VTU Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences
Volume 7 Issue 2 2023 "St. Cyril and St. Methodius" University of Veliko Tarnovo

doi:

There is No Such Thing as Maternal Instinct: Unwanted Pregnancy, Infanticide, and Child Abandonment in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* (2008) and Fatou Diome's *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2003)

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Navigating the boundaries between "woman" and "mother," this study examines the complex relationship between womanhood and motherhood, particularly within the diverse socio-cultural milieus of Africa. It draws on Adrianne Rich's conceptualisation of motherhood, which makes a critical distinction between motherhood as a social institution shaped by patriarchal ideology and mothering as a profoundly introspective feeling and experience. Building on this distinction, this study endeavours to investigate how contemporary fiction authored by African women actively challenges and demystifies the pervasive notion that mothers are inherently maternal. This aspect is exemplified in literary works such as *Imagine This* (2008) by the Nigerian Sade Adeniran and *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2003) by the Senegalese Fatou Diome. Both texts challenge entrenched, dichotomous gendered expectations within African societies, prompting a revaluation of motherhood as a mindset shaped by personal choices and social context, rather than an intrinsic, innate trait. Utilising a comparative approach, the analysis thus highlights how both French and English-speaking women from sub-Saharan Africa engage with sensitive and often taboo issues, including unwanted pregnancy, infanticide, and child abandonment, to dismantle idealised perceptions of maternal figures and roles.
Keywords: motherhood, unwanted pregnancy, child abandonment, infanticide, sub-Saharan African women writers

Introduction

In her seminal work *Of Woman Born* (2021), Adrienne Rich clarifies the distinctions between mothering and motherhood. According to her, mothering refers to "the potential relationship of any woman to her power of reproduction and to children", whereas motherhood pertains to "the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (lxi). The former thus represents an intersubjective relationship between a mother and her child, whereas the latter reflects societal conceptions of motherhood shaped by patriarchal ideology. According to Rich, society imposes idealised images of motherhood on women from the moment they become pregnant, assuming that a mother will engage selflessly and emotionally in the process of child rearing (25).

Resonating with Rich's observations, Francus notes that mothers are frequently regarded as "archetypal females," a conception traceable to the biblical figure of Eve, which results in the idealisation

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and abstraction of female subjectivity (26). Particularly in Western contexts, femininity and domesticity are viewed as being inherently intertwined, leading to expectations that women embody traits such as chastity, submissiveness, docility, and compassion (Francus 26). Based on the archetype of the domestic wife and mother, the maternal figure is expected to care for her children by fulfilling their physical and psychological health as well as their moral and social education (Hays 3). These nurturing practices have become a key criterion for distinguishing the "good" mother from the "bad" one. Accordingly, the ideal of "good" mothering entails that a woman is selfless, serves as the major caregiver, and stays at home with her children (Hays 3).

In the African context, the notion of motherhood linked to domesticity was introduced with colonialism, specifically through the concept of separate spheres, rooted in Victorian ideology (see Imhonopi, Irounagbe, and Urim; Makama). Women, who enjoyed relative independence and economic autonomy in the pre-colonial era, found themselves relegated to the domestic sphere under colonial rule (Makama 120). The female sex's exclusion from the public and political spheres, combined with social pressures on females such as early marriages, childbearing, and domestic labour, has contributed to women's current disempowerment. In addition, the perception of female education as secondary to that of male children, together with certain inhibitive religious practices, has further exacerbated such a condition (Makama 120). Modern African literature addresses these concerns by paying particular attention to how motherhood, rather than elevating women's status, can also potentially function as a tool for patriarchal control and socio-economic exploitation.

Imagine This (2008) by the Nigerian author Sade Adeniran and *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2003) by the Senegalese novelist Fatou Diome offer a complex representation of motherhood, featuring mothers who are both physically and emotionally detached. The trope of the absent mother, in particular, is used to articulate and question social, cultural, and religious issues. As Nadaswaran observes, twenty-first-century Nigerian women writers deconstruct a view of the family rooted in patriarchal structures in which femininity is associated with submissiveness and domesticity (27).

