

## Analysing the Literary Representation of Women's Influence in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

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### Abstract

*In many African countries, women's roles have historically been marginalised in both literature and everyday life. Against this backdrop, this study analyses how African literary works represent women's influence in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Guided by African Feminist Literary Theory and Gender and Development Theory, the study adopts a qualitative case study design, grounded in close textual reading and thematic analysis. The target population comprised African literary works that portray women's roles in society. Four texts were purposively selected: Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries*, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Guillaume Oyono Mbida's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *This Time Tomorrow*. Data were generated through multiple close readings of the primary texts and analysed thematically, with interpretation informed by the researchers' scholarly expertise. The findings reveal that women are portrayed as contributors to the achievement of the SDGs, though in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways. While many representations depict women as promoters of gender equality and empowerment (contributing to poverty reduction, advocates for quality education and educational reform, enhancers of health and well-being, highlighting gender inequality, and preservers of ethical and culturally acceptable practices), other portrayals present women in more problematic roles, including as objects of male pleasure. Hence, the study recommends that African governments strengthen laws against harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation and that societies reject domestic violence and outdated beliefs that deny women equality and access to education.*

**Keywords:** Representation of women, literary works, sustainable development, oppression, Sustainable Development Goals

### 1 Introduction

Women have historically occupied a complex and evolving position within African literature, where they are simultaneously silenced, symbolised, celebrated, and empowered. As African societies grapple with the interconnected challenges of sustainable development, literary representations of women emerge not merely as reflections of social realities but as critical instruments for interrogating patriarchal norms, reimagining gender relations, and inspiring transformative action. Although recent scholarship has examined women's representation in African literary works in relation to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on

gender equality, such studies remain limited in scope. They often overlook how literary portrayals function as active mechanisms for awareness-raising, resistance, and sustainable social transformation—an analytical gap that the present study seeks to address. Consequently, literary works have gained renewed importance as powerful vehicles for advancing social progress and structural change (Lomotey, 2024).

Grounded in Feminist Literary Theory, this study aligns with the view that women in literature should be portrayed as fully recognised individuals endowed with agency, participation, and the capacity to shape their own destinies (Singh, 2022). However, in many African societies, women's roles have historically been marginalised in both literature and everyday life (Adewumi, 2024). This contradiction underscores the need for sustained critical inquiry into how African literary texts construct women's identities and contributions. Accordingly, this study analyses the representation of women's roles, identities, and agency in selected African literary works in relation to sustainable development across political, cultural, and economic domains.

To achieve this objective, the study purposively samples two novels and two plays noted for their strong representation of women: Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries*, Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*, Guillaume Oyônô Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *This Time Tomorrow*. Examining these texts enables a comparative and cross-cultural exploration of women's experiences and representations within diverse African contexts.

*Unanswered Cries*, set in Sierra Leone in 2002, foregrounds the struggle against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) while simultaneously offering emotional, moral, and cultural insights into the lived realities of women and girls. *Women at Point Zero*, set in Egypt in 2007, exposes the harsh realities of patriarchal domination and women's struggle for autonomy, emphasising financial independence as a critical pathway to self-determination. The novel further underscores the importance of self-worth, dignity, and honour, even as it reveals the severe limitations placed on women's autonomy in male-dominated societies.

Similarly, Guillaume Oyônô Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, set in Mvoutess Village in Southern East Cameroon in 1960, critiques traditional marriage practices by foregrounding Juliette's struggle to choose her own husband amidst competing suitors. Finally, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *This Time Tomorrow*, set in Uhuru Market, Kenya, during the 1970s post-independence period, examines social and economic inequalities, with particular attention to women's representation in a rapidly changing society. Through its title and setting, the play reflects the everyday struggles and aspirations of Kenyan women in the aftermath of independence.

Collectively, these texts provide a rich analytical framework for examining how African literature not only represents women in relation to gender equality but also actively advances awareness, resistance, and sustainable development.

## 2 Literature review

Recent scholars have increasingly explored how African literary works represent women in relation to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which promotes gender equality. Adewumi (2024) qualitatively examined two Nigerian novels by female authors, focusing on depictions of womanhood through themes of marriage, motherhood, and agency. The study revealed persistent marginalisation of women and underscored how literature both reflects and

critiques gendered inequalities. Adewumi's analysis links directly to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and indirectly to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), arguing that literary portrayals of women's realities can promote social awareness and transformative change. Although Adewumi links literary depictions to SDGs, the gap lies in the absence of a comprehensive, intersectional, and Pan-African literary analysis.

