African Literature in English

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Imprint

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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How to Use This Book

This book is a study companion, not a replacement for the novels, poems, and plays it introduces. Its purpose is to give you a map, a method, and the confidence to read the works themselves.

Read each chapter in order the first time. Note the learning aims at the start: they tell you what you should be able to do when you finish. Work slowly through the worked example in each chapter. It shows a teacher thinking aloud — noticing a detail, asking a question about it, connecting it to a larger idea, and supporting the point with evidence from the text or from its history. Then try the exercises before you read the answer guidance. The guidance is not a single correct answer to memorise. It is a model of good reasoning that you can compare with your own.

Keep a notebook beside you. Write down names, dates, and terms, but also write down your own responses. African literature in English often asks the reader to listen carefully: to a narrator who may not explain everything, to a proverb that carries an argument, to a silence where a history has been broken. Your questions are part of the reading.

A note on language. Many of the writers in this book grew up speaking one or more African languages and learned English at school, at work, or in a colonial administration. When they chose to write in English, they did not simply accept the language as they found it. They bent it, seasoned it, and made it carry rhythms, images, and ways of thinking from home. Learning to notice how they do that is one of the great pleasures of this field.

Chapter One: What Is African Literature in English?

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- define African literature in English in your own words;
- explain why language choice has been debated by African writers;
- distinguish between place of birth, subject matter, and audience when deciding whether a work belongs in this field;
- use the terms oral tradition, colonial language, and appropriation accurately.

1.1 A Working Definition

African literature in English is writing — novels, poems, plays, essays, life stories, and short fiction — produced by African writers, or writers of African heritage working closely with African experience, using the English language as their main medium.

That sentence sounds simple, and every part of it has been argued about. Who counts as an African writer? Someone born on the continent? Someone living in London, Toronto, or New York whose parents came from Accra or Yaoundé? Must the work be about Africa? What about a writer born in Africa who writes only about life in Europe? There is no single examination answer, and good students learn to state the definition they are using and then test it against difficult cases.

For the purposes of this book we use a generous, practical definition: if a writer's formation, community, and imaginative concerns are substantially African, and the work enters into conversation with African histories and readers, it belongs in our discussion, wherever the writer now lives. This lets us include diaspora writing without pretending that exile and home are the same experience. In an essay, say which definition you are using. Clarity is more persuasive than a rigid rule.

1.2 Why English? A Language With a History

English arrived in most of Africa through trade, mission schools, and colonial government. It was the language of the examination, the office, the law court, and often the only language shared by people from different regions of a new nation. That history gives English a double character in African writing.

On one side, English can feel like an imposed language — connected to punishment at school for speaking a mother tongue, to officials who did not understand local life, and to books in which Africans appeared as background figures in someone else's story.

On the other side, English offered reach. A novel in English could be read in Lagos, Nairobi, Lusaka, and London in the same season. It could answer colonial accounts in the

very language in which those accounts had travelled the world. It could bring together readers who shared no other tongue.

Writers have responded in different ways. Some have argued that African writers should write primarily in African languages, building audiences at home first and letting translation follow. Others have argued that English, now spoken and reshaped by millions of Africans, is itself an African language in practice, provided the writer makes it bear the weight of local experience. Many writers do both across a career: publishing in more than one language, translating their own work, or mixing languages within a single text.

As a reader, do not treat this debate as a contest with one winner. Treat it as a question each writer answers in the work itself. Ask: What does English make possible here? What does it strain to say? Where do you hear another language pressing through the English — in a proverb, a pattern of repetition, a form of polite address, or a joke that only works if you know the home culture?

1.3 Oral Tradition Is Not a Preface — It Is a Living Art

Students sometimes describe oral tradition as what came before real literature. That is a mistake. Oral art — praise poetry, folktales, riddles, proverbs, epics, songs for work and mourning and celebration — is literature, made with sophisticated technique and carried in memory by skilled performers. Written African literature did not replace it. It grew alongside it, borrowed from it, and sometimes argued with it.

Notice these oral resources when you read:

- **The proverb as argument.** A proverb is rarely decoration. It can summarise a moral position, allow a speaker to criticise indirectly, or show that a character is drawing on communal wisdom — or hiding behind it.
- **The tale within the tale.** A story told by a character can comment on the main action, warn a listener, or offer a second version of events.
- **Repetition and variation.** A repeated phrase can mark rhythm, create suspense, or show a small change that matters.
- **The audience inside the text.** Narrators may address listeners directly, ask them to judge, or leave a story open for discussion, as a performer would.
- **Naming and praise.** Names, titles, and praise epithets can carry history and expectation. A character may struggle to live up to, or escape from, what they are called.

1.4 Themes You Will Meet Again and Again

Themes are not a shopping list to spot mechanically, but certain concerns return because the histories behind them are real: the encounter between local custom and colonial rule; the making and breaking of nations after independence; the city and the village pulling a young person in two directions; education as both opportunity and estrangement; mothers, fathers, and ancestors as moral presences; corruption and the abuse of power; migration and return; faith, old and new; and the land itself as livelihood, memory, and contested right.