Drawing on Nadaswaran's reading of Nigerian literature, this analysis extends it to the broader context of contemporary sub-Saharan African Anglophone and Francophone literature, employing a comparative approach to the literary texts under examination. More precisely, it focuses on the recurrent motif of the absent mother by exploring how *Imagine This* and *The Belly of the Atlantic* dismantle deeply entrenched societal expectations of the African mother archetype, characterised as inherently selfless, caring, and compassionate.

The study unfolds in two distinct phases: the first section addresses the representation of emotionally and physically absent mothers, while the second part focuses on the coping mechanisms enacted by the main female characters and on those figures, who provide nurture and care. This analysis posits that maternal absence, rather than indicating deficiency, serves as a catalyst for female empowerment, enabling these characters to shape their own destinies and challenge prescriptive social norms.

Moving Beyond the Myth of Motherhood

Within the socio-cultural context of sub-Saharan Africa, motherhood is often conceived as the "expected destiny of every female" (Dipio 9). This deeply ingrained cultural view reflects the profound significance of the maternal figure in traditional African belief systems and worldviews. Because of her generative capacity, the African mother is revered as a "life-giver and sustainer, comprehensive educator, food provider, and scapegoat of the family" (Dipio 17).

The relevance of the maternal figure is evident in early postcolonial literary production, particularly within the Negritude movement (see Stratton, "Periodic Embodiments" and *Contemporary African Literature*). According to Stratton, tropes like "Mother Africa" and the femme noir, while seemingly celebrating African womanhood, ultimately confine women to the symbolic representation of "embodiment of the nation" (Stratton, "Periodic Embodiments" 111). Within such a framework, Mother Africa was portrayed as the pure and uncorrupted "mother earth," a "graphical representation of the African

continent" untouched by European colonisation" (Ajayi 37). However, such a depiction inadvertently reduplicated colonial ideology dictated by a "relationship of possession" in which the male assumes the role of the "active subject-citizen" and the female was relegated to the "passive object-nation controlled and manipulated by him" (Stratton, "Periodic Embodiments" 122).

In addition to literary texts, the significance of motherhood is also apparent in particular works of the late twentieth-century West African feminist movement. Exemplary is Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's notion of "Motherism" (1995), which was articulated to provide an alternative to western feminism that was African-centred. Within such a framework, motherhood is conceived as a source of empowerment for both women and men, in which, as Musingafi, Mafumbate, and Khumalo aptly observe, the goal is to build "partnership, cooperation, love, understanding, and patience" (246). In this sense, the woman's roles as "matriarch" and "social nurturer" are emphasised as being instrumental in society (Musingafi, Mafumbate, and Khumalo 246).

In a similar vein, in African *Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel* (1996), Ogunyemi explores the profound social and political implications of motherhood in sub-Saharan Africa by elucidating the idea of womanism. She contends that the relevance associated with maternal roles is such that "if a majority of women desired to have power as a collective rather than as individuals, motherhood and its perquisites would be the easiest route to perform a *coup de grace* on the entire populace" (46). Ogunyemi adds that "the power of motherhood instils the desire, to the last Nigerian woman, to have children for self-esteem" (46) as a result of the importance attributed to motherly figures.

It is, however, essential to clarify that the concept of motherhood articulated in womanism differs from the biological and gendered interpretations associated with a patriarchal view of the mothering experience. Instead, Ogunyemi's definition of maternity is presented as a multifaceted practice that includes "a set of beahviours based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual mediation, and dispute resolution" (Phillips xxxix). This idea is echoed in Ogunyemi's assertion that the Nigerian woman is "always somebody's mother" and "doesn't feel any resentment at the extension of her individuality" (9).

Despite the social prestige accorded to motherhood within African feminist schools of thought, several scholars have pointed out its potential drawbacks (see Eze, *Ethics*; Dosekun, "African Feminism"). Thus, Eze posits that the emergence of African feminisms was deeply intertwined with nation-building and the defence of West African values and belief systems against western influence (3). Consequently, critiques of motherhood as a patriarchal imposition moved by certain western feminists did not resonate with many sub-Saharan African women, who instead sought to affirm their own cultural understanding of the maternal role.

Another important aspect that has been brought to light is how the emphasis placed on women's reproductive capabilities inherently exploits those who are biologically infertile. As illustrated in Flora Nwapa's literary text, *Efuru* (1966), this exclusion could lead to social marginalisation and, in certain circumstances, pressure to enter into a polygamous relationship.