Similarly, Yussif and Nsowah (2024) investigated how African women writers reconstruct female identity through their literary works. Drawing on feminist theoretical frameworks, the authors demonstrated that texts by writers such as Mariama Ba, Nawal El Saadawi, and Amma Darko challenge patriarchal narratives, reclaim women's voices, and highlight resistance to oppression. Their findings emphasise literature's capacity to advance SDG 5 by fostering equal representation and promoting women's agency in both cultural and intellectual spheres. The study also connects SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by revealing how literary empowerment can inspire broader societal transformation in women's economic participation. Be that as it may, the study lacks literary representations of women's roles across diverse African contexts, with respect to educational, economic, and policy impacts linked to multiple SDGs.

In the same vein, Masha and Mogoboya (2024) analysed the portrayal of female academics in novels by Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie through a Stiwanist (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) lens. Their research found that even educated, professional women in literature encounter entrenched sexism and structural barriers, reflecting real-world inequalities. The study aligns with SDG 5.5, which calls for women's full and effective participation in leadership and decision-making, and SDG 10, which targets social inclusion. By illustrating how professional women navigate and resist systemic constraints, African literature contributes to conversations about equity and empowerment. The existing scholarship insufficiently explores how literary constructions of non-elite women translate into tangible educational, policy, and socio-developmental impacts, thereby limiting understanding of African literature's broader role in advancing inclusive and sustainable development.

Nyairo (2025) extended this discourse by analysing agency and representation of female characters across selected African literary texts. The study categorised women into agentive and non-agentive characters, revealing how some female protagonists actively resist patriarchal dominance while others remain victims of societal control. Nyairo argued that literary constructions of agency mirror broader gender dynamics in African societies and that such portrayals can influence perceptions of women's empowerment. The study directly supports SDG 5's emphasis on eliminating discrimination and ensuring women's equal participation in all areas of life. However, the study ignores comprehensive representations of female characters linked to multiple SDGs.

Hasan (2025) examined the way patriarchal power structures in *Woman at Point Zero* systematically subjugate the protagonist Firdaus physically, psychologically, and socially, thereby exposing the pervasive gendered oppression in patriarchal African and Middle Eastern contexts. It foregrounds how cultural conditioning and internalised trauma shape women's experiences under dominant gender hierarchies. The study reveals a gap in comparative, interdisciplinary research linking such literary representations to broader sustainable development outcomes, including measurable impacts on education, economic participation, legal reforms, and policy discourses aligned with the SDGs.

Niwabiine and Ocan (2025) examined post-colonial representations of women's education in African novels. Their qualitative analysis revealed tensions between traditional expectations and

modern educational aspirations for women. The study connected these literary depictions to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5, highlighting how education serves as both a tool for empowerment and a site of struggle against patriarchal norms. The authors concluded that literature not only mirrors women's evolving educational roles but also advocates for equitable access and transformative learning.

Together, these empirical studies demonstrate that African literature remains a powerful medium for interrogating and reshaping gender relations. By revealing women's struggles, resistance, and aspirations, these works align with the core objectives of the SDGs, particularly SDG 5, by promoting gender equality, empowerment, and social justice across African societies. Be that as it may, very few of the existing studies explicitly connect these literary representations to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly from a Pan-African and interdisciplinary perspective. In this regard, the present study fills this gap by connecting the representations of women not only to gender inequality but also to practical, educational, and policy-oriented implications for sustainable development. This approach is significant because it positions African literature as an active contributor to development discourse, demonstrating how literary analysis can inform social awareness, educational reform, and evidence-based policymaking across the continent.

### **3 Theoretical framework**

This study was guided by African Feminist Literary Theory, which examines how African women writers and their works represent women's roles, resist oppression, and envision liberation, drawing on concepts and approaches that emerge from African worldviews (Masha & Mogoboya, 2024). The theory was pioneered by a Nigerian scholar called Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in 1994 in her book *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*. She coined the term Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as an African-centred variant of feminism. In her work, she argues that Western feminism does not always fit African contexts, prompting her to propose a model in which women are included as agents of social transformation in Africa rather than simply opposing men (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). In this study, the theory provided a critical lens for analysing how women are represented in African literary works, predominantly in terms of power relations, gender dynamics, and cultural narratives that either empower or marginalise female characters.

