



Gender, Voice and Linguistic Agency in Cameroonian Women's writing: A Study of Margaret Afuh's *Born before her time* and Sarah Anyang Agbor's *Echoes within*

Manjo Gladys Bimeh^{1*}

¹University of Bertoua

*Corresponding Author

Manjo Gladys Bimeh

University of Bertoua

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Abstract: This study examines the intersection of gender, narrative voice and linguistic agency in two works of Cameroonian women's writing: Margaret Afuh's novel *Born Before Her Time* and selected poems from Sarah Agbor Anyang's *Echoes Within*. Afuh's novel traces the coming-to-consciousness of a young female protagonist against a backdrop of forced marriage and cultural coercion in the North West Region. At the same time, Anyang's poetry moves across the registers of maternal sacrifice, domestic violence and female leadership to construct a composite portrait of Cameroonian womanhood in both its suffering and its power. The study contends that these writers do not merely describe women's experiences but actively reconstitute female subjectivity through form, diction and the strategic management of voice, thereby situating the primary texts within the broader trajectory of Anglophone Cameroonian literature and its engagement with questions of identity, agency and social transformation. Grounded in feminist literary theory and postcolonial feminism, the study argues that both writers deploy language as a deliberate instrument of gendered resistance, using narrative voice, imagery, repetition and symbolism to challenge the patriarchal and colonial structures that have long circumscribed women's self-expression in Cameroon. The analysis reveals that linguistic agency in these texts functions simultaneously as testimony, critique and reconfiguration, giving form to lives that dominant discourse has rendered invisible and asserting, through the medium of literary language, the full humanity of women whose personhood their social environments deny. The study postulates that, for Afuh and Anyang, no meaningful account of Cameroonian social life is possible without attending to the gendered experience of its women.

Keywords: Gender, Linguistic Agency, Cameroonian Women's Writing, Feminist Literary Theory, Postcolonial Feminism, Narrative Voice, Margaret Afuh, Sarah Agbor Anyang.

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INTRODUCTION

The Cameroonian literary landscape has often produced writers within a linguistic

environment that is itself a site of contest. Within this environment, women writers face a double burden: they must navigate the expectations of a literary field in which male voices have historically predominated

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while simultaneously confronting the social and discursive structures that silence women's speech across the domestic, civic and cultural spheres. It is from within this complexity that the works examined in this study emerge. Margaret Afuh's *born before Her Time*, published in 2003, is among the earlier Anglophone Cameroonian novels to place a female bildungsroman at its narrative centre. Set in the North West Region during the post-independence decades, it traces the childhood, forced marriage and gradual awakening of its protagonist, Abo, a girl whose name and predicament encode the novel's central preoccupation: a subject born into a world not yet prepared to receive her on her own terms. The title's temporal displacement, the sense of a female self, born before her social world has consented to her existence as a person, frames the entire narrative as an inquiry into the conditions under which female personhood is suppressed and the means by which it might equally be reclaimed. Furthermore, the poems of Sarah Agbor Anyang, collected in *Echoes Within*, approach the question of women's experience from the concentrated perspective of the lyric. Through three poems in particular, "Motherhood Supreme," "Lament of a Wife" and "A Song for Dorothy", Sarah Agbor Anyang constructs a prototype of female existence that moves from sacrifice to oppression to celebration, which gives each register its own voice, imagery and emotional logic. Although Anyang is primarily known as a distinguished academic and former African Union Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology, her creative writing reveals a poet of considerable formal skill and political consciousness, one whose verse intervenes in the same debates about gender and power that her scholarly work addresses through a different medium.

The relationship between language, power and gender in African women's writing has generated a substantial body of scholarship since the 1980s. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, in her landmark study *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*, argues that African women writers reinscribe women as speaking-subjects in their fiction, not by adopting Western feminist conventions wholesale but by developing what she terms an Africa-centred gender analysis responsive to the specific cultural and historical conditions of women's lives on the continent (7). Nfon Rita Gola's more recent reading of Afuh's *Born Before Her Time* in "Overshadowing Masculinity: A Feminist Reading of Afuh Margaret's *Born Before Her Time*, *Flowers in the Desert* and Tala Julie Enjema's *Daughters of Ekema*" employs a womanist framework to demonstrate how the protagonist's resistance to forced marriage, though defeated in its immediate object, constitutes a form of refusal that the narrative validates even as it records its social failure (240). These studies provide

important foundations, but they do not address in any sustained way the specifically linguistic and formal dimensions of these writers' practice, the question not only of what they say but of how they say it and what that how accomplishes.