Dosekun additionally argues that claiming motherhood based on culture and "Africanness" risks being exclusionary and essentialist, given that in the name of African authenticity, same-sex subjectivities and those who do not identify with "conventional" cultural values are excluded. Furthermore, not all women want to be mothers, and in those cases where a woman might become one, she may feel uncomfortable and have the impression that she has little say in the matter (Dosekun 55).

Contributing to such discourses, the novels *Imagine This* by Adeniran and *The Belly of the Atlantic* by Diome thematise alternative maternal models which fail to fit in the glorified representation of the African mother. The depiction of emotionally and physically absent maternal figures who appear to be disinterested in fulfilling their maternal roles as nurturers and caregivers thus defies expected social conventions.

Child Abuse and Neglect in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*

Published in 2007 by the award-winning Nigerian author, Sade Adeniran, *Imagine This* charts Lola Ogunwole's journey from childhood to adulthood. The protagonist, born in London in 1968 to Nigerian parents, was abandoned by her mother when she was just eighteen months old. The absence of a maternal figure in Lola's life is strongly reflected in her personal diary. The journal opens in 1991 and includes a flashback to 1977, when Lola and her brother, Adebola, arrived in Nigeria with their father.

Threatened by the fact that his children might be placed in the care of child protection services, Lola's father, Samuel Ogunwole, decides to send them to live in Nigeria with his relatives. This drastic change of environment, however, has a profound impact on the protagonist, who would rather "want everything to go back to the way it once was, with [her father], Adebola and [her] living at number 4 Edgecombe House" (Adeniran 4). In Nigeria, she experiences alienation due to cultural and linguistic divergences, which lead her to feel disconnected from her ancestral homeland. Similar to other literary texts, such as Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005), *Imagine This* highlights the challenges the character confronts in adapting to a new socio-cultural setting that feels foreign to her (Okparanta 189).

Research indicates that return migration does not always result in a sense of homeliness and cultural belonging. As Christou notes, returning to one's ancestral homeland presupposes a complex negotiation process (69). This aspect is particularly evident for second-generation returnees who, having been born and raised outside their parents' country of origin, often struggle to reconcile their identities with the cultural ancestral setting. As a result, returning to the ancestral location can exacerbate the feeling of estrangement due to limited proficiency in the language of heritage and unfamiliarity with the cultural mannerisms of those who grew up within the cultural setting. For instance, Lola recounts the linguistic hindrances initially experienced after moving to Idogun and the difficulties of interacting with her relatives: "I have a lot of family, everyone is related to me, everyone wants to touch me, they say things I don't understand and then burst out laughing. Rotimi, my interpreter, is still no good really, his broken English isn't very clear, and I have to guess at what he's saying through a lot of waving and grunts" (Adeniran 13).

Lola's sense of *Unheimlichkeit* and dislocation is further intensified by the emotional and physical detachment exhibited by her father, Samuel, towards her and her brother, Adebola. Samuel personifies what Nadaswaran describes as the "patriarch of the family," a type of masculinity characterised by indifference, disengagement, and aggressiveness (23). His characterisation parallels portrayals of patriarchal figures in earlier and contemporary literary texts such as Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Eugene in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004). Samuel is portrayed through a lens of violence, dominance, abuse of power, and neglect, thereby reinforcing entrenched stereotypes of male authority (Amann and Staudacher 760). Lola frequently documents in her diary memories of a father who displays violent behaviour, subjecting his children to corporal punishment and infliction of pain. For instance, she writes: "[w]hen we were younger, Daddy would use the rulers on our knuckles, then he started using the cane on our palm and if a cane wasn't available, he'd use a belt. I hate the belt, because when Daddy says give me your hand the belt was a way of snaking under the back of the hand so it's like you are getting beaten twice, on the palm and the back of the hand (Adeniran 78).

Recalling narratives that thematise authoritarian patriarchy and violence within family relationship dynamics, Adeniran brings into view the dysfunctional parental approach enacted by Samuel. The passage clearly illustrates the escalating violence through the progression from rulers on knuckles to canes on the palm and the back of the hand, which reflects the deliberate attempt to inflict maximum pain on his children. His aggressive, detached, and uninvolved parental approach leads the protagonist to question whether he is indeed her father. As she observes in one of her diary entries, "I don't even think he's my Father. Maybe I was adopted and I have a real dad out there who is looking for me. Or maybe I was switched at birth and I was given to the wrong parents" (Adeniran 121).