When you write about a theme, always tie it to a choice the writer made: a scene, an image, a point of view, a ending that refuses comfort. A theme statement without evidence is an opinion. A theme traced through evidence becomes analysis.

Worked Example: Reading a Definition Against a Hard Case

Question: A novelist born in Cameroon, educated in Yaoundé, now living in Canada, writes in English a novel set in both Yaoundé and Montreal about a daughter caring for an ageing mother. Is this African literature in English?

A model approach: Begin with your definition. Under the practical definition used in this book, yes: the writer's formation is Cameroonian, the imaginative concerns join Cameroon and its diaspora, and half the action and much of the moral world belong to Yaoundé. Then complicate your answer honestly. A narrower definition requiring residence in Africa would exclude the book, and that exclusion would reveal a weakness: it would cut off much writing about migration, which is itself a central African experience of our time. Conclude by saying what your inclusion lets you study — here, how care, duty, and distance are imagined across two homes. Notice the shape of this answer: definition, application, difficulty, reasoned conclusion. Use that shape in examinations.

Exercises

1. Write your own one-sentence definition of African literature in English, then name one work or kind of work it might wrongly exclude.
2. Give two reasons a writer might choose English and two reasons a writer might choose an African language first.
3. Choose a proverb you know from your own community. Explain in a paragraph how it could do argumentative work in a story, not merely decorate it.
4. Explain the difference between saying a text is influenced by oral tradition and saying it is unsophisticated.

Answer Guidance

5. A strong answer states a clear rule about writer, language, and concern, and then tests it. For example, a definition centred only on birthplace might exclude a second-generation diaspora writer whose work is in deep conversation with a home country. Naming the exclusion shows critical thinking.
6. For English: reach across regions and countries; access to publishing and examinations; the ability to answer colonial accounts in their own language; a shared national medium. For an African language first: intimacy and precision of home expression; building a local reading audience; preserving the language as a literary resource; resisting the idea that serious thought must happen in a European language. Good answers can respect both choices.
7. Look for an explanation of function: the proverb might let an elder rebuke a young person without naming them, or let a narrator summarise why a character's pride is dangerous. If your paragraph only translates the proverb, develop it further by placing it in a scene.
8. Influence describes specific techniques — tale-within-tale, direct address, proverb, repetition — chosen for effect. Unsophisticated is a judgement about quality, and oral art can be highly sophisticated in structure, memory, and performance. Keep the two ideas separate.

Chapter Two: Early Voices — Life Writing and the First Printed Books

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- place early African writing in English in its historical setting;
- explain why life writing — autobiography and the slave narrative — mattered so much at the start of this tradition;
- analyse a short public-domain excerpt for voice, audience, and purpose;
- describe how early writers used English to claim education, faith, and full humanity against systems that denied them.

2.1 Before the Novel, the Testimony

Long before the modern African novel, Africans were writing in English to testify. Letters, petitions, sermons, newspaper pieces, and life stories were weapons in arguments about slavery, freedom, and who would be believed. A formerly enslaved writer who published a book was doing something radical: presenting himself in print as an author — a reasoning, remembering person — in a world where law had treated him as property.

These texts were often published with supporting documents and introductions by editors, because the reading public was encouraged to doubt that an African could have written such a book. When you read early life writing, watch for this pressure. The writer must tell a personal story and, at the same time, prove that the story deserves a hearing.

2.2 Olaudah Equiano and The Interesting Narrative

Olaudah Equiano, who also used the name Gustavus Vassa, published his life story in London near the end of the eighteenth century. In his own account, he was born in what is now south-eastern Nigeria, kidnapped as a child, carried across the Atlantic, enslaved, and eventually able to purchase his freedom. He worked at sea, became involved in the movement to abolish the slave trade, and wrote a book that was read widely and reprinted many times.

Modern scholars have debated details of his birthplace because some records suggest a different origin. That debate is worth knowing, but it does not erase the book's importance: as a work of literature and testimony it gave English readers a first-person African account of capture, the Middle Passage, enslavement, literacy, faith, and freedom, written with deliberate rhetorical skill.

Read the short excerpt below. It is from a public-domain work.

> *"I was born, in the year 1745, in a charming fruitful vale, named Essaka, in the kingdom of Benin, situated in the distance of Guinea."*
>
> *— Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (public-domain work, first published in the late eighteenth century)*

Notice what the opening does. It gives a date, a place, and a landscape described with affection — fruitful, charming. Before the violence of capture enters the story, the reader is asked to see a home: ordered, valued, and loved. That order matters to the whole book. Slavery is not presented as the rescue of a person from emptiness. It is presented as the tearing of a person from a world.

Equiano also writes carefully about learning to read and write. Literacy in his narrative is practical, spiritual, and political at once. It helps him work, it opens the Bible to him, and it eventually lets him address the public in his own name. When later African writers describe a child's hunger for school, or the danger and promise of the book, they are working in a tradition Equiano helped to found.