This study, therefore, sets out to examine two principal questions: how do Afuh and Anyang use narrative voice, diction, imagery and structure to give form to women's experiences in postcolonial Cameroon and in what sense can this formal and linguistic practice be understood as a mode of resistance to the patriarchal and colonial discourses that have shaped those experiences? The concept that organises the analysis is that of linguistic agency, by which the study means the deliberate, artistically mediated use of language to assert female presence, name female experience and challenge the discourses that would render women peripheral or silent. More precise than the general category of voice, which describes a property of narrative, linguistic agency names an activity, a doing of things with language that goes beyond description into intervention. The analysis that follows demonstrates that both Afuh and Anyang exercise this agency with considerable skill and that an understanding of their formal choices is essential to a full appreciation of what their writing achieves.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical frameworks adopted in this study are feminist literary theory and postcolonialism. Feminist literary criticism, as developed from its foundational moment in the 1970s, through to its contemporary forms, is united by the conviction that literature is a cultural practice through which gender relations are constructed, contested and transformed. For critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, the history of women's writing is inseparable from the history of women's exclusion from literary authority and the recovery of women's texts is always a critical and political act. Within the African context, however, the most pertinent frameworks are those that, as Nfah-Abbenyi argues, are more grounded in the material realities of African women's lives than derived exclusively from Western experience (5). Scholars such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in *Re-creating Ourselves* and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in her foundational essay "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" have variously insisted on forms of analysis that accommodate the communal orientations of many African cultural traditions alongside their critiques of gender hierarchy. Womanism, as Ogunyemi defines it, is a philosophy of survival, wholeness and the reconciliation of gender struggle with communal belonging (63). This

perspective is particularly relevant to the reading of writers like Afuh and Anyang, both of whom criticise patriarchal structures without abandoning the communities within which those structures are embedded.

Postcolonialism, with a focus on its feminist tenet, extends this framework by attending to the historical and structural dimensions of women's subordination in formerly colonised societies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal paper *Can the Subaltern Speak?* positions postcolonial feminist criticism as how colonial rule both intensified existing forms of gender hierarchy and introduced new ones, restructuring women's relation to education, economic life and public voice in ways that persist long after formal independence. In the Cameroonian context, this is legible in the history of women's access to formal schooling, their position within the institutions of marriage and bride price and their relationship to the two colonial languages that continue to structure public discourse. Spivak's question is precisely what Afuh and Anyang answer through their writing: both are engaged in making audible the voices that dominant discourse has suppressed or ignored and both do so through forms, the novel and the lyric poem, that give those voices public and permanent shape. As Norman Fairclough maintains in *Language and Power*, language is not a transparent vehicle of pre-existing meaning but a social practice in which power relations are enacted, reproduced and challenged through specific linguistic choices (23). This insight is foundational to the readings that follow.

Gender Roles and the Social Construction of Womanhood

Both Afuh and Anyang demonstrate that the roles assigned to women in Cameroonian society are not natural but constructed, produced through social practices and discursive conventions presented as inevitable precisely because they are so deeply embedded in cultural life. In *Born before Her Time*, the construction of womanhood is inseparable from the social institution of betrothal and forced marriage. Abo is betrothed to Pah Worewum at birth, a contractual arrangement between two men in which the girl herself has no voice and of which she is not even informed until she is ten years old. The scene in which her father communicates this arrangement to her, with what the novel renders as a note of finality that forecloses any possibility of objection, establishes, from the outset, that female identity in this social world is constituted through male exchange rather than self-determination. Abo is defined as somebody's future wife before she has had the chance to become a person in her own right. The critical anatomy of this system is deepened by Afuh's attention to the mechanisms through which women

within it become complicit in its perpetuation. Abo's mother, though not party to the decision about her daughter's husband and clearly not at ease with it, responds to Abo's distress with the culturally transmitted maxim that "parents choose husbands for their daughters" (21). This statement is made reflexively, as a reiteration of what the mother herself has been taught to believe and its effect is to show how patriarchal ideology reproduces itself through the very voices of those who suffer under it (Gola 241). Afuh does not condemn the mother but presents her with a kind of tragic comprehension: she is a woman constrained within the same system that now constrains her daughter and her words are the words of someone who has internalised her own subordination.

