

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*, 1994

Naomi Nkealah, *University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa*

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, author of *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*, was an internationally acclaimed gender theorist. At the time she published *Re-creating Ourselves*, she was one of few African women from the continent producing knowledge on African gender theory from an African-centred perspective. Some of her feminist contemporaries were sociologist Fatima Mernissi (born in Morocco in 1940);¹ literary scholar Helen Chukwuma (born in Nigeria in 1942); and the writers Ama Ata Aidoo (born in Ghana in 1942), Micere Githae Mugo (born in Kenya in 1942), and Sindiwe Magona (born in South Africa in 1943). Together, these women spoke and wrote about gender based on their first-hand experiences of women's empowerment and disempowerment within their African societies. Like her contemporaries, Ogundipe-Leslie was an outstanding intellectual whose ideas propose the combination of scholarly, activist, and developmental efforts in the project of transforming Africa's cultural, religious, economic, political, and ethical landscapes for the benefit of women. Evidence of this view is abundant in *Re-creating Ourselves*. The book was published by Africa World Press in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1994 and brings together essays that Ogundipe-Leslie wrote over a period of two decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s.² The essays exemplify her multiple accomplishments: as a literary critic, a social critic, a women's rights activist, a founder of women's organizations, and an educator.

Born on December 27, 1940, in Lagos, Ogundipe-Leslie (named Abiodun Omalara Ogundipe at birth) attended universities in Nigeria before proceeding to Leiden University,

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1. See Nadia Bouras's essay on Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* in this issue.

2. There is only one original publication of *Re-creating Ourselves*, with 262 pages and ISBN number 0-86543-412-3. In my research, I could not find a reprinted version or second edition of the book.

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where she obtained her doctorate degree. Like many of her contemporaries, she worked in Nigeria before joining the migrant labor force of university professors in North America.³ She published *Re-creating Ourselves* in 1994 as a way of consolidating her scholarly writing over many years. Several chapters in the book were published previously in journals and books. For example, chapter 3, “The Female Writer and Her Commitment,” was initially published with the same title in the journal *African Literature Today*.⁴ Similarly, chapter 1, “African Women, Culture and Another Development,” appeared in the journal *Présence Africaine* under the name Leslie Omolara Ogundipe.⁵ Beside *Re-creating Ourselves*, Ogundipe-Leslie wrote other books. Working with Carole Boyce Davies, she edited the two-volume *Moving Beyond Boundaries*.⁶ In addition to her critical writing, she published the poetry collection *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems*.⁷ Nevertheless, she is most famous for her theory of *stiwanism*, which she coined based on the acronym STIWA (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa). At the heart of *stiwanism* is the need for African women to drive development in their societies, working in partnership with men to do so, so that change can be holistic. These ideas are plotted out in detail in chapter 18 of *Re-creating Ourselves*.

Re-creating Ourselves was seen as an important book at the time it was published because it broke the cycle of male hegemony in scholarship on women’s representation in African literature and presented an alternative narrative that directly countered the masculinist views of African male writers in their fictional representations of African women. Florence Stratton’s book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* was published in the same year as *Re-creating Ourselves* and also served as a feminist intervention that challenged the proliferation of patriarchal ideas about African women by scholars such as Ibekwe Chinweizu.⁸ Chinweizu was a sexist whose writings denigrated African women. As Itang Ede Egbung states, “Chinweizu has confined women to the domestic space because of his perception about women as people who are bereft of physical strength and mental ability to function in other areas of life.”⁹

3. Allan, Review of *Re-creating Ourselves*, 197.

4. Ogundipe-Leslie, “Female Writer and Her Commitment.”

5. *Ibid.* I noted different iterations of Ogundipe-Leslie’s name during my research. While her name appears as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie on her book *Re-creating Ourselves*, she had used other variants of her name in earlier publications. Thus, it was difficult to determine the exact number of citations she has garnered over the years. Nevertheless, on Google Scholar, the number of citations for *Re-creating Ourselves* was 960 as of September 28, 2023.

6. Boyce Davies and Ogundipe-Leslie, *Moving Beyond Boundaries*.

7. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems*.

8. Chinweizu, *Anatomy of Female Power*. For a feminist critique of Chinweizu’s book, see God’spresence, “Chinweizu’s Assumptions of Women’s Power.”

9. Egbung, “Patriarchal Limitations,” 83.

Stratton's book challenged this way of writing about African women. It also countered representations of women in texts by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and many others by offering radicalized readings that exposed the chauvinist subtexts embedded in these works and proposing women's literature as an alternative making of African gender relations. As important as it was, Stratton's work received criticism on the basis that it failed to analyze male-female relationships from a position of understanding of gender relations in Igbo culture.¹⁰ By contrast, Ogundipe-Leslie's book, which equally hammered the male guard of writers, received rave reviews. In a review of the book, Tuzyline Jita Allan noted that "to the conventional list of colonial and class considerations" that the topic of "Africa's devaluation in the global economy of ideas" had inspired, "Ogundipe-Leslie has added the neglected category of gender, confident in the belief that the rise of women in Africa will raise the continent from its current state of dejection and despair to new heights of resourcefulness and creativity."¹¹ Thus, *Re-creating Ourselves* was a remarkable book of its time because of its role in engineering feminist postcolonial knowledge amidst a very masculinist body of knowledge.