2.3 Mission Schools, Newspapers, and New Readers

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mission and government schools spread English literacy unevenly across the continent. Their purposes were their own — conversion, administration, and the training of clerks and teachers — but students made more of the tools than the institutions intended. They wrote letters to newspapers, founded debating societies, kept diaries, composed hymns and poems, and argued about marriage customs, land, taxation, and chiefs and councils in print.

Newspapers deserve special attention in your study. In many towns the newspaper was the first regular home of African writing in English: short, argumentative, close to daily life, and addressed to a local public the writer could picture. Editorials and letters columns trained both writers and readers in a new kind of public argument. If you enjoy the essay and the pamphlet as forms, look here. Not all literature arrives between hard covers.

2.4 What Early Writing Teaches Us About Reading

Three habits will serve you with early texts.

First, ask who helped the text into print and why. An editor's introduction, a subscription list, or a mission press imprint is part of the story of the book.

Second, respect the conventions of the time without being trapped by them. Early life writers often use the language of Christian conversion or of respectable self-

improvement because that was the language their audience honoured. Inside those conventions, individual observation and quiet resistance are often present.

Third, do not measure an early text only by whether it sounds modern. Measure it by what it made possible: a claim to authorship, a record of a community, a sentence in which an African narrator says I and expects to be believed.

Worked Example: Analysing Equiano's Opening Strategy

Passage focus: the opening sentence quoted in section 2.2.

Step one — observe. The sentence supplies a birth year, a named valley, a kingdom, and a region. It is precise, like the opening of a legal deposition or a ship's log.

Step two — ask why. A writer whose truthfulness was likely to be challenged begins with checkable particulars. Precision is a defence.

Step three — notice the feeling. The adjectives are warm. The valley is charming and fruitful. Precision and affection work together: this was a real place, and it was good.

Step four — connect. The opening therefore prepares the moral argument of the whole narrative. What slavery destroyed can only be understood if the reader first sees what existed. In your own essays, imitate this movement: observation, question, feeling and form together, larger meaning.

Exercises

9. Why did life writing matter so much in the early history of African literature in English? Give three reasons.
10. In the Equiano excerpt, what is the effect of describing his birthplace as charming and fruitful before any account of capture?
11. Name two kinds of short writing, besides books, through which early African writers in English reached readers.
12. A classmate says an editor's introduction to an early text is not worth reading. Argue for or against, in a short paragraph.

Answer Guidance

13. Strong reasons include: it claimed authorship and full humanity in print; it provided first-person evidence in the debate over slavery; it modelled literacy as a path to public voice; and it created a precedent and an audience for later fiction and poetry. Any three, explained, will do well.
14. The description establishes a valued home and an ordered society, so capture appears as loss and violence rather than rescue. It also invites the distant reader to imagine

the place with respect. Answers that mention both the emotional and the argumentative effect are strongest.

15. Newspaper editorials and letters, petitions, sermons, pamphlets, and hymns are all acceptable. Newspapers are the most important example for building a local reading public.
16. A good defence of reading the introduction: it reveals the conditions of publication, the doubts the writer faced, and how the book was framed for its first audience — all of which shape interpretation. A good argument against would need to show that the introduction distorts the text; simply calling it boring earns little.

Chapter Three: The Novel Finds Its Voice

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe, in your own words, the achievement of the best-known mid-twentieth-century African novels in English;
- explain how novelists reshaped English with proverb, idiom, and local patterns of speech;
- analyse a novel's treatment of cultural encounter without reducing it to a simple contest of good and bad;
- discuss what changed when independence gave way to disillusion.

A note on quotation in this chapter: The novels discussed here are still in copyright. They are therefore taught in this book by summary, theme, and analysis in our own words. No passages from them are reproduced. Read the novels themselves — that is where their language lives.

3.1 A Story Told From Inside

For generations, most English-language fiction set in Africa was written by outsiders, and African characters were often seen from a distance — as servants, threats, curiosities, or symbols. The great change of the mid-twentieth century was a change of standpoint. African novelists began to narrate their own communities from inside: the village meeting, the family compound, the schoolroom, and the mission station rendered by someone who knew how people there actually spoke, joked, mourned, and decided.

The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe is the name most associated with this change. His first novel, published in the late nineteen-fifties, tells the story of a proud wrestling champion and farmer in an Igbo community whose life is broken by personal fear, communal conflict, and the arrival of colonial government and a new religion. Told in our own words, its achievement is threefold. First, it presents pre-colonial Igbo society as a complete civilisation — with law, art, religion, and debate — not as a backdrop. Second, it refuses to make any side simple: the community has wisdom and cruelty; the newcomers bring both genuine faith and destructive arrogance; the hero has greatness and a fatal rigidity. Third, its English is deliberately seasoned with Igbo proverb and idiom, so that the language of the telling itself enacts the culture being told about.

When you study this novel, follow the proverbs. They are the community thinking aloud. Notice, too, how the narrative voice can move between a storyteller's warmth and a historian's distance. That double movement — intimate and judging at once — became a model for many who followed.