Abo's resolve to defeat this system "comes crumbling," as Gola notes, when she falls prey to Pah Worewum's sexual coercion (241). Afuh's account of the wedding night, in which Abo "regains consciousness in the morning lying in a pool of blood" (31), refuses any euphemistic softening of what forced marriage entails at the level of the body. The violence is presented as continuous with the social institution rather than as an aberration from it. Its institutionalised nature is confirmed by Pah Worewum's second wife, who explains to Abo that such suffering was an ordeal experienced by many young girls in the community, that "girls would resist in the beginning but end up settling down" (qtd. in Gola 241). In *Born Before Her Time*, then, gender roles are not merely described but anatomised: Afuh shows not only what they demand of women but also how they are justified, normalised and transmitted across generations. This is done precisely by attending to what women in the system say to each other and to themselves.

In *Echoes Within*, Anyang presents gender roles in a more compressed, concentrated way, exploiting the resources of lyric poetry to capture, at moments of intensity, what Afuh tracks across the arc of a life. "Motherhood Supreme" frames motherhood not as a natural condition but as a specific social assignment, one that demands from women a form of labour and self-abnegation so total as to approach the condition of martyrdom. The poem's imagery is deliberately physical and unglamorous: "hands calloused, the drudgery of life" (19) insists on the bodily cost of the work that is culturally assigned to mothers and culturally rendered invisible by the sentimentalisation of motherhood as a spiritual condition. The description of childbirth as passing through "the valley of the shadow of death" (19) draws on Psalm 23 to give this physical experience a heightened register, emphasizing the dangers of childbirth rather than redeeming it through consolation. Similarly, "Lament of a Wife" constructs

the domestic sphere as a site of unrecognised and unrewarded labour through the listing of tasks that form the poem's syntactic backbone: "I clean / I sweep / I wash / I tidy after him" (22). The anaphoric structure of these lines reproduces the very repetitiveness and invisibility of domestic work, performing them in the poem's formal structure. The cultural reference to "bride price" that appears later in the same poem gives this personal account its broader institutional dimension, locating the individual woman's suffering within a social system of exchange in which women's bodies and labour have been commodified. The two texts under analysis thus show that gender roles in the Cameroonian society are both socially constructed and deeply contested through women's lived experiences. It is through the act of literary naming, that is, calling these roles and their costs by their proper names, that the writers begin to challenge them.

Narrative Voice and the Presentation of Women's Experiences

The most important formal difference between Afuh's novel and Anyang's poetry lies in the management of narrative voice and it is in this management that the two writers' distinctive contributions to female literary self-assertion are most clearly visible. In *Born before Her Time*, Afuh uses a narrative voice that is reflective and developmental, tracking Abo's movement from the relative unknowing of childhood through the traumatic experience of forced marriage and sexual coercion toward a gradually emerging consciousness of her own situation and her own possibilities. The novel's opening is particularly striking in this regard: Abo's interiority is established immediately, so that the reader is placed inside the experience of coercion rather than positioned as an observer of it. Her thought, "I would have sworn that they would protect me unto death" (1), reveals in its very phrasing the structure of a betrayed trust, the gap between the expectations that a child forms about the adults responsible for her care and the reality of those adults' conduct within a patriarchal economy that treats daughters as commercial assets. The narrative not only sentimentalises this disillusionment but also presents it with the directness of a consciousness that is still in the process of understanding what has happened to her.

