the individuals portrayed in the novels. This section focuses on the symbolic significance of the main characters of the novels and, specifically, on the condition of the African woman as depicted through each of them.

### 2.1 *PERPÉTUE ET L'HABITUDE DU MALHEUR* (MONGO BÉTI, 1974)

*Perpétue* is about the tragic fate of a young girl so named, due to the combined forces of backwards traditions and neocolonial evils in the context of an African (sub-Saharan) country. She is trapped by tradition which materializes through her mother and her drunkard brother, Martin.

Violence based on tradition affects her from the point of view of marriage, sexuality and procreation. She is forced to marry Edouard or, rather, is sold to him when she is a child, at the age of 14, despite her impassioned plea for time to have an opportunity to study and, when forced by her mother, to get used to the idea of marriage (Beti, 1974: 110). Afterwards she is sold, once more, by her husband who hopes to achieve professional advancement thereby. She is obliged to obey her mother by tradition, and her husband by tradition as well as Christian religion. Violence also results from the political circumstances that prevail in the country. Dictatorship, irresponsibility and political incompetence explain the serious problems which pervade the whole country and whose most significant consequences are evidenced in the educational and health systems. The confining effects of traditional and neocolonial violence are compounded by generalized corruption which conditions the lives of the masses through the actions of corrupt officials and politicians. The deleterious situation which results from these circumstances induces men to either rebel, as Essola, one of Perpétue's brother does, or to indulge in alcoholism as is the case with Martin, her other brother.

Without the protection of her brother Essola, imprisoned for political reasons, Perpétue finds herself destitute. Besides being innocent, she becomes powerlessness, a peculiar predicament in which all her efforts and projects abort. Her innocence and powerlessness deriving from her age and sex, in a tradition in which women and children are not listened to, is met with violence and mistreatment mostly on the part of her relatives. Hence, her suffering and despair in the face of the violence perpetrated by her mother and her husband, and of Martin's indifference. Hers is a life in which «on a toujours choisi pour elle» (*others have always decided on her behalf*; Beti, 1974: 66) in the sense of bargaining her destiny. The sharp contrast between the generalized and multiform violence and the corruption pervasive in the country on one the hand and, on the other, her age, her innocence and the generosity implicit in her life project gives to her life an aura that allows to consider her as prodigious («prodigieuse»; Beti, 1974: 66) or as an angel («un ange»; Beti, 1974: 51) whose implied fate is to be dedicated to sacrifice «vouée au sacrifice» (Beti, 1974: 98) or to be delivered bound hand and foot to her torturer «livrer pieds et poings liées à son tortionnaire»; Beti, 1974: 91), which makes of her life a *via crucis* (Beti, 1974: 48). Faced with this persistent fatality, Perpétue progressively loses the faith she had in herself, her ambition and her voice. Silence accentuates her condition as a victim and prisoner (Beti, 1974: 81), turning her into a living dead. Katri gives a vivid depiction of the predicament of Perpétue as a victim thus:

Trop tard, ma petite mère. Personne ne te consultera, n'y compte surtout pas. Ta mère t'a piégée. Nous sommes toujours piégées, et par les nôtres encore (*Too late, my little*

*mother. No one will consult you, don't count on it. Your mother set you up. We are still trapped, and even worse, by our own people;* Beti, 1974: 110)

The combination of innocence, suffering, nobility and victimhood together with the image of many of Perpétue's relatives as torturers suggests martyrdom. This, in turn, evokes the idea of a lamb which is living helplessly through its own sacrifice and, beyond, that of a martyr, a saint. From this point of view, the connection between the story of Perpétue's as related in the novel and the martyrdom of Saint Perpetua lies in what Ellerman (1990: 127) defines as *passio*: intense suffering. Another parallelism has to do with the fact that the martyr-story implies a witness (Ellerman, 1990: 127). The title of the novel accords with the evocation of Saint Perpetua, with the nuance that in the novel despair is added to the suffering. This is Perpétue's essence, which is consistent with her portrayal and, in more precise terms, with her symbolic role in the novel (Jick et al., 2015). Mongo Beti stresses the symbolic dimension of Perpétue in the following terms (Biakolo, 1979):

C'est un personnage auquel j'ai voulu donner une dimension symbolique [...]. Je pense que le nom Perpétue contient quelque chose de la fatalité, de la continuité dans la condition féminine [...] qui fait que tous les efforts de Perpétue [...] pour se libérer avortent toujours. [...] C'est cette espèce de désespoir que j'ai voulu signifier dans le mot et le monde de Perpétue. [...]