3.2 Other Roads the Novel Took

The novel in English did not travel one road only.

In Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o began by writing in English novels about the land, the emergency years of anti-colonial struggle, and the hopes and betrayals that followed independence. His early fiction asks what freedom means when the land and the school and the church have all been battlegrounds. Later, as you learned in Chapter One, he made the famous decision to write his fiction first in Gikuyu — a decision best understood not as a rejection of his earlier readers but as an argument about who literature is for first.

In Ghana, novelists explored the new nation's politics and the weary comedy of corruption, following civil servants, teachers, and travellers through offices and bus stations where grand promises met daily frustration. In southern Africa, writers under racist minority rule used the novel and the short story to record townships, passes, prisons, and the interior cost of humiliation — and also love, humour, and stubborn dignity under pressure.

Across these regions, watch for three recurring novelistic choices:

- **The educated returnee.** A character comes home from school or abroad and sees the village with new, sometimes unfair, eyes. The device lets the novel stage an argument between generations.
- **The meeting and the market.** Public scenes where many voices contend — councils, funerals, markets, church gatherings — let the novelist show a society debating itself.
- **The open or wounded ending.** Many of these novels refuse a tidy resolution, because the historical questions they raise were not resolved. Learn to read an unresolved ending as a meaning, not a failure.

3.3 After Independence: From Celebration to Disillusion

Independence, when it came country by country, brought real joy and real expectation. Within a few years, much fiction darkened. Coups, one-party states, stolen elections, and wars entered the novel. The enemy was no longer only the departing colonial power; it was also the new elite at home — the minister with the imported car, the party official with the locked food store.

This shift matters for your essays. Do not write as if African fiction stopped at the moment of cultural assertion. Its second great subject is accountability: writers holding their own leaders, and their own communities, to the promises of liberation. Satire sharpens in this period. So does a new kind of hero — not the champion of the clan but the teacher, nurse, clerk, or mother trying to stay honest inside a dishonest system.

3.4 How to Write About a Novel You Cannot Quote in Class Notes

Because the novels in this chapter are in copyright, your own study notes should do what this chapter does: paraphrase scenes accurately, name the chapter or episode, and analyse. In an examination you may of course refer closely to the set text in front of you under your institution's rules. The discipline to practise now is precision in summary. A vague summary hides vague reading. If you can retell a turning point exactly — who was present, what was decided, what it cost — you are ready to analyse it.

Worked Example: Analysing Cultural Encounter Without Taking Easy Sides

Task: An essay prompt asks: "The community in Achebe's first novel is destroyed only by colonialism. Discuss."

A model approach: Begin by granting what is true in the statement. Colonial courts, prisons, and the new religion do break the community's ability to judge its own affairs, and the novel's final pages make the cost plain. Then test the word only. The novel has already shown internal fractures: a hero whose fear of weakness drives him to an act his own religion condemns; disputes over how to receive strangers; converts drawn partly by genuine conviction and partly by exclusion from the old order. The community is not a flawless whole struck from outside; it is a living society with tensions that the colonial intrusion exploits and worsens. Conclude with a refined claim: colonialism is the decisive destructive force, but the novel's greatness lies in showing a society complex enough to have its own arguments — which is precisely why its breaking is a tragedy and not a fable. This structure — grant, test a single strong word, refine — will strengthen almost any literature essay.

Exercises

17. In your own words, give three achievements of Achebe's first novel as described in this chapter. Do not quote the novel.
18. What is the educated returnee device, and what argument does it allow a novelist to stage?
19. Explain how fiction changed in tone after independence, and give two reasons for the change.
20. Why is an unresolved ending sometimes a meaning rather than a weakness? Answer with reference to the kind of historical questions these novels raise.

Answer Guidance

21. Acceptable achievements: rendering a pre-colonial society as a complete civilisation from inside; refusing simple sides for community, newcomers, or hero; and

reshaping English with proverb and idiom so the medium enacts the culture. Credit any three explained points in the student's own words.

22. A character returns home after schooling or travel and sees familiar life with changed eyes. It stages the argument between generations, between custom and new knowledge, and between loyalty and criticism — often inside one family.
23. The tone moved from celebration and cultural assertion toward satire, weariness, and disillusion, because independence governments in several countries produced coups, corruption, and one-party rule, and writers turned to holding home leaders accountable. Economic disappointment and war are also creditable reasons.
24. Where the underlying history — land, power, reconciliation — remains unsettled, a tidy ending would falsify the subject. The open ending invites the reader to continue the judgement the novel began, and signals honesty about an unfinished history.

Chapter Four: Poetry — From the Spoken Word to the Printed Page

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe how oral performance shaped written African poetry in English;
- read a poem for voice, image, and address — who speaks, to whom, and to what end;
- explain the appeal and the limits of protest poetry;
- compare a praise poem's public function with a lyric poem's private meditation.