This technique of sustained interiority is Afuh's primary instrument of literary resistance. The more constrained Abo is in the social world of the novel, the more expansive and precise is the reader's access to her consciousness. In this, *Born Before Her Time* does what Nfah-Abbenyi identifies as the central project of African women's fiction: it reinscribes woman as a speaking-subject (7), insisting through form and not argument that there is

a consciousness here, a person, whose inner life has weight and significance even when the surrounding social world refuses to acknowledge it. The Reverend Sister Elizabeth's observation, in the novel's later movement, that "forced marriages had defined almost all human settings, including her homeland, England, until recently" (114), places Abo's individual situation within a broader historical narrative of gradual female emancipation, suggesting that change is possible even if it requires institutional rather than merely personal transformation. Afuh, like Ibsen before her, is not interested in the isolated heroic gesture but in the slow, difficult work of social evolution.

Anyang's deployment of narrative voice in *Echoes Within* is considerably more varied and this variety is itself part of the political argument of the collection. "Motherhood Supreme" is voiced by a daughter who speaks of her mother with a directness that carries the warmth of personal testimony and the weight of public acknowledgement simultaneously. The poem's movement between the particular and the general, between this mother and all mothers, between this sacrifice and the institution of motherhood, is accomplished through voice as much as through imagery and the effect is to elevate private suffering into the register of communal witness. "Lament of a Wife" adopts a first-person voice of immediate, confessional directness, as the woman speaks of her own experience in the present tense, creating a rawness that positions the reader as a witness to a private account made public. The shift to the public register is significant. What is maintained in silence in Cameroonian domestic culture is here, in the space of the poem, said, transforming a woman's private suffering into a matter of public record. "A Song for Dorothy" moves entirely into a celebratory, communal voice that recalls the praise-poetry traditions of the region, elevating a named woman to the status of social exemplar. The movement across these three registers, from testimonial to confessional to celebratory, constitutes in itself a statement about the range and complexity of women's experience and the inadequacy of any single mode of address to contain it. In this, Anyang achieves in miniature what Afuh achieves across the span of a novel: a demonstration that women's lives transcend the narrow roles assigned to them and require a correspondingly richer literary language to be truly seen.

Marriage, Silence and Patriarchal Violence

Marriage emerges in both texts as one of the primary institutions through which women's subjectivity is suppressed and its representation in Afuh and Anyang illuminates the range of strategies, from the explicitly violent to the ideologically subtle,

through which patriarchal authority maintains its hold. In *Born before Her Time*, the institution of forced marriage is embedded in a web of obligation, debt and social sanction that makes individual resistance almost structurally impossible. Pah Worewum's claim on Abo is rooted in the debt that her father owes him for saving his life, a debt repaid by the promise of a daughter. The logic is economic exchange, in which a girl's body and future are fungible assets in a system of masculine reciprocity in which women enter only as objects. What makes Afuh's treatment particularly incisive is her attention to the escalation of violence through which this system operates: the symbolic violence of the betrothal, in which Abo is disposed of before she knows it; the social violence of the wedding, from which she cannot escape and the physical violence of the wedding night. The escalation from the symbolic to the physical is not a narrative accident but a demonstration of how ideological systems generally depend on the capacity for physical coercion, how even the most elaborate cultural justifications for the subordination of women rest, finally, on force.

The Tasmana episode deepens this critique. When Abo finds refuge with Tasmana, the independent hunter, she imagines him as an elder brother and saviour. But Tasmana sees in her a wife, one whose position, in his view, is in his domestic sphere. Projecting the same masculine assertiveness that his community admires as a mark of manliness, he tells Abo plainly: "It depends on what I want" (106). The exchange is brief but devastating: it shows that the logic of masculine ownership that Pah Worewum represents is not peculiar to old men with resources but is a structural feature of the culture, reproduced even by those who appear, in other respects, to stand outside its conventions.