*(It's a character to which I wanted to give a symbolic dimension. I think that the name Perpétue contains something of fatality, of continuity in the feminine condition [...] which makes all of Perpétue's efforts [...] to free herself abort. It is this kind of despair that I wanted to signify in the word and the world of Perpétue.)*

As depicted through Perpétue, the condition of the African woman is that of a victim of both traditional and (neo)colonial evils and is very similar to that of a slave, although she is not declared as such and her suffering may be somewhat different. From this point of view, Mongo Beti's narrative is an indictment against the condition of the African woman in the decades following the independence of African countries. Because of Perpétue's symbolic function and representation, Mongo Beti's novel may be included in a broader discursive and intertextual space concerning the condition of the African woman alongside the other novels discussed in the paper.

## 2.2 WHO FEARS DEAD? (NNEDI OKORAFOR, 2010)

Whereas the title of Mongo Beti's novel is redundant due to the reduplication subsumed in it, the title of Okorafor's novel is based on the English translation of Onyesonwu, an Igbo

expression used in reference to the protagonist of the narrative wherein its meaning and use are explained. As the protagonist tells at the end of chapter one,

My mother named me Onyesonwu. It means «Who fears death?» She named me well. I was born twenty years ago, during troubled times.

A meaning more attuned to Onyesonwu's portrayal would be in the sense that «she is not afraid of death» or that «she does not fear death», which is the case when one asks either this kind of question either rhetorically or with respect to oneself.

The novel is about the rather long and perilous journey that Onyesonwu, the child of an Okeke woman and a Nuru warrior who assaults and rapes her, undertakes in order to confront and kill her biological father, and re-write the Great Book which naturalizes the power of the Nuru people over the Okeke people, thus freeing the latter from slavery. Being a child of rape in this context (*Ewu*), she is subjected to discrimination and violence based on certain physiological peculiarities. As the daughter of a sorceress, Najeeba, and a sorcerer warrior, Daib, her birth not only results from rape but also from a fight based on magic: her mother uses her magical powers to bear a daughter and not a son, thus overpowering Daib's pledge. She is also born with magical powers on the basis of which she can shift shapes. However, her powers as an *Eshu* are not sufficient to defeat her father, for which she needs the help of a mentor, sorcerer Aro, as well as of her boyfriend Mwita. Onyesonwu's birth as a result of rape and of a relationship based in subjugation in which Okeke are slaves of Nuru subsumes confining elements, typically originating in the past, that she inevitably has to challenge. Gender-based discrimination and the attendant sexual objectification have an even larger range, as Onyesonwu tells Mwita, who has justified Aro's reticence to including her among his apprentices based on her gender.

[..] we've been raised to feel that it's wrong to open our legs, even when we want to. We weren't brought up to be free as [...] you were. (Okorafor, 2010: 289)

Onyesonwu's identity subsumes at least three defining traits expressed in the following expressions: *Ewu*, Okeke, *Eshu*. On the other hand, her journey is narrated in a science fiction or Afrofuturist mode («organic fantasy» in the sense of Okorafor) which has much in common with magical realism insofar as it blurs the boundary between the perceptible and the imperceptible realms, often by means of (objects infused with) magical powers (*juju*; Ambadiang, in press). All these identity components, which may be reduced to ethnicity/race, gender and magical powers do not have the same relevance however, as magic overpowers the other features by having the power to mitigate or cancel differences based them. In more general terms, the way in which