Lola's experience, characterised by the absence of parental affection and emotional support, can be understood as child neglect or maltreatment. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO),

child maltreatment encompasses "all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power" (2024). Different from other forms of child abuse, child neglect is often less visible and, in some cases, socially accepted. This phenomenon is particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa, where there are culturally embedded practices that tend to legitimise child mistreatment, including physical punishment (Kaawa-Mafigiri and Eddy 2).

However, as Avdibegović and Brkič point out, the consequences of child neglect are multiple and tendentially long-lasting. When a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs are unmet, there is an increased propensity for passivity, withdrawal, and apathy (Avdibegović and Brkič 340). Furthermore, neglected children are more likely to internalise feelings of worthlessness and rejection, leading to a diminished sense of self and the belief that they are incapable of forming meaningful friendships, achieving success in their studies, and gaining recognition (see Avdibegović and Brkič; Marici, Clipa, Remus and Pîrghie). This psychological distress is evident in Lola's reflection on her mother's abandonment: "She took one look at me and disappeared, so why would anyone else like me?" (Adeniran 13).

Deprived of the maternal affection she so intensely craves and trapped within an environment marked by emotional neglect and exploitation, Lola turns to writing as a means of survival and self-expression. Her fictitious friend named Jupiter serves as a psychological refuge, providing her with a safe space to articulate her feelings of frustration, anger, disillusionment and profound disappointment towards her father and her extended family. As Ondrus aptly states, "Jupiter is the foundation for her survival. Without Jupiter, she would not write or overcome her abuse. Disclosing her feelings to Jupiter and believing that Jupiter cares provide intimacy for Lola, something she lacks in her daily life" (47-48). It serves as the source of her strength, enabling her to remain resilient in the face of the multiple forms of abuse she endures until she ultimately decides to return to London.

It is within such imaginary milieus that Lola can write about her deep longing for a maternal figure and construct a vision of familial unity and emotional connection. She writes: "I just want to be with my dad but I don't want him to cane me for every mistake I make. I want a mother too, one who will plait my hair, kiss me goodnight and read me stories of princes and princesses" (Adeniran 15).

In a similar vein, in another passage, the protagonist fantasises about a reunion with her mother:

> I watched parents come and pick up their kids. […] No one came for me, I knew no one would come but I couldn't help wishing for a mother to drive up in her nice car get out and call my name anxiously then hold out her arms as I ran into them. She'd then hug me and kiss me and say how much she missed me, she'd ask me about school and I'd tell her how much I hated it and she'd tell me not to worry, that she'll find another one for me just to make me happy. Then she'd take me home and cook me rice and stew with *moi-moi* and I'd eat until I was bursting. I imagine her holding my hand or stroking my head and telling me everything is going to be all right. If I ever do find her, I wonder if my life would be like a fairytale where I get to live happily ever after. (Adeniran 73)

Despite being aware that no one will come for her, Lola nevertheless continues to dream of a mother who will rescue her by providing her with the affection, reassurance, and care she needs.

However, Adeniran complicates the narrative by avoiding stereotypical depictions of the "bad mother." As the plot unfolds, the reader comes to understand that Lola's mother, Constance Olufemi, chose to abandon her children due to the domestic abuse she endured at the hands of her husband, Samuel. This revelation is conveyed through a letter from Constance to her husband in which she writes: "*I have experienced enough of your cruelty and I can no longer go on like this. There are many defects in my body as the result of your beating me like an animal daily— these defects I have to repair*" (Adeniran 304 [italics in the original]). It is interesting to note the repetitive use of the pronouns "I" and

"me," which signals her sense of self-preservation that stands in deep contrast with the archetype of the self-sacrificing "African mother" who prioritises her children's well-being above everything else. By choosing to place her safety and survival first, Constance defies traditional expectations of motherhood as synonymous with boundless affection, care and nurture. While this behaviour challenges conventional maternal role expectations by offering an alternative portrayal of a mother, it simultaneously exposes the devastating consequences of her decision to prioritise her self-preservation as she leaves her children, Lola and Adebola, vulnerable to maltreatment and emotional neglect.