Although this theory places strong emphasis on social change and inclusiveness, its major weakness is that it is mostly text-based and lacks the structural and policy components needed to connect literary representations to actual development processes. Therefore, in this study, the weakness of the African Feminist Literary Theory is complemented by the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, developed by Caroline O. N. Moser, a British feminist scholar and development planner, in her 1993 book *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. In her work, she focuses on socially constructed gender relations and how power dynamics between men and women influence socio-economic development outcomes rather than women alone (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1994). GAD offers a useful framework for comprehending how literary portrayals of women either support or contradict current gender roles, processes of empowerment, and sustainable development goals.

#### **4 Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative case study design grounded in close textual analysis and thematic interpretation of selected African literary works. Rather than pursuing a single, uniform notion of realism tied to a specific place or period, the study approaches realism as a comparative literary lens through which women's experiences under patriarchy are examined across diverse African socio-cultural contexts and historical moments. The target population comprised African literary works that portray women's roles within their societies, acknowledging that gender inequality and struggles for sustainable development manifest differently across regions and time.

Purposive sampling was employed not to generalise contemporary African realities, but to enable analytical depth and contrast. The selected texts span different geographical locations and historical periods, allowing the study to trace both continuities and shifts in women's roles, identities, and agency. Including texts from earlier periods, such as the 1970s, was intentional, as it allows for a diachronic understanding of how literary representations of women anticipate, critique, or illuminate ongoing gender challenges that persist despite social change. This approach recognises that literary realism captures structural patterns of inequality that often endure beyond specific temporal settings.

The sample comprised two novels and two plays, selected based on their thematic relevance to women's experiences rather than to confirm predetermined outcomes. To mitigate research bias, the study applied maximum variation sampling, ensuring that the texts differ in genre, region, historical context, and authorial perspective, thereby providing a broad range of representations around a shared thematic concern. The focus on women's roles, identities, and contributions to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was therefore analytical rather than selective, emerging from the texts through systematic interpretation rather than being imposed in advance.

Data were generated through multiple close readings of the primary texts. Passages depicting women's roles, voices, actions, and social positioning were identified, annotated, and organised into a corpus of textual evidence. Thematic analysis was employed as it is a flexible and rigorous method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The process involved: (i) familiarisation through repeated reading of the texts; (ii) open coding of passages related to women's representation; (iii) theme development guided by the theoretical frameworks; (iv) refinement of themes in relation to the texts and the SDGs; and (v) the development of a final thematic map comprising six major themes. This method enabled analysis to remain grounded in the authors' perspectives while allowing for critical interpretation.

Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring respectful, non-stereotypical interpretations of women's experiences, avoiding cultural reductionism, appropriately acknowledging authorship and sources, and critically engaging with gendered realities without reinforcing harmful narratives. The study aligns with ethical scholarship on gender equality and sustainable development while recognising the contextual limits of literary representation.

#### **5 Findings and discussion**

This section presents an analysis of the representation of women's influence in selected African literary works in relation to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Frequency distribution of themes across selected African literary works**

Theme	Unanswered Cries (Conteh)	Women at Point Zero (El Saadawi)	Three Suitors: One Husband (Oyônô Mbia)	This Time Tomorrow (Ngũgĩ)	Total tallies
Women as agents of gender equality, empowerment, and awareness	5	4	6	4	19
Women as agents of poverty alleviation	4	2	4	5	15
Women as facilitators of health and well-being	5	3	4	3	15
Women as embodiments of gender inequality	4	6	3	4	17
Women as promoters of quality education	5	3	4	5	17
Women as preservers of ethics and cultural practices	4	2	4	5	15

The frequency counts presented in Table 1 represent the number of coded textual instances identified during repeated close readings of each literary work. A coded instance refers to a passage, dialogue, character action, or narrative event that explicitly reflects a thematic category related to women's roles and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The analysis reveals that women in these texts are represented in diverse and often contradictory ways, ranging from active contributors to social, political, and economic development to figures constrained, exploited, or instrumentalised within patriarchal structures. The details of the representations are presented in the following subsections, thematically.

### 5.1 Women as agents of gender equality, empowerment, and awareness

African literary works frequently portray women as active agents who challenge patriarchal structures, promote gender equality, and raise societal awareness about injustice. Through courage, resistance, and the exposure of oppression, female characters are depicted not only as victims of inequality but also as empowered voices that confront and destabilise dominant gender norms.