Onyesonwu challenges the confining conditions imposed on her depends on the contexts and the dimension involved in each case. Thus, her challenges against gender stereotypes range from the impassioned and insistent vindication of her abilities, when Aro, her future mentor, initially refuses to include her among his apprentices based on her gender (Okorafor, 2010: 2), to the cancellation of the effects of genital mutilation, as she grows her clitoris back in order to enjoy sex before marriage, contrary to the disposition of the mutilation rite. With respect to procreation, as her mother can dispose her body to give birth to a female contrary to Daib's curse, Onyesonwu is also able to manipulate her body to conceive and bear a son after Mwitia is dead with whatever of him remains alive inside her (Okorafor, 2010: 398). In the case of race and gender-based violence, whereas her mother and other Okeke women cannot avoid assaults and rape, Onyesonwu's powers protect her from sexual violence. Apprenticeship with Aro allows her more powers still, so that she is able to control the forces of life and death, as when at the moment of conception, she not only kills males capable of impregnating women but causes nearby women to become pregnant. However, her most portentous feat has to do with the killing of her biological father and the re-writing of the Great Book.

The narrative thus features a change from the condition of Okeke and Ewu women as slaves devoid of sexual interiority from the point of view of tradition, due to the confining effects of genital mutilation and the association of women's sexual pleasure with prostitution (Okorafor, 2010: 241), as well as of ethnic conflicts, in which their bodies are naturalized as objects of rape or weapons of war, converting them into «walking dead» (Okorafor, 2010: 221), to that of a woman dreadful by her deeds and by her name, as she lets her attackers know, after chastising them and before shifting shape into a fearsome sphinx:

Next time you want to attack an Ewu woman, think my name: Onyesonwu. [...] and fear for your life. (Okorafor, 2010: 221)

As noted, the constraints confining Onyesonwu's life have to do with rape, genital mutilation, marriage, sexuality, racism and genocide. Correspondingly, her journey covers different spaces and conditions, and her story is about defying such confining and limiting elements, which implies overturning gender stereotypes, changing gender-power dynamics, as well as reframing relationships in general (Oku, 2021: 275). From this point of view, *Who fears death?* features a «narrative of resistance» (Dowdall, 2009: 275 quoted in Rathburn, 2018) which allows, by means of counterfactuals (Kwenya, 2022: 34-35) to challenge the idea of the female body as an (sexual) object and the need to control female sexuality. This way, Onyesonwu (and the female characters of the novel) cancel the physical objectification imposed on them and achieve sexual interiority and

subjectivity. In a sense, she not only overcomes the pervasive societal constraints put on her but also becomes a strong and powerful sovereign agent in full control of her life and destiny, which allows her to overpower even death, since she avoids permanent death by exercising her power to live beyond death or to outlive death in order to «take action» in order to right a wrong so as to «live in the very world she helped remake» (Okorafor, 2010: 416), as the peacock symbol suggests (Rathburn 2018: 14-16).

Onyesonwu challenges the confining factors in two ways: through her body, i.e. (physical) interaction and by re-writing the Great Book. To challenge them physically she resorts to the two resources that make up what is her essence: «change and defiance» (Okorafor, 2010: 416). The range of her defiance increases progressively from Ewu women (vindicated in her threat to her assailants) to all women,

All the women, Okeke and Nuru, found that something had changed about them. [...] Thousand of abilities. All bestowed upon women. There it was. Onye's gift. In the death of herself and her child, Onye gave birth to us all. This place will never be the same. Slavery here is over. (Okorafor, 2010: 413)

and then to all the population

If Onyesonwu had taken one last look below, to the south, [...] she'd have seen Nuru, Okeke, and two Ewu children in school uniforms playing in a schoolyard. To the east [...], she'd have seen black paved roads populated by men and women, Okeke and Nuru, riding scooters and carts pulled by camels. (Okorafor, 2010: 418)

Therefore, Onyesonwu death implies deep changes with respect to many of the confining factors originating in the past and endorsed by tradition and by the Great Book. Such changes concern the condition of the women as well as the gender-based relationships and, more generally, interpersonal relationship. As the preceding quotes from the novel suggest, a change in the condition of the women does not seem to be attainable without some change in men's agency.