4.1 The Poem That Is Also an Event

In many African traditions a poem is not first of all a text on a page. It is an event: a praise singer before a chief, mourners at a funeral, workers keeping time, children trading riddles, a congregation answering a leader's line. Performance teaches written poets habits that remain visible in print — direct address, call and response, refrain, lists that accumulate power, and a sense that the audience may answer back.

When a written poem uses a refrain, do not call it repetition and move on. Ask what changes each time the line returns. A refrain after a new stanza of loss does not mean the same thing it meant at the start. The words are the same; the weight is different. That difference is often the poem.

4.2 Finding a Voice in a Second Tongue

Early published poets in English sometimes wrote in borrowed costumes — imitating the diction and landscapes of English verse they had studied at school. The interesting story is how quickly poets began to make English answer to local ground: the harmattan and the rains instead of daffodils; the market, the lorry park, and the compound instead of the village green; ancestors and local spirits treated with the seriousness other poetries reserved for classical gods.

Christopher Okigbo, the Nigerian poet killed in the civil war of the late nineteen-sixties, is often studied for the opposite-seeming quality: a dense, musical, highly allusive style that joins local ritual imagery to wide reading in several traditions. His work reminds students that African poetry is not required to be simple to be authentic. Difficulty, in his hands, is a form of ceremony — the reader is initiated gradually, as one would be at a shrine, and not everything is explained to the outsider.

Other poets chose plainness as their ceremony: short lines, ordinary speech, and everyday objects made luminous by attention. Neither road is more African. Learn to describe what each poet's style does rather than ranking poets by how familiar their imagery feels.

4.3 Protest and Witness

Where people have lived under colonial rule, military government, or racist minority regimes, poetry has served as witness. A poem can smuggle a report past a censor, memorialise a prisoner whose name may not be printed in a newspaper, or give a crowd words it can chant together. South African poets under apartheid, and poets writing through wars and dictatorships elsewhere, made the lyric carry public weight.

Protest poetry has a known risk: the message can flatten the music, until the poem is a slogan with line breaks. The best witness poetry avoids this by staying concrete — a named street, a mother's hands, a particular morning — so that the political claim grows out of witnessed life. When you evaluate a protest poem, ask two questions together: What does it say? And what does its language make you feel and notice that a pamphlet would not? A poem that answers only the first question has done half its work.

4.4 Women Poets and the Intimate Lyric

Women poets in English have widened the field's subjects and its music: childbirth and child loss, the economics of a household, desire and its dangers, the politics of the body, friendship between women, and the quiet heroism of keeping a family fed and schooled. Some write in the voices of grandmothers and market women; some in a spare modern lyric; many move between public and intimate registers in a single collection. When you read them, resist treating the domestic as small. In these poems the household is often where national history is actually paid for.

Worked Example: Reading a Refrain

Situation: You are given, in class, a poem built on a returning line in which a speaker addresses the sea, and each stanza adds a new departure — fishermen, traders, exiles, students leaving to study.

A model approach: Do not summarise stanza by stanza. Instead, track the refrain's changing weight. At first the address to the sea may sound like praise: the sea as road and provider. After the stanza of exiles, the same words darken: the road that provides also removes. After the students' departure, the line may hold both hope and cost at once. Your essay can then argue that the poem's meaning lives in this accumulation — the sea, and the refrain, come to contain a whole history of leaving. Support each stage with one concrete image from the relevant stanza. This method — follow one formal feature and show its meaning grow — produces stronger poetry essays than retelling content.

Exercises

25. Name four habits written African poetry in English has learned from oral performance, and explain one of them in detail.
26. Why is it wrong to say a difficult, allusive poem is therefore less African? Answer with reference to the poet discussed in this chapter.
27. State the risk of protest poetry and the quality that saves the best examples from it.
28. A refrain returns unchanged three times in a poem. Explain how its meaning can still change each time.

Answer Guidance

29. Direct address; call and response; refrain; accumulating lists; proverbs and praise epithets; the audience invited to judge. A detailed explanation might show how call and response makes reading communal rather than solitary, distributing the poem's authority between speaker and answerers.
30. Because authenticity is not a style. The poet discussed built a ceremonial difficulty from local ritual joined to wide reading; initiation and gradual understanding are themselves rooted in the cultures he drew on. Judging by surface familiarity mistakes the reader's comfort for the poem's belonging.
31. The risk is that message flattens music into slogan. The saving quality is concreteness — witnessed, particular detail from which the political feeling grows — together with formal control of rhythm and image.
32. Because the context around the line has changed. Each new stanza adds experience, so the returning words are heard against more loss, hope, or knowledge. Meaning in poetry is made by placement as well as by wording.

Chapter Five: Drama and the Living Stage

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain what makes drama distinct from the novel and the poem as a way of knowing;
- describe, in your own words, the concerns of the best-known African dramatists writing in English;
- analyse how ritual, song, and audience participation function on the African stage;
- discuss the practical conditions — companies, schools, festivals, censorship — that shape plays.

A note on quotation in this chapter: The modern plays discussed here are still in copyright and are taught by summary and analysis in our own words, without reproduced passages.