In Guillaume Oyônô Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, Juliette exemplifies women's agency and empowerment through her resistance to patriarchal control over marriage. She rejects the tradition that allows her family to choose her husband and insists on her right to marry the man she loves. Her declaration, "*Father, I shall marry the man I love, not the man you choose for me*" (p. 38), encapsulates her defiance of patriarchal authority and affirms women's autonomy and self-determination within a restrictive cultural context. Juliette's courage challenges inherited norms in Mvoutess Village and raises awareness about women's right to freedom of choice and expression.

Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* portrays Firdaus as both a victim of systemic patriarchal violence and a powerful agent of resistance. Subjected to abuse, sexual exploitation, and

economic oppression by male figures, including her uncle, husband, and later Marzouk, Firdaus's lived experience exposes the brutality of male-dominated power structures. Her refusal to submit culminates in the killing of Marzouk, an act that symbolises her ultimate rejection of domination. Her assertion, "*I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die*" (p. 110), reflects her profound self-awareness and fearless defiance of oppression. Through Firdaus, the text not only portrays women's struggle for empowerment but also functions as a whistle-blowing narrative that exposes gender-based violence and the commodification of women.

Women's roles as awareness-raisers are further evident in *Unanswered Cries* by Osman Conteh, where female characters such as Makalay and Olabisi reveal the persistence of sexual exploitation and harmful traditional practices. Makalay's sexualisation by Mr Ade and Olabisi's exploitation by Mr Eddy highlight entrenched gender inequality and moral hypocrisy. Olabisi's forced circumcision exposes how Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is justified through tradition, thereby unveiling the cultural mechanisms that sustain violence against women. These portrayals transform women's suffering into acts of social exposure, encouraging readers to question and critique oppressive norms.

These literary representations demonstrate that women's empowerment and awareness-raising are deeply interconnected. By exposing injustice, women promote dialogue, education, and reform. To keep in line with these findings, Neethu and Das (2022) argue that gender-based violence is sustained through oppressive rituals that cause severe physical and psychological harm, while Ashimbuli and Woldemariam (2024) observe that women within patriarchal systems are often exploited and discriminated against in multiple forms. Through whistle-blowing narratives, literature challenges the normalisation of such practices and positions women as catalysts for social change, as also revealed by Braun and Clarke (2021) and Nephawe and Abodunrin (2023).

The urgency of this awareness is underscored by the continued practice of FGM and domestic violence in many African societies, particularly in rural areas, despite legal prohibitions. Even educated women, such as Makalay in *Unanswered Cries*, are sometimes shown defending harmful traditions, as when Oyah asks, "*Mrs Kamara, do you not find it surprising to see a college-educated woman supporting and defending cruelty to a child?*" (p. 81). In *Women at Point Zero*, Firdaus's mother's role in performing the clitoridectomy further reveals how patriarchal values are internalised and transmitted across generations.

Overall, these portrayals show that women in African literature function as agents of gender equality, empowerment, and awareness by resisting oppression and exposing injustice. The findings align with African Feminist Literary Theory, which emphasises women's agency and resistance to patriarchy, and with Gender and Development Theory, which highlights gender equality and empowerment as essential to sustainable social and economic development (Duflo, 2012; Joyia & Gull, 2017; Kabeer, 2020; Suryaningsih & Sayuti, 2023). Through courage and consciousness-raising, women in these texts demand transformative change and contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.

## 5.2 Women as agents of poverty alleviation

Women are portrayed as promoters of poverty alleviation in selected African literary works through their hard work. The representation of hardworking women highlights their unacknowledged

economic contribution and challenges discourses that render female labour invisible, thereby supporting SDG 1 (No Poverty) in their societies. For instance, in Guillaume Oyônô Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, women are portrayed as hard workers because they do almost all the work, while their husbands are lazy and blame their wives. A good example is Makrita, the wife of Atangana. She always does all the farm and housework for her family, but her husband blames her for being late coming home from the farm to cook for him.

The same applies to Monica, Ondua's wife. She prepares illegal alcohol commonly known as Arki in Mvoutess Village. She sells in order to sustain her family. Her husband, Ondua, blames her since she refuses to provide him with a bottle of alcohol. In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *This Time Tomorrow*, Njango is portrayed as a hard worker. She wakes up very early in the morning, prepares soup, and sells it to customers at Uhuru Market. She works very hard in order to earn money and support her family's daily needs. The results suggest that the efforts of hardworking women in literary works raise awareness of poverty alleviation within their families, while also helping other women in African societies work hard in different fields, such as home, markets, farms, factories, and large-scale trade. In fact, they promote women's participation in social, political, and economic development in both rural and urban areas.