### 2.3 AMERICANAH, "THE BEEN TOO" (CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, 2014)

In contrast to the titles of the preceding novels, «Americanah» is a pseudonym that underlines the cosmopolitan status as specifically relating to the circumstances of Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel, a young Nigerian woman so called because she «has been» (or «is coming from») America. The narrative shows interesting differences in the experience of characters such as Obinze or Aunt Uju based on the country, regime of residence, mobility, gender, and, more generally, condition or predicament. *Americanah* is about a female character growth along migration

and return processes in which belonging and gendered relations are negotiated on the basis of social features such as ethnicity, gender and class as mediated through love, hair, aesthetics and sexuality that Adichie interprets in essentially political terms (Reuter, 2015; Ndaka, 2020). In this context, the three main factors involved in identification processes have to do with race, origin, and class, as they materialize through nationality, culture, outward appearance and speech. The narrative focuses on Ifemelu and her boyfriend Obinze who emigrate, respectively, to the United States and the United Kingdom. Ifemelu leaves Nigeria when she is in a love relationship with Obinze, a young man who not only does not behave in the patriarchal manner so typical in his country and in Africa more generally, but also helps produce life-affirming gendered relationships (Ndaka, 2020: 5). Their separation, linked to the uncertain future of their country, opens Ifemelu to other relationships.

Upon her arrival in America, adaptation problems make her fall into a depression after a traumatic sexual encounter. Her first boyfriend after recovering from depression is Curt, a white man of a privileged and wealthy family whose mother considers him an adventurer and Ifemelu some kind of exotic game he has hunted. Ifemelu adopts the American style in her speech and hairdressing but, throughout this relationship, experiences another dimension of racism resulting from its combination with cultural differences and intimacy. Curt helps her to get a job and a green card, and she is amazed by his attitude which, among lavish gifts and exotic journeys, at times, makes her forget about racial differences. However, their relationship is constrained by the norms of white cultural order evidenced in Curt's obsessive possessiveness as well as the fact that he cannot understand her worries about racial relations, which makes her prefer silence although it may «cast a shadow over them both» (Ngozi Adichie, 2014: 294). The ensuing intercultural problems and the impossibility to fix them, makes her leave the relationship with Curt, who cannot give her more than «the gift of contentment and ease» (Ngozi Adichie, 2014: 200).

Ifemelu's second boyfriend, Blaine, is an African American intellectual of fascinating sophistication and humour whose excessive expectations with respect to racial solidarity progressively bracket out their relationship and their gender-based experiences. In contrast to the preceding relationship in which racial differences are the biggest obstacle, in the present case racial identity creates the illusion of a shared cultural background, as evidenced in the effects Blaine's use of certain pronouns has in terms of inclusion and exclusion: «His use of "they" suggested an "us", which would be both of them» (Ngozi Adichie, 2014: 177). This illusion gives rise to misunderstandings that make Ifemelu leave the relationship with Blaine upon divergences with respect to the style and content of her blog and to her attitude regarding complex (intra)racial

issues. This separation coincides with a progressive loss of interest in her blog that is shifting towards an increasingly commercial resource (Ngozi Adichie, 2014: 303-306) and a need to return to Nigeria where she opens after some time a new blog, *The small redemption of Lagos*, «about what she cares about» (Ngozi Adichie, 2014: 411).

Three main factors have confining effects on Ifemelu: race, gender and African origin. Although two of them also affect men, the complexities resulting from intersectionality is compounded, in the case of women by the inclusion of more specific aspects of race relating to hairdressing and beauty, for instance. Her intimate relationship with two American boyfriends makes her discover racism, of which she is not aware until her arrival in America, in its more complex and subtle dimensions, as both intend to condition either her appearance in the case of Curt, or her attitude with respect to intra-American racial issues and to her ideology regarding the form and content of her blog in the case of Blaine. Ifemelu challenges what these relationships entail in terms of feminine relegation and subservience by means of social agency and discourse or voice. Social agency materializes through her relationships, essentially with her two American boyfriends, whereas her autonomous voice is heard through her blog. Due to the intersectionality inherent in her identity and the complexity of her subjecthood, Ifemelu must challenge in an adaptative fashion the imposed ideas and criteria relating to beauty, hair, race or gendered relationships. Moreover, the fact that this challenge ranges over countries that are different from the point of view of their cultures and racial demography suggests that the way she copes with these impositions depends on the context. On the other hand, because of the centrality of heterosexual relations, gender plays a crucial role in the narrative. This notwithstanding, the construction of Ifemelu's voice can only proceed in a 'segmented' and multimodal fashion. Thus, although her resistance materializes through her own body and through her blog, this occurs differently in the cases of Curt and Blaine, in comparison to her relationship with Obinze. With Curt, Ifemelu challenges constructions around race, culture and gender, whereas in the case of Blaine she is concerned with culture and gender. However, this does not mean that the other dimensions or sections of her identity are overlooked, only that they are less salient and entails less urgency than those just mentioned. With gender as a mediating instance, she uses race to confront culture in one case and inversely in the other.