Anyang's "Lament of a Wife" engages with marriage through a different formal strategy, concentrating the institution's violence into the present-tense particularity of a single woman's account. The poem's rhetorical power derives from the juxtaposition of two kinds of statement: those that document the woman's labour and those that record her suffering. The domestic tasks listed in the poem's opening movement, "I clean / I sweep / I wash / I tidy after him" (22), establish a baseline of invisible, unacknowledged work; the statement "He hits me like a punching bag for nothing" (22) then introduces violence as continuous with this invisibility, as the further extension of a logic in which the woman's personhood counts for nothing. The simile is deliberately ungainly: a punching bag is an object designed to absorb force without resistance and the comparison strips away any possibility of romantic softening. The lines that follow, "He pushes me to the left, I follow / He pushes me to the right, I

follow" (22), extend this objectification into the register of spatial and bodily control, showing a woman whose very movement is determined by another's will. In both Afuh and Anyang, the normalisation of this condition is represented as one of patriarchy's most effective instruments of perpetuation. In Afuh's novel, it is transmitted through the mother's resigned maxims. In Anyang's poem, it is captured in the mother-in-law's verdict: "In marriage, it happens like that" (22). Both texts show, with equal clarity, that a structure of oppression depends not only on those who exercise power but on those who teach its victims to accept it.

Motherhood and the Politics of Sacrifice

The figure of the mother occupies a complex and contested position in both texts. Motherhood has traditionally been one of the primary means by which women's value is defined in patriarchal social orders, their worth measured in reproductive capacity and willingness to subordinate desire to the needs of children and husbands. Both Afuh and Anyang are sensitive to this dynamic and both resist the temptation to resolve it sentimentally. Anyang's "Motherhood Supreme" is the most concentrated exploration of this complexity in the corpus under study. The poem's title announces its subject with a formality that borders on the ceremonial and it proceeds to honour the mother while simultaneously insisting on the cost of that honour. The physicality of the central imagery, "hands calloused, the drudgery of life" (19), is deliberate: it insists that the idealisation of motherhood as a condition of spiritual elevation must reckon with the material reality of what motherhood demands of women's bodies and time. The description of childbirth through the Biblical phrase "the valley of the shadow of death" (19) gives the physical danger of parturition a weight that counterbalances the cultural tendency to romanticise it. Anyang is not dismissing the spiritual dimensions of the mother's sacrifice but insisting that those dimensions must be held together with the material ones, that to celebrate the mother honestly is to acknowledge what she has actually endured.

The poem's speaker, figured as a daughter, performs the witnessing that feminist criticism has identified as central to the recovery of women's experience: the act of seeing clearly what has been done and saying it back in a form that cannot be ignored. The repeated affirmation "I remain indebted" (19) enacts the speaker's awareness of a debt that cannot be repaid and that the surrounding culture has not even acknowledged as a debt. In this sense, "Motherhood Supreme" functions as a retroactive recognition, a giving of credit where credit has been withheld. But it also, by naming the sacrifice so precisely, implicitly raises the question of whether such a sacrifice should be required in the

first place. The poem does not answer this question directly but leaves it suspended in the space between the honour it bestows and the suffering it names and it is in this suspension that its political intelligence resides.

In *Born before Her Time*, the representation of motherhood is more diffuse but no less significant. Abo's mother's response to her daughter's situation, her repetition of cultural wisdom about the prerogatives of parents in the matter of their daughters' marriages, can be read as a form of maternal failure. Still, Afuh presents it with enough contextual clarity to prevent such a simple judgment. The mother is herself a product of the system she transmits and her speech is an act not of malice but of resignation, the response of someone who has given up the hope that things might be otherwise. This is one of the novel's most searching observations: that motherhood, as it is structured within patriarchal society, can reproduce the very conditions of women's subordination, not because mothers wish their daughters harm but because the same constraints have drawn the horizon of possibility within which they operate. The novel's critical project is to expand that horizon by giving Abo's consciousness the space to imagine and desire beyond it.

Linguistic Agency as Resistance

The concept of linguistic agency designates the deliberate and artistically mediated use of language to assert female presence, make women's experience visible and challenge the discursive formations that would suppress or marginalise that experience. It is distinguished from the general fact of having a voice by the element of intentionality and craft. Linguistic agency is exercised when a writer makes formal choices about diction, syntax, imagery and structure that are in themselves politically significant and that do not merely describe a situation but intervene in it. Both Afuh and Anyang exercise this agency with considerable skill and an appreciation of their formal choices is essential to a full reading of what their texts accomplish.