These results are supported by Ambepitiya (2016), who argues that hardworking women involved in activities such as entrepreneurship, especially in rural and urban areas, contribute to creating employment opportunities and eliminating poverty. Bergnehr & Henriksson (2021) add that hardworking women promote social, political, and economic improvements by demonstrating struggle in various activities and a high level of resilience, thereby promoting poverty alleviation. This practice of hard work is currently flourishing among most African women. Tanzanian societies show that women are hard workers in various social and economic sectors, such as farming, business, entrepreneurship, and civil service, to mention a few. A few examples from Tanzania include Neema Lugangira, a former member of parliament and digital advocate, Faraja Nyalandu, a social entrepreneur, and Dr Ellen Mkondya Senkolo, a public health leader. They all struggle to earn money and support their families, thereby contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa. These findings align with African Feminist Literary Theory by emphasising the economic contribution, resilience, and agency of women as a means of empowering them in patriarchal society, and with Gender and Development Theory by highlighting the active roles that women play in reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development through their empowerment and economic engagement.

### 5.3 Women as facilitators of health and well-being

Women are depicted as facilitators of a healthy life. These women in selected African literary works enhance their families' emotional well-being and physical health. In Guillaume Oyônô Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, women are depicted as the family's caretakers and held accountable for the children's misbehaviour. Consider the way Makrita is held accountable for teaching Juliette such a shameful act. She also places the blame on Juliette, who is thought to have acted inappropriately, saying, "Juliette, haven't I always told you to be obedient to your family?" (p. 18). Literary works such as Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries* portray women like Makalay, who takes care of her daughter, Olabisi, offering a platform to demonstrate that nurturing is not a passive act; rather, it is a transformative process to bring better health and well-being to present and future generations.



The findings show that the women's responsibilities often extend beyond national borders, impacting education, healthcare, cultural exchange, social justice, and resilience. Through love, hard work, and effective leadership, they mould the upcoming generation, safeguard vital knowledge, and maintain the structure of communities. Cahn (2000) argues that most women, when performing household activities and childcare, demonstrate more of their powerful identity as mothers, influencing their children. Becker (2000) adds that women have a vital role in child care and caretaking because most of them are mothers, and, beyond doubt, they help bring health and well-being to present and future generations. Ahun *et al* (2024) are in line with the argument that women are regarded as the first teachers of their children, playing a significant role in imparting knowledge, skills and competences that benefit children's well-being from home to society at large. Ashimbuli & Woldemariam (2024) cement that the depiction of women as caretakers of their children is to improve their children's well-being. These findings align with African Feminist Literary Theory by honouring women's nurturing responsibilities as catalysts for social change and empowerment, and with Gender and Development Theory by demonstrating the concrete contributions that women's leadership and caring make to sustainable development, health, and social advancement.

#### 5.4 Women as embodiments of gender inequality

The representation of women as ignorant or denied access to education in African literary works embodies the deep-rooted gender inequality embedded within patriarchal social structures. These portrayals do not merely depict individual shortcomings but symbolise systemic discrimination that restricts girls' access to knowledge and opportunities. By situating women within conditions of exclusion and marginalisation, such texts reveal how gender inequality is reproduced and normalised across generations.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *This Time Tomorrow* illustrates this embodiment of gender inequality through the character of Wanjiro, whose lived experience exposes unequal access to education between boys and girls. Wanjiro's frustration stems from being denied schooling while her brother is sent to town to pursue his education. Her lament, "*Mother, you mock me with your talk of clothes and school. Where is my brother? You sent him to my uncle so that he might attend school. Me, you kept here to work for you*" (p. 35), captures the structural injustice that assigns domestic labour to girls while privileging boys' education. Wanjiro's condition embodies the gendered educational gap characteristic of Kenya's post-independence society, where cultural norms and economic priorities systematically favoured male children.

Such representations expose how women are positioned as second-class citizens and deprived of fundamental rights due to ignorance, misperceptions, and entrenched patriarchal beliefs. Akhter (2020) observes that although women are traditionally expected to sustain family well-being, they are frequently denied access to education, healthcare, and employment, thereby reinforcing gender inequality at both familial and societal levels. Similarly, Fitriani and Muassomah (2021) argue that literary depictions of uneducated women reveal how gender inequality is sustained by treating women as inferior beings rather than as full social actors.