### 3. THE EVOLVING CONDITION OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN

#### 3.1 FROM THE CONDITION OF «LIVING DEAD» TO DEFIANCE

It has been shown in the preceding section how differently the protagonists are portrayed in the three novels discussed in the paper. This follows from the multiple differences between the novels, two of which are of interest for our discussion. The first one has to do with the narrative mode. As a futurist or science fiction narrative *Who fears death?* allows space for exploring counterhegemonic discourses and challenges that are not available in the other novels in which realism prevails. The other difference concerns the contextualization within the narrative of the subjectivity of its protagonist, i.e. the way subjectivity unfolds in the novel. In comparison to the other novels, *Americanah* is a more segmented narrative because of the irreducible complexity of Ifemelu's subjectivity and identity. Beyond these differences, the three novels offer together a vision of the condition of the African woman since the colonial period. This condition evolves from a starting point depicted in *Perpétue* in the form of an innocent and promising young girl who is subjected to martyrdom as a result of the destructive effects of traditional and neocolonial forces. In this process she progressively loses her subjectivity and voice, as evidenced in her progressive introversion and lately her silence. *Perpétue* dies as a lamb, as if she had never had a voice, and her story is written by her brother Essola who, as is the case in martyr stories, acts as a witness, thus giving her a voice, being her voice by speaking on her behalf in order to vindicate her subjectivity. This way, *Perpétue's* death loses part of what it may entail in terms of defeat to become, as is also the case in martyr-stories, a victory, albeit only a moral one.

*Perpétue* dies but the story of her martyrdom as told by her brother is a vindication of her life and condition and of the condition of the African woman, her predicament in a context in which women and children are not listened to or are silenced (stripped of voice or voiceless), which means they are deprived from their subjectivity and subjecthood. *Perpétue's* martyrdom (*passio* in the sense of Ellerman, 1990) makes her stand in sharp contrast with all other feminine characters in the novel, in consistence with the symbolic relevance of her portrayal, her figure and her name.

In *Who fears death?* Onyesonwu is the focus of a narrative in which the depiction of her condition is incomplete if other feminine characters are not taken into account, particularly her mother. Beyond the mother-daughter relationship, there is a line of continuity between these two characters from the point of view of magical powers. Indeed, Onyesonwu overpowers her mother, but she also receives part of her powers through her. Furthermore, she is born a girl, against her

biological father's pledge, as a result of magical powers her mother resorts to, in accordance with her subjectivity. However, her mother's agency is constrained by the comparatively limited range of her powers and her ethnic belonging, a consequence of which is rape, which turns her into a sexual object, a walking dead or a person devoid of voice and subjectivity. Onyesonwu's powers enables her to repel a group of men who intend to assault her and thus prevents her from experiencing her mother's fate. The correlation that occurs between voice and power in the case of Onyesonwu suggests that her mother is indeed stripped of her voice or devoid of voice, whereas Onyesonwu's story is in a very strong sense that of a conquest of voice, which is in accordance with her name. In effect, in one of the most spectacular occasions in which she declines her identity and declares her subjecthood, Onyesonwu, after shape-shifting into a sphinx roars at her assailants recalling her name (Okorafor, 2010: 221). In case, as we contend here, voice is supposed to materialize in a roar, it is also an attribute of her unborn daughter whom she hears rage and roar inside her as she is being tortured to death (Okorafor, 2010: 417).