The repercussions of her absence are particularly evident when Adebola is hospitalised following the severe physical abuse he endured at the hands of his uncle. At such a moment, both siblings direct their resentment towards their absent mother: "[Adebola] is blaming all on our absent mother and I agree with him because if she was here we wouldn't have left London. […] She should have been there to look after us properly since [Daddy] couldn't (Adeniran 81). As Nadaswaran poignantly observes: "[d]espite the fact that their actions seem extreme, mothers in third-generation novels do take some form of action to liberate themselves. Yet this is done at the expense of their relationship with their daughters" (26).

It is, however, the very strained daughter-mother relationship that propels Lola towards self-articulation and agency (Nadaswaran 29). Whether fuelled by rage or increased self-awareness, Lola ultimately decides to sever ties with her mother after discovering that she lives in Nigeria. Recalling their telephone conversation, she reflects: "[t]alking to her for the first time on the phone didn't feature in my happy reunion. I didn't want to know why she hadn't come back for us. I'm going to London, it's better to go without baggage from the past" (Adeniran 329).

The mother, personifying the pain and trauma of the past, is perceived as a burden from which she feels compelled to free herself. Her choice to leave behind unresolved questions and emotional wounds stemming from parental neglect signals a powerful act of self-liberation. This decision testifies to her agency and rejection of her past as a defining force in her future.

Infanticide and the Stigma of Illegitimacy: Portraying an Alternative Maternal Figure

In Nathan's analysis of *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006), this literary work is characterised as a "treatise on alienation," emphasising the narrative exploration of "the lack of a firm sense of belonging or identity," particularly within society and the context of migration (73). This aspect contrasts with Adeniran's *Imagine This,* in which Lola's sense of estrangement stems from her initial detachment from her ancestral homeland, which is manifested through linguistic, cultural, and ideological dissonance. Conversely, *The Belly of the Atlantic* articulates a condition of unbelonging shaped by the liminal space occupied by the protagonist as an illegitimate child within the Niodor Senegalese society and as a migrant in France.

Like Lola, the protagonist of Diome's work, Salie, faces abandonment by her mother. However, while Adeniran's novel illustrates intentional child abandonment, Diome also emphasises the ostracism experienced by an illegitimate child. Although most of the critical discourse surrounding *The Belly of the Atlantic*, over the last two decades, has notably favoured an immigration-centred perspective, it is also essential to acknowledge the centrality of the Senegalese author's discussion of two sensitive maternity-related topics: infanticide and illegitimate children (see Nathan; Persic). Deriving from the Latin *infans*, meaning "unable to speak," and *cidium*, from *cidere*, meaning "to strike down" or "to kill," the word "infanticide" refers to the killing of infants, whereas the term "illegitimate" derives from Latin *illegitimus*, meaning "not lawful" (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*). Both notions underscore the detrimental impact of insufficient care and protection from parental figures.

Several studies have attempted to explore the motivation that leads young girls to commit infanticide in Senegal (see Menick, Yabiku; Salisu). Among the factors highlighted is the complex interplay of socio-economic and cultural axes, coupled with low literacy, which significantly influences adolescents' decisions. Even though children are considered a symbol of prestige and fulfilment in traditional African societies, the stigma associated with illegitimate childbirth can lead to severe consequences for young

mothers (Menick 1558). As Menick acknowledges, "[i]l faut des enfants dans le contexte du mariage, ce qui suppose un non aux enfants hors mariage et partant, non aux 'mères célibataires' ou aux 'filles-mères'. Ceci veut dire une condamnation à peine voilée des femmes qui pour une raison ou une autre ne peuvent se marier; le mariage n'étant pas autinatiquemen un acquis lorsqu'on atteint l'âge d'y accéder" (1558).

To prevent and limit illegitimate pregnancies, in Islamic settings across sub-Saharan Africa, early marriages are sometimes practised as a means to ensure that girls remain virgins to avoid dishonour and social exclusion (Menick 1558). The plight of children born out of wedlock is poignantly depicted in *The Belly of the Atlantic* through the story of the main character, Salie. Escaping a "tradition - which demanded [she should] be suffocated," she is an illegitimate child who is raised by her grandmother (Diome 48). Salie's state as an individual born out of wedlock leads her to experience a sense of perpetual exile and to be left out of her community. In this regard, the narrator observes that her "body bore indelible marks," which leads her to "[grow] up with a feeling of guilt, an awareness that [she] had to atone for a sin that is [her] life itself" (Diome 161).