In *Unanswered Cries* by Osman Conteh, the portrayal of uninformed women such as Makalay further embodies gender inequality. Makalay's lack of education and awareness of broader social and legal frameworks reflects how patriarchal traditions limit women's capacity to question harmful practices. Her condition illustrates how ignorance, rather than individual failure, is a product of systemic exclusion from quality education. Through such characters, the text exposes the cyclical

nature of gender inequality, in which women's lack of access to knowledge perpetuates their subordination and the continuation of oppressive customs.

These literary representations embody the realities faced by many girls in African societies, particularly in rural areas, where the denial of education remains prevalent. Girls are often prepared for early marriage and domestic roles, reinforcing traditional values that restrict their intellectual and personal development. By portraying women within these limiting conditions, literary works reveal the structural foundations of gender inequality and invite critical reflection on the necessity of educational inclusion.

Overall, these findings align with African Feminist Literary Theory by demonstrating how patriarchal systems restrict women's access to education and institutionalise inequality. They also resonate with Gender and Development Theory, which underscores that sustainable social transformation and gender equality depend on equal access to education. Through their embodied experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, women in these literary works serve as living representations of gender inequality, making visible the urgent need for structural change.

### **5.5 Women as promoters of quality education**

The selected African literary works foreground women as educated agents and active promoters of quality education and social awareness within their societies. Through their knowledge, critical thinking, and courage, female characters demonstrate how education empowers women to challenge oppressive traditions and advocate for individual and collective rights. These portrayals highlight the transformative role of quality education in fostering social consciousness and progressive change in African communities.

In Guillaume Oyônô Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, Juliette exemplifies a woman who uses education as a tool for empowerment and awareness-raising. Through her character, the text promotes women's rights to education, freedom of expression, self-determination, and informed decision-making, particularly in matters of marriage. Juliette challenges inherited traditional values that silence women and deny them the right to choose whom to love or marry. Despite facing resistance from her grandfather Abesollo and other family members, she persistently voices her opinions. Abesollo's question, "*Since when do women speak in Mvoutess?*" (p. 15), reflects entrenched patriarchal attitudes that Juliette confronts through her education and awareness. Even her mother, Makrita, reinforces traditional obedience by reprimanding her, saying, "*Juliette, haven't I always told you to be obedient to your family?*" (p. 18).

Juliette's education enables her to articulate her humanity and reject the commodification of women through bride price. Her protest— "*You want me to let them sell me like a goat? After all, I'm a valuable human being*" (p. 18)—underscores how education equips women with the language and confidence to assert their dignity and challenge dehumanising customs. By resisting being treated as property, Juliette becomes a symbol of educated African women who advocate for reform and promote critical awareness within their societies.

Similarly, Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries* presents female characters such as Olabisi, Oyah, and Dr Asiatu as promoters of quality education and social awareness. Through their advocacy against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), they educate their communities about its severe physical, psychological, and social consequences, including death. Their efforts highlight the role of informed

women in protecting children's rights and promoting women's autonomy in decision-making. By standing firmly for freedom of expression and informed choices, these characters demonstrate how education catalyses social transformation.

Overall, these findings suggest that representing women as promoters of quality education and awareness encourages the effective use of education as a lifelong tool for resisting ignorance and fostering progressive change. Such portrayals inspire critical thinking, challenge harmful traditions, and stimulate reform movements within African societies. Kim (2024) argues that elevating women's perspectives enriches our understanding of struggles for freedom, equality, and justice, while Bulut (2024) notes that educated women who apply their knowledge effectively become independent and capable of achieving meaningful success. Consequently, these literary representations encourage African societies to prioritise education and awareness, particularly for women.

These findings align with African Feminist Literary Theory, which emphasises the portrayal of intelligent, courageous women as agents of empowerment and social change. They also resonate with Gender and Development Theory, which recognises women's education and awareness as central to sustainable development, gender equality, and societal advancement.