Interestingly, Onyesonwu's death has beneficial effects essentially and firstly for women and then to all the society, as it implies the end of slavery and a profound change in the place, even though many Nuru from «below» who do not acknowledge that «This place will never be the same» are «still waiting to wet their tongues with Onyesonwu's blood» (Okorafor, 2010: 419). In more precise terms, Onyesonwu's death is a gift not only for women, but also for Okeke and for Nuru and, in general, for the society of which they are all part, which refers essentially to care and conviviality. The details of Onyesonwu's gift provide some precisions regarding gendered relations. On the one hand, we are told that women have received multifarious magical powers from Onyesonwu who, with her death, have given birth to all the women. Insofar as this birth is symbolic, it may only concern their condition and subjectivity, which implies something as a renaissance from the point of view of voice and subjecthood, although magical powers are the recourses to be used against objectification and subservience. Another change concerns the racial relations. In this case, conviviality prevails in all realms, to the exception of those Nuru who do not believe that things have changed and intend to continue silencing the subjectivity of the women and of their subjugated neighbours. Onyesonwu's predicament depicts the condition of the African woman, and her voice is thus the voice of all African women and, beyond, of all African subjects who are silenced due to subjugation.

As already noted, *Americanah* differs from the other novels because of the effect of intersectionality. Although Ifemelu's story stands in contrast with those of the other feminine characters in the novel, it also comprises many contrasting experiences. This is a result of the

complex way in which her identity and subjectivity are displayed throughout the narrative. Correspondingly, she challenges her confining circumstances in a segmented fashion. This impinges on her voice which, by way of consequence, materializes variably. If, as proposed above, voice is a manifestation of subjectivity and even subjecthood, then it may be suggested that Ifemelu's subjectivity entails some degree of inconsistency, which means that her identity results from a construction process that is continuous. In the more frustrating moment of her relationship with Curt, the blog functions as her voice (she loses her physiological voice), and when her relationship with Blaine ends, she closes the blog, only to open a new one when she returns to Nigeria. In her case, therefore, voice may be lost and (re)conquered. This implies the existence of multiple subjectivities in one and the same individual and the necessity to coordinate them for action.

Ifemelu's challenge focuses on the confining effects of relegation and subservience. She deploys against them a non-normative femininity that has disruptive effects on her relationships and, albeit from an essentially discursive point of view, on the society in general. This way, she destabilises hegemonic representations that idealise womanhood while naturalizing the attributes, spaces and roles imposed on women (Ndaka, 2020). Moreover, by subsuming belonging and care, her femininity implies critical thinking and consciousness, which induces her to engage with more general categories such as social inequality or subjugation (Reuter, 2015: 13). As in the case of Onyesonwu, whose femininity also destabilises her society, through her voice or subjectivity work, Ifemelu is able to find a self-defined position as a subject, defined by her own autonomous voice (Reuter 2015: 17). This brings closer the relationship of these two characters with the condition of the African woman, beyond the differences relating to the genre of each novel.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to discuss the condition of the African woman as it has evolved since the colonial period. The study is based on three novels published in the aftermath of African independencies and in the first decade of the current century. Our discussion suggests that, although the novels approach the condition of the African woman in diverse ways as well as from different perspectives and based on contrasting interests, they depict complementary dimensions of her predicament on the basis of the subjectivity of the protagonist of each of them as it is deployed in the narrative. In none of the novels is the feminine voice considered an



endowment of women or as something natural to them. Perpétue loses her voice by being silenced or not being heard, Onyesonwu has to conquer her voice, whereas in the case of Ifemelu voice is something that may be (partly) lost, recovered and, above all, modulated. The last situation is typical of cosmopolitan subjects whose mobility allows them to interact with cultural others. This contrast is consistent with the observation that only Perpétue and Onyesonwu have a symbolic function in the corresponding novels, besides accounting for the symbolic meanings of the names which make their titles. In this sense, Perpétue symbolizes the condition of the African woman as acknowledged by Mongo Beti, a feature that may also be applied to Onyesonwu according to our discussion. Furthermore, Mongo Beti and Okorafor extend this symbolic function of their respective characters to Africa, imagined as a feminine figure which has (re)conquer or (re)construct her voice, identity and subjectivity, something that is less plausible in the case of a more fragmented subjectivity as the one portrayed in *Americanah*.



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SSRN:<https://ssrn.com/abstract=2808396> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2808396>



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