5.1 A Play Is an Argument Between Bodies in a Room

A novel can tell you what a character thinks. A play must show people contending — in speech, silence, gesture, and space — in front of witnesses who are breathing the same air. African dramatists in English have made powerful use of this. The stage suits cultures with strong traditions of public deliberation: the council under the tree, the funeral gathering, the festival where the community watches itself.

Ask of any play: Who is allowed to speak, and who is silenced? Where do people stand, and who sits? What does the crowd — chorus, market women, elders, students — do to the action? In this drama, groups are rarely decoration. They are a force that can crown, shame, rescue, or destroy.

5.2 Soyinka and the Weight of Ritual

Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian dramatist and the first African writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, built plays in English that join Yoruba ritual and mythology to a fierce examination of power. In his best-known tragedy, discussed here in our own words, a king's horseman who is expected by custom to follow his master in death is delayed by worldly pleasure and by colonial interference, and the duty falls terribly elsewhere. The play refuses to let the audience blame one side cleanly: ritual duty, personal failure, and colonial arrogance are wound together, and the ending asks what a community owes its dead and what the living may rightly refuse.

Soyinka's comedies and satires turn the same intelligence on modern targets — religious fraud, political theatre, and the educated elite's self-importance. Across his work, notice

the language: high ritual speech beside market banter, song beside argument. The shifts of register are the world of the play made audible.

5.3 Other Stages, Other Arguments

In Ghana, dramatists such as Efua Sutherland built theatre deliberately for community development, founding studio companies, writing for children, and treating the audience as partners in education rather than consumers. Sutherland's work shows that a play can be an instrument — for health, for literacy, for civic confidence — without ceasing to be art.

In East and southern Africa, plays have been made in school halls, church compounds, open-air festivals, and, under repressive regimes, in forms coded enough to pass a censor and clear enough for the audience to understand. Popular theatre workshops, in which a community devises a play about its own water supply, land dispute, or clinic, turn spectators into authors. When you study African drama, therefore, keep two canons in mind: the published plays of named authors, and the devised, local, often unpublished theatre that has changed actual villages. Both are literature in action.

5.4 Reading a Play on the Page

Students often read a play as if it were a short novel and then complain that it feels thin. Repair this with three habits. Read speeches aloud, even quietly; timing and emphasis reveal meaning the eye skips. Track entrances and exits; a play thinks in arrivals and departures. And always imagine the staging the text implies — a doorway, a stool, a drum — because a symbol you must picture being carried onstage has a different force from one described in prose.

Worked Example: Analysing a Chorus as a Force

Task: "The crowd in the play we studied is merely background. Discuss," using a play from your course.

A model approach: Test the word merely against three moments. First, find a scene where the crowd's praise raises a character's obligation — public honour creates the duty that will crush him. Second, find a scene where the crowd's mockery or withdrawal changes what a powerful person dares to do; shame is a political instrument. Third, examine the final scene: if the crowd witnesses, mourns, or judges, it is performing the community's verdict, which is an action, not a backdrop. Conclude that in this dramatic tradition the group functions like a character with divided motives — proud, fearful, wise, and cruel by turns — and that removing it would remove the play's moral machinery. Adapt the three-moment structure to whatever set play you are given.

Exercises

33. Give two reasons the stage form suits societies with strong traditions of public deliberation.
34. Summarise, in your own words, the central conflict of Soyinka's best-known tragedy as presented in this chapter, and name the three forces wound together in it.
35. What did Efua Sutherland's theatre work add to the idea of what a play is for?
36. State three habits that help a student read a play on the page, and explain one.

Answer Guidance

37. Drama stages contending voices before witnesses, as a council does; and it makes the community's reaction — praise, shame, judgement — part of the action, as in public deliberation. It also joins speech to ritual, song, and spectacle, which such traditions already honour.
38. A royal horseman bound by custom to die with his king is delayed by pleasure and by colonial interference, and the sacrificial duty falls on another with terrible results. The three forces are ritual duty, personal failure, and colonial arrogance. Credit accurate paraphrase; no quotation is expected.
39. She showed that theatre could be a deliberate instrument of community development and education — through studio companies, children's theatre, and audience partnership — while remaining art. Her example widens the definition of drama's purpose beyond entertainment or individual expression.
40. Reading speeches aloud; tracking entrances and exits; imagining the implied staging. An explanation might note that reading aloud restores timing — pauses, interruptions, and emphasis — in which much of a play's meaning is carried.

Chapter Six: Women Writers, New Nations, and a World of Readers

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain why the first published generation in English was mostly male, and what changed;
- describe, in your own words, the contributions of major women writers in this field;
- discuss how writers have treated marriage, motherhood, work, and education as literary subjects of the first importance;
- describe the contemporary scene — diaspora, new genres, and digital publishing — without losing sight of the home audience.

A note on quotation in this chapter: The writers discussed here are modern and their works are in copyright. They are taught by summary and analysis in our own words, without reproduced passages.