### **5.6 Women as preservers of ethics and acceptable cultural practices**

The women represented in African literary works serve as people who foster family values and maintain cultural standards such as language, rituals, folklore, dress, food, and religion, thereby preserving social materials and the continuity of their societies. In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's play *This Time Tomorrow*, for example, Njango is portrayed as a woman who maintains societal values and provides moral guidance to her daughter Wanjiro. Although Wanjiro has genuine love for Asinjo, Njango denies her daughter, Wanjiro, the right to marry Asinjo, because he comes from another tribe. She is afraid that a man from another tribe cannot take care of her daughter. She is believed to be a tribalist who maintains Kenyan traditions. That is why she is against Wanjiro. She says Wanjiro, '*With that man? A man from another tribe?*' (p. 55). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o portrays strong beliefs in African traditions. Osman Conteh's *Unanswered Cries* also reveals women to be traditionalists, as they believe in superstitions such as bondo gods and spirits. For example, Makalay insists on saying that '*When a circumcised woman reveals to a gborka the secrets of gods, something terrible will happen to her*' (p. 85). This statement means it is prohibited for a circumcised woman to reveal the secrets of their gods to a gborka (uncircumcised woman) unless she will get into trouble. Conteh, through women, portrays strong beliefs in African traditions, even when those traditions have less value to people.

The results show that through preserving ethical behaviour, building communal cohesion, embodying and upholding cultural values, women are represented as preservers of ethics and acceptable cultural practices that support sustainable development goals in Africa. The findings also demonstrate their part in maintaining moral principles and preserving constructive cultural customs. Mahmud (2019) argues that the depiction of female characters meant to reveal cultural values plays a vital role in preserving ethics and cultural practices. Liailia Ihsanovna *et al.* (2023) argue that literary works have a strong chance of preserving the national identity of a given society. These findings align with African Feminist Literary Theory by acknowledging women in their communities as stewards of moral integrity and cultural authenticity, and with Gender and

Development Theory by demonstrating how women's ethical leadership and the upholding of strong cultural values support sustainable social development.

## **6 Limitations**

This study has several acknowledged limitations. First, the selected literary texts span different historical periods, with some dating back to the 1970s; as such, they do not directly reflect all contemporary developments in women's roles and gender relations. However, this temporal range was intentional, as it allows the study to trace enduring structural patterns of gender inequality that continue to inform the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) today, rather than offering a snapshot of current conditions alone.

Second, the use of purposive sampling means that the selected texts are not representative of African literature as a whole. The focus on works that foreground women's experiences and gendered power relations may limit generalisability. Nonetheless, this approach was adopted to enable in-depth, comparative analysis across diverse regions, genres, and contexts, thereby prioritising analytical insight over statistical representation.

Finally, the study relies on qualitative close reading and thematic interpretation, which inevitably involve the researcher's judgment. While this may limit reproducibility when compared to computer-assisted or AI-supported textual analysis, the methodology remains appropriate for literary inquiry, as it allows for contextual sensitivity, theoretical engagement, and nuanced interpretation. The findings should therefore be understood as interpretive rather than exhaustive, offering grounded insights into literary representations rather than definitive empirical claims.

## **7 Conclusion**

The analysis of women in selected African literary works does not show bias. Women were analysed both positively and negatively, but they all contribute to achieving sustainable development goals in Africa by either adopting or avoiding certain behaviours or practices by African societies. Hence, the representation of women in selected African literary works demonstrates their contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa in several ways. These include promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, reducing poverty, enhancing health and well-being, exposing gender-based violence, revealing gender inequality, and advocating for reforms in educational systems, promoting quality education and awareness, and preserving ethics and acceptable cultural practices. These findings revealed that women are represented as catalysts of societal transformation, combining cultural insights with emotional resonance. Their representation strives to make meaningful contributions to sustainable development goals, encompassing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection, in a rapidly evolving world. Therefore, African literary works play a significant role in recognising that women contribute to socio-economic development in their societies, countries, and worldwide. Through this study, the African governments are recommended to establish laws that can help different societies to abandon the outdated traditional values, such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). FGM causes severe pain to girls during childbirth and sexual intercourse, as well as the potential risk of death. In addition, most African women are advised to be hard workers, just as Makrita, Monica, and Njango, to support and sustain their families, because women are caretakers and play a significant role in their families and society as a whole. Additionally, the study recommends that African societies have to struggle to eradicate the outdated traditional values which deny women the right to education. The modern

world is highly influenced by science and technology; thus, it needs both men and women to pursue education to fight for their rights and benefit themselves, their families, and society at large. Moreover, further studies are recommended to explore how women are represented in oral literature, such as folktales, songs, and proverbs, which continue to shape societal values and development narratives.

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