In Anyang's poetry, linguistic agency is exercised with particular formal sophistication. The listing technique that characterises "Lament of a Wife" is, as noted above, both a description of domestic labour and a formal enactment of it. The poem's syntax reproduces the experience of repetitive, unacknowledged work, so that reading the poem involves an encounter with the condition it describes. This is both intellectual and somatic and the linguistic agency is precise. Anyang uses the formal resources of poetry to create in the reader an experience that is isomorphic with the experience she represents. In this sense, the poem does not

merely report on women's invisibility but makes it felt. The simile "He hits me like a punching bag" (22) operates similarly: its linguistic striking quality, its refusal of euphemism, its willingness to use a deliberately jarring comparison constitute a political act in their own right, a demand that violence be seen for exactly what it is and not softened into something more bearable through a more decorous phrase.

The shift in register and imagery that marks "A Song for Dorothy" is equally significant. When Anyang describes Dorothy as "an icon" and as "the eagle with a crest of red and gold" (65), she draws on the symbolic resources of praise poetry to claim for a woman the public recognition that such poetry has traditionally reserved for male leaders and warriors. The eagle, in many West and Central African cultural traditions, symbolises power, vision and sovereignty; the crest of red and gold adds the language of heraldry and formal authority. To apply this imagery to a woman is to contest the gendered distribution of symbolic capital, asserting that the qualities the eagle represents are not inherently masculine but can be fully embodied by a woman. This is linguistic agency at the level of image and literary tradition, a rewriting of the symbolic vocabulary through which a culture represents its values and exemplars. The three poems of *Echoes Within* under examination constitute a sustained and formally inventive argument for the full inclusion of women's experience within the category of the humanly significant.

In Afuh's novel, linguistic agency operates primarily through the construction of Abo's interiority. The decision to give the protagonist a rich and fully realised inner life, allowing the reader sustained access to her thoughts, feelings, desires and judgments, is itself an act of literary resistance to a social order that refuses to recognise that inner life as worthy of attention. When Abo thinks of her betrayal, when she forms her own judgment of the men who dispose of her, when she imagines a different existence, these moments of interiority constitute what Nfah-Abbenyi calls the reinscription of woman as speaking-subject (7): the narrative insistence that there is a consciousness here whose weight and significance are not diminished by the fact that the surrounding social world refuses to acknowledge them. The Shavian parallel is instructive. Shaw, writing of Vivie's characterisation in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, observed that drama of his time was "flaccid in its sentimentality" (25) and deliberately created a character whose clarity of mind and refusal of consolation constituted a challenge to that sentimentality. Afuh's construction of Abo's consciousness performs an analogous operation within the novel; it refuses the sentimental representation of the suffering female victim and insists instead on the unsentimentalised fact of a

mind that continues to think, desire and resist even within conditions of near-total social constraint.

Women's Writing and the Reconfiguration of Social Identity

Both Afuh and Anyang are engaged not only in describing women's experience but also in reconfiguring the terms through which women are represented and understood in Cameroonian society. In *Born before Her Time*, this reconfiguration unfolds primarily through Abo's developing consciousness. The novel does not conclude with a triumphant liberation narrative; Afuh is too honest a writer for that and the social forces that constrain Abo are too substantial to be defeated by individual will alone. What the novel offers instead is the more modest but more credible achievement of a female subject who has come to understand her situation, who has named it to herself with clarity and who has established, through that naming, a relation to her own experience that is not simply one of submission. Like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who closes the door on her husband and children in search of a fuller existence, Abo's reaching toward a different life represents less a solution than a formulation of the problem in terms that can no longer be ignored. Ibsen, too, was interested not in the isolated heroic gesture but in what his speech to the workers of Trondheim called "the nobility of character, the nobility of mind and will" (1885), the quality of spirit that enables individuals to see beyond the narrow definitions their social orders impose on them. Afuh's Abo embodies this quality of spirit within the North West Cameroonian context and the novel's insistence on rendering that spirit visible is itself the primary act of reconfiguration it performs.