6.1 The Missing Half of the Shelf

For its first decades, African literature in English as the world received it was written mostly by men. The reasons were structural, not a judgement on talent: girls were sent to school later and withdrawn earlier; publishing networks ran through boys' schools, universities, and civil-service postings; and the experiences editors expected from an African book were often the public experiences men were permitted to have. Women's stories were being told — in oral tradition women were and are master narrators — but they reached English print more slowly.

Naming this history matters because it changes how you read the early shelf. When a male novelist writes a mother, a wife, or a market woman, ask how fully she is imagined from inside. Sometimes the answer honours the writer. Sometimes you will find a woman who exists mainly to test the hero. Women writers, when they came to print in strength, did not merely add female characters. They changed what counted as a subject.

6.2 What Women Writers Changed

Flora Nwapa, publishing in the nineteen-sixties, is often called the mother of modern African women's writing in English. In our own words: her fiction centres Igbo women's lives — trade, friendship, fertility, and the longing for a child in a society that measures a woman by motherhood — and treats women's economic skill and solidarity as the real engines of the community. The market woman, in her hands, is not local colour. She is a financier, a strategist, and a philosopher of risk.

Buchi Emecheta, writing from London as an immigrant mother, made fiction from the double labour of women who raise children and raise themselves — through study, work, and refusal — at the same time. Her novels, summarised here rather than quoted, follow girls and women negotiating bride price, marriage, migration, and the price of an education, and they insist that a mother's ambitions for herself are not a betrayal of her children.

Mariama Bâ, writing in French and read across Africa in translation, showed generations of students how a letter-novel can hold a whole society's argument about marriage inside one woman's patient, devastating courtesy. She belongs in this chapter as a reminder that the conversation crosses languages: English-language women's writing grew up talking to sisters in French and in African languages, through translation, conferences, and shared publishers.

In poetry and drama, too, women reshaped the field — as you saw with Efua Sutherland's theatre in Chapter Five — claiming the stage and the lyric for subjects once dismissed as private.

6.3 Subjects Brought to the Centre

With women writers, certain subjects move from the margin to the centre of African literature in English, and they have stayed there for all writers since:

- **Marriage as negotiation** — not a plot ending but an economic and moral arrangement to be examined from both sides, including polygamy discussed by the women who live it.
- **Motherhood in its full weight** — joy, status, danger, grief, and work, rather than a symbol of the land or the nation alone.
- **Girls' education** — the school fees scraped together, the aunt who pays, the teacher who believes, and what an educated daughter owes and does not owe.
- **Women's work and money** — trading, farming, teaching, nursing, and migration, treated as skilled labour that holds societies together.
- **Friendship between women** — as a source of knowledge and rescue as real as any romance.

When you write essays on these subjects, be specific about agency. The women in these books are not only victims of custom or heroes against it. They bargain, scheme, endure, laugh, and sometimes uphold the very customs that constrain them. That complexity is the literature.

6.4 The Contemporary Scene: Many Homes at Once

Today's African literature in English is written in Accra and Abidjan, in Johannesburg and Nairobi, in Houston, London, and Toronto — and read everywhere at once. New writers move between the novel, the short story, memoir, speculative fiction, and the graphic narrative. A story may braid a village funeral with a video call; a poem may live first as a performance recording shared on a phone. Prizes and festivals on the continent itself now shape careers, and small publishers at home have joined the older metropolitan houses.

Two cautions for the student. First, do not let the international success of a few names convince you that the field is only what travels. School set-books, church and community theatre, local-language publishing, and radio drama form the reading lives of millions. Second, diaspora writing is not a diluted version of home writing. Distance creates its own knowledge — of racism abroad, of remittances and return visits, of children translating for parents — and its own blindnesses, which the best writers examine honestly.

Your task as a graduate reader is to hold the whole shelf in view: Equiano's testimony and the newest novel on your phone are one long argument about who may speak, in what language, and who is listening.

Worked Example: Writing About Agency, Not Just Oppression

Task: "Women in the fiction discussed in this chapter are presented only as victims of tradition. Discuss."

A model approach: Challenge the word only with evidence of action. Take the market women of Nwapa's fiction as summarised above: they organise credit, judge character, and sustain the community's economy — constrained by custom, certainly, but exercising skill and power within and against it. Take Emecheta's studying mothers: their endurance is not passive, because it is directed at a chosen goal — qualifications, independence, a different life for their daughters — and the novels measure the cost of that choice honestly, including what it strains at home. Conclude with a balanced claim: tradition in these books is a real constraining force, but the writers' subject is precisely the intelligence with which women negotiate it. An answer built this way — claim tested against two bodies of evidence, balanced conclusion — is the pattern to carry into your examinations.

Exercises

41. Give three structural reasons the early published generation in English was mostly male.

42. In your own words, what did Flora Nwapa place at the centre of her fiction, and why did it matter?
43. Name five subjects women writers moved to the centre of this literature.
44. State the two cautions this chapter gives about the contemporary scene, and explain one of them.