As Eubanks contends, there are multiple convergences between Diome's debut novel and her personal life experiences (122). Born in 1968, Fatou Diome was raised by her grandmother on the small Senegalese island of Niodor. At the age of thirteen, she moved to the city of M'Bour, where she attended high school and subsequently continued her studies in Dakar. At the age of twenty-two, she married a Frenchman and relocated to France. Following the dissolution of her marriage, she relocated to Strasbourg to pursue her doctoral studies (Eubanks 122).

Salie's life, much like Diome's own experiences, is marked by a perpetual state of displacement and *Unheimlichkeit* linked, during her childhood, to her social status as an illegitimate child and, later, by her condition as a black migrant woman. As Zadi's analysis of the novel indicates, Niodor is portrayed as a setting that is gradually undergoing significant changes due to globalisation and capitalism (176). Despite these transformations, rigid patriarchal gender norms persist, where girls are socialised into motherhood and domesticity while boys are encouraged to undertake a more active role as household leaders. As a result of her illegitimacy, Salie is positioned outside of the traditional process of gender socialisation experienced by young girls in Niodor. Unlike the girls who live in her community, whose greatest desire is to become a "mummy, like [their] mummy," Salie avoids such a fate due to her undefined family history, marked by the absence of a recognised paternal figure (Diome 2006, 131).

With respect to motherhood and femininity, the text provides significant insights into how patriarchal ideology and religious beliefs contribute to a dichotomic understanding of gender roles. In a social context in which a woman's value is deeply embedded in her capacity to procreate, motherhood becomes the benchmark for determining those who are considered real women. The consequences of the glorification of motherhood are vividly illustrated through Salie's ironic reflections:

> The number of children in the village is impressive. Nearly all the women of child-bearing age walk around with a baby on their back or under their clothes. […] Some families have enough kids to make up their own football team, subs included. And as for those who are polygamous, their hearts divided, they could even organise their own tournaments at home!
> […] And the women don't stop! Blind or blinded, they rush to sacrifice themselves on the altar of motherhood, to the glory of a god who gave them nothing but ovaries to justify their existence. (Diome 130)

When framed through the lens of Rich's notion of "institutionalised motherhood," it becomes evident to what extent circumscribed perceptions of motherly figures perpetuate a model that prioritises "women's maternal instinct" over intelligence, "selflessness" over "self-realisation," "relation to others rather than creation of self" (25). This ideology paradoxically elevates motherhood to a "sacred" status solely when

the offspring are considered "legitimate"; in essence, this occurs only if the child carries the father's name (Rich 25).

This paradox is poignantly brought to light through the story of Sankèle and Ndtétare. Sankèle is portrayed as a strong-willed female character who, despite "being illiterate," has "naturally acquired a sense of revolt" that leads her to defy societal norms and expectations by engaging in a romantic relationship with Ndétare, a Senegalese man who is considered an outsider in Niodor society (Diome 88). Sankèle's act of defiance is further exacerbated by her unmarried status, rendering her pregnancy a profound source of shame, ostensibly symbolising "family dishonour" (Diome 90). To avoid the social repercussions of a child born out of wedlock, Sankèle's father commits infanticide by "putting the baby in [a] plastic bag and trussing him up like a joint of pork" and adamantly declaring: "No illegitimate child will be raised under my roof" (Diome 91). Exposing the consequences of rigid adherence to traditional values regarding legitimacy and marriage, Sankèle and Ndtétare offer important insights into the widespread practice of infanticide in Senegal and its tragic outcome.

To Sankèle's story, Diome juxtaposes that of Salie, whose mother also experienced pregnancy outside of marriage. However, in contrast to Sankèle, who lacks familial support, Salie is saved by her grandmother. Defying a tradition that would have "demanded [she] be suffocated and a stillborn child announced to the community", her grandmother arranges for her daughter to marry her cousin (Diome 48). However, Salie faces rejection by her stepfather and her health is badly affected. Ultimately, her grandmother decides to raise her as her own daughter.