Anyang's reconfiguration of female identity is accomplished through the juxtaposition and range of her three poems, which together construct a social portrait of Cameroonian womanhood that refuses reduction to any single image. The suffering mother of "Motherhood Supreme," the abused wife of "Lament of a Wife," and the celebrated leader of "A Song for Dorothy" are not contradictory figures but facets of a complex social reality in which women occupy the positions of victim, worker, survivor and exemplar simultaneously. By placing these three poems in relationship, Anyang implicitly argues against the reductive representations of women that dominant culture permits: those that sentimentalise female suffering and those that celebrate female achievement without acknowledging the conditions against which that achievement is won. Dorothy is celebrated as an eagle, but the poems that precede her portrait remind the reader that many women endure calloused hands and punching bags before they reach any position from which their achievements can be publicly acknowledged. The

collection thus constructs, in miniature, the kind of composite female portrait that feminist criticism has called for: one that holds together suffering and agency, constraint and transcendence, without resolving the tension between them into a comfortable narrative.

The relationship between language and identity that both texts enact is particularly significant in the Cameroonian context, where linguistic plurality is not merely a sociolinguistic fact but a condition of cultural and political life. Both Afuh and Anyang write in English, but their English is inflected with the cultural specificities of the Cameroonian North West, including idioms, proverbs, social references and ways of imagining the world particular to the region and its tradition. This is not simply a stylistic choice but a political one: it claims the resources of the English language for a set of experiences and voices that standard literary English has not historically represented. It is, in essence, the literary practice that postcolonial theory has described as writing back, not by abandoning the colonial language but by stretching and redirecting it to carry the weight of experiences it was not designed to bear. In this, both writers participate in the broader project of what Chinweizu and his co-authors once called the decolonisation of African literature, not as a matter of language choice alone but as a matter of whose experience literary language is made to attend to and validate.

CONCLUSION

Afuh's representation of gender roles and marriage in *Born before Her Time* is unmistakable and Anyang's condemnation of patriarchal domestic arrangements in *Echoes Within* is equally evident. Both authors are unanimous in demonstrating that the social construction of womanhood in postcolonial Cameroon is a system of constraint that operates simultaneously at the levels of the body, the institution and the imagination and that its perpetuation depends on the silencing of women's voices across all three levels. For Afuh and for Anyang, the literary text is the space in which that silencing is refused. It is unrealistic, counterproductive and destructive of human potential and it must therefore be confronted not through revolution in the Marxist sense, but through the slower and more durable work of representation: giving women's experience the visibility, the complexity and the formal dignity that the surrounding culture withholds.

The primary instrument of this confrontation is what this study has called linguistic agency: the artistically mediated use of language to assert female presence, name female experience and challenge the discourses that render women

peripheral or silent. Anyang exercises this agency through the concentrated formal resources of lyric poetry, exploiting listing, simile, anaphora and the traditions of praise-song to make women's lives both visible and significant. Afuh exercises it through the sustained construction of a female interiority that the social world of the novel refuses to acknowledge but that the novel's narrative refuses to abandon. In both cases, the formal choices are inseparable from the political argument: the how of the writing is part of what the writing says. While it is clear from both texts that the authors do not seek a wholesale rejection of Cameroonian cultural tradition in favour of a Western feminist template, they also advocate a thoroughgoing transformation of the terms on which women are valued and heard within that tradition.

Afuh's motivation for giving Abo an interior life as rich as the one her social world denies her is because Abo can embody the problem of women's suppression with a vividness that argument alone cannot achieve. Anyang's decision to celebrate Dorothy as an eagle soaring above the constraints that "Lament of a Wife" makes visible is because Dorothy's elevation represents not an escape from those constraints but a demonstration of what women are capable of when those constraints are lifted. Abo and Dorothy, the girl bound with twine in her father's yard and the woman with the crest of red and gold, can therefore be seen as twin emissaries of the same argument: that the failure to hear women's voices is not a minor social inconvenience but a fundamental distortion of social reality and that the correction of that distortion is what literature, at its most serious and most necessary, is for.

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