Answer Guidance

45. Later and interrupted schooling for girls; publishing networks running through boys' schools, universities, and the civil service; and editorial expectations favouring men's public experience. Any three structural — not personal — reasons earn credit.
46. Igbo women's lives and work: trade, friendship, fertility, and the desire for a child, with women's economic skill and solidarity shown as the community's real engines. It mattered because it redefined what and who counted as a serious literary subject.
47. Marriage as negotiation; motherhood in its full weight; girls' education; women's work and money; friendship between women. All five are named in section 6.3.
48. First, the field is larger than the few names that travel internationally — local publishing, set-books, theatre, and radio matter. Second, diaspora writing is not diluted home writing; distance brings its own knowledge and its own blindnesses. A good explanation of the first might describe a school or community reading culture; of the second, how migration creates subjects — remittance, return, translation between generations — unavailable to a writer who never left.

Conclusion: Reading With Care and Confidence

You have travelled from a valley described in a life story of the eighteenth century to novels and poems being shared on phones today. If you remember only a few things, remember these.

African literature in English is a literature of voice: who speaks, in whose language, reshaped how, and who is finally believed. It grew from testimony and oral art as much as from the classroom. Its great subjects — custom and change, land and city, power honest and power corrupt, mothers and daughters, leaving and returning — are argued through form: the proverb placed like a stone in a path, the refrain that darkens, the chorus that judges, the ending that refuses to pretend a wound is healed.

Read the works themselves. This book has deliberately summarised the modern classics rather than quoting them, both to respect their authors' rights and to send you to the real pages. When you go, go with the habits you have practised: define your terms, observe before you judge, follow one formal feature closely, test strong words like only and merely, and let your conclusion be as exact as the book you have read.

Final Self-Test

Answer briefly, then check your answers against the chapters.

49. Why has the choice of English been debated by African writers? (Chapter One)
50. What does Equiano's opening sentence achieve? (Chapter Two)
51. What threefold achievement is claimed for Achebe's first novel? (Chapter Three)
52. How can a refrain change meaning without changing words? (Chapter Four)
53. Name the three forces wound together in Soyinka's best-known tragedy. (Chapter Five)
54. What is meant by saying women writers changed what counted as a subject? (Chapter Six)

Guidance: 1. Because English carries a colonial history yet offers reach, and writers differ on whether home languages must come first. 2. It gives precise, checkable particulars and describes a loved, fruitful home, so that capture reads as loss and the narrator claims credibility. 3. A complete civilisation shown from inside; no simple sides; English reshaped by proverb and idiom. 4. The stanzas around it change, so the returning line is heard against new experience. 5. Ritual duty, personal failure, and colonial arrogance. 6. Subjects such as marriage as negotiation, motherhood, girls' education, and women's work moved from the margins to the centre and were treated as matters of the first importance.

Glossary

- **Appropriation (of a language):** Making a language one's own by reshaping it — with local idiom, rhythm, and imagery — for one's own subjects and readers.
- **Call and response:** A performance pattern in which a leader's line is answered by a group; in written texts, a structure of voice and reply.
- **Chorus:** In drama, a group that comments on, witnesses, and sometimes directs the action; in African drama often the community itself.
- **Colonial language:** A European language established in a territory through colonial rule and retained in education, government, or literature after independence.
- **Diaspora:** A people dispersed from a homeland and living elsewhere, and the culture made between home and away.
- **Life writing:** Non-fiction forms centred on a life — autobiography, memoir, testimony, and the slave narrative.
- **Lyric:** A poem, usually short, expressing a speaker's feeling or meditation, as distinct from narrative or dramatic verse.
- **Oral tradition:** Literature composed, performed, and transmitted by voice and memory — tales, epics, praise poetry, proverbs, riddles, and songs.
- **Proverb:** A short, traditional saying that carries communal wisdom and can be used to argue, advise, or judge indirectly.
- **Refrain:** A line or phrase that returns at intervals in a poem or song, gathering meaning from what surrounds it each time.
- **Register:** A level or variety of language — formal, ritual, colloquial, official — chosen for a situation; shifts of register can mark power and intimacy.
- **Slave narrative:** A first-person published account by a formerly enslaved person, written to testify to slavery's reality and to claim the author's humanity and freedom.
- **Testimony:** A first-person account offered as evidence, often under conditions where the speaker's credibility is challenged.

A Short Shelf for Further Reading

Read the works themselves, in full, from your library or bookshop. This book has discussed the following in its own words.

- Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* — public domain; widely available in free editions.
- Chinua Achebe, the novel of Okonkwo and the Igbo community discussed in Chapter Three, and his later novels and essays.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, his early novels in English and his essays on language and literature.
- Christopher Okigbo, his collected poems.
- Wole Soyinka, his tragedies, comedies, and memoirs.
- Efua Sutherland, her plays and her writings on theatre for development.
- Flora Nwapa, her novels of women's lives and trade.
- Buchi Emecheta, her novels of motherhood, education, and migration.
- Mariama Bâ, her celebrated letter-novel, read in English translation.

Ask your teacher or librarian which of these are set texts for your course, and read those first, in full.

End of African Literature in English — From the Library of Maggie Enow