Similarities can be drawn between Diome's and Adeniran's portrayals of the absent mother. Like Constance, Salie's mother appears to be unconcerned about her daughter's safety. Her passivity is echoed by Salie's thoughts as she notes that her mother does not seem "overanxious to protect me" (49). Salie's mother's lack of affection for her daughter contrasts sharply with the attitude of her grandmother, who demonstrates caregiving and nurturing qualities that Salie does not get to experience with her biological mother. The absence and rejection by her mother are further underscored by the fact that when the mother finally conceived a male child, she "considered [him] her firstborn" (Diome 49).

It might be argued that Diome offers a distinct perspective on the maternal figure, challenging the traditionally privileged status accorded to biological mothers. Recalling Ogunyemi and Acholonu's notion of the African mother, which suggests that mothering practices extend beyond the biological mother to include extended familial bonds, Salie's grandmother embodies the nurturing qualities that her biological mother, due to her personal choices and societal stigma against illegitimate children, could not offer her. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Salie regards her grandmother as the cornerstone of her life:

> Determined to save me my grandmother took me away with her. To cure me, she made endless root broths and massaged me with shea butter. As it hadn't been so long since she'd weaned her youngest, she began to breast-feed again; her milk returned in abundance and soon made a tubby baby of me, full of energy. Because love cannot be measured, my grandmother breastfed me without setting a limit, until the day when, past the age of three, I myself no longer asked for the breast. […] So, *mater*? My grandmother, mother of perpetual maternity: *madre*, mother, *mamma mia*, *yaye boye*, nenam, *nakony*, beloved mama, my mammy-mummy, my real mother! (Diome 49 [emphasis in the original])

Salie's grandmother plays a significant role in encouraging her to pursue an education. Despite being illiterate, the narrator observes how her grandmother "[l]ittle by little, […] became enthusiastic about my studying. […] [S]he kept such a strict watch over my evening revision by the light of the hurricane lamp (Diome 45).

As Nadaswaran observes, the decisions made by female characters in sub-Saharan African literature not to establish a bond with their mothers indicate a process of metamorphosis characterised by

the "separation from patriarchal obligations in family relationships" (30). While in Adeniran's *Imagine This,* such an aspect is exemplified by Lola's choice to sever ties with her extended family following the death of her father, in *The Belly of the Atlantic,* Salie's decision to pursue education and migrate abroad represents a rejection of the conservative notions of femininity imposed by patriarchal structures in her community in Niodor.

Additionally, like Lola, writing becomes Salie's tool for empowerment as it allows her to voice out the unspoken truths of her mother's generation and critique societal norms. Her liminal status as a migrant navigating life between France and Senegal, coupled with her identity as a divorced and childless woman, financially responsible for her stepbrother, Madické, further complicates conventional gender norms.

Ultimately, it might be argued that Diome's narrativisation of the nurturing granddaughter-grandmother bond serves to suggest alternative possibilities and modes that go beyond the traditional family structure founded on the biological mother and father figure. The relationship between Salie and her grandmother provides the protagonist with the affection and support necessary to navigate the difficulties of her life and forge a new path that defies the limitations imposed by tradition and societal expectations. As the narrator poignantly reflects: "[t]he imaginary little chain that my grandmother stretched between us restored my equilibrium. After every storm, she is the beacon rising up from the belly of the Atlantic that sets my solitary navigation back on course [...]. Her soft voice in the night was a mother's cool breath on the burns of her child" (Diome 134).

Conclusions

The creative works examined in this study challenge patriarchal notions of motherhood, which assume that women are naturally nurturing, caring, and self-sacrificing. Such stereotypes suggest that motherhood should provide women with a sense of fulfilment, joy, love, comfort, pride, and satisfaction. In reaction to these institutionalised representations of motherhood, Anglophone and Francophone sub-Saharan African women writers present alternative depictions of mothers that contest the notion that maternal instinct originates from a "natural" bond between mother and child. By narrating tales of women who exhibit emotional detachment from the conventional carer role for their children, they highlight the intricacies of motherhood and the necessity of eschewing reductive stereotypes. At the same time, it might be argued that *Imagine This* and *The Belly of the Atlantic* thematise "the female quest for empowerment, agency and self-identification is achieved at the end of the text, allowing the newly developed female personhood to lead a life filled with opportunities" (Nadaswaran 31). Both literary texts mirror the feminist intent of the authors who, through their writings, provide the representation of female characters who dare to challenge long-lasting exploitative practices

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