One of the male writers whose depiction of African women Ogundipe-Leslie boldly challenges in her book is Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Nobel laureate. In chapter 6 of *Re-creating Ourselves*, "The Representation of Women: The Example of Soyinka's *Ake*," Ogundipe-Leslie praises Soyinka's account of his childhood life in *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981) as a boyhood story "charmingly re-created by the adult Soyinka" but disputes Soyinka's representation of women in the text, women such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti who led anticolonial protests in Nigeria.¹² She calls into question Soyinka's chauvinist representation of Nigerian women's political activities between 1947 and 1952 against the colonial government: "Perhaps the greatest historical disservice Soyinka does the Women's Movement is to portray it as an unplanned, impulsive, gut reaction to contemporary maladministration. The movement was, in fact, highly organized."¹³ It is obvious here that Ogundipe-Leslie took the patriarchal bull by its twisted horns and pinpointed the sexism belying Soyinka's writing about the women's anticolonial struggles. This is quite a courageous act at a time when many scholars could hardly criticize Soyinka.

10. See, e.g., Obioma Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries." According to Nnaemeka, Stratton's book illustrates "the pitfalls of a radical feminist criticism in its full regalia of arrogance, prejudice, and separatism" (96).

11. Allan, Review of *Re-creating Ourselves*, 197.

12. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves*, 101.

13. *Ibid.*, 106.

Ogundipe-Leslie's outspokenness in addressing matters that had been trivialized or ignored in existing scholarship sets her book apart from others of her time. One of the important books that was trending at the time Ogundipe-Leslie published *Re-creating Ourselves* is Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, published in 1987. The book is an ethnographic study into gender relations in an Igbo society in southeastern Nigeria, and the author also looks at how colonialism destabilized women's power. In a review of a reprint of the book published by Zed Books in 2015, Kirk Arden Hoppe notes that the book was a politically and theoretically important book in its postulations of women's institutional power in pre-colonial Nigerian Igbo societies but that its limitation was its silence on sexual diversity matters, thus treating gender in isolation of sexuality.¹⁴ In contrast to Amadiume's silencing of sexuality in her treatise on women in precolonial Igbo society, Ogundipe-Leslie openly criticizes the "silence and silencing" as she acknowledges that "lesbian and gay discourses have not yet received earnest attention in African thought."¹⁵ Her courage to speak about this in her book at a time when the topic of African sexualities was still a repressed subject signifies her scholarly autonomy, political expressionism, and social vision.¹⁶

Beyond showcasing the writer's courage, *Re-creating Ourselves* is a classic of the humanities because it has influenced the feminist thinking of so many African scholars of different age groups and diverse genders. In the opening chapter of her *Womanism and African Consciousness*, Mary Modupe Kolawole engages extensively with *Re-creating Ourselves*, arguing that the book disproves claims about African women's voicelessness. She notes that Ogundipe-Leslie shows clearly that rural women are speaking up about their challenges as well as their agency in overcoming these challenges and that it is the responsibility of critics to listen out for these voices, rather than assuming them muted.¹⁷ In affirming the need for new, authentic terminology for African feminisms, she draws on Ogundipe-Leslie's idea of African women "recreating ourselves." This becomes the rationale for launching her own theory of African womanism. Twenty years down the line, in my own theorization of African feminism based on the South African literary context, I equally drew on ideas in *Re-creating Ourselves* to launch my theory of cameline agency.¹⁸ I used particularly Ogundipe-Leslie's idea of "critical transformations" to construct cameline agency as a feminist theory of social transformation in

14. Kirk Arden Hoppe, review of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 499.

15. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves*, 214.

16. The topic of African sexualities has now gained wide scholarly interest as evident in books like Tamale, *African Sexualities: A Reader*.

17. Mary Modupe Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, 9.

18. See Nkealah, "Cameline Agency."

South African women's literature. From the perspective of Ogundipe-Leslie's book, the women characters represented in my selection of texts critically transform themselves as well as the spaces within which they operate as "they create social spaces where things are done differently, in contrast to a past system founded on patriarchal hegemony."¹⁹ Effectively, I borrowed Ogundipe-Leslie's notion of critical transformation and made sense of it within a uniquely challenging South African context of women's subjugation to racist, sexist, chauvinist, classist, ethnicist, and xenophobic practices.

The example of Kolawole and myself, whose scholarship has a twenty-year time gap, clearly illustrates the enduring relevance of Ogundipe-Leslie's book in the field of African feminist studies as it transitions from the veteran scholars to the more contemporary ones. Two other African women whose feminist ideas echo those of Ogundipe-Leslie are Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. With Ezeigbo born in 1947 and Adichie in 1977, there is a thirty-year age difference, yet both of them have expressed feminist ideas that clearly resonate with Ogundipe-Leslie's ideas in *Re-creating Ourselves*. In *Snail-Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model*, Ezeigbo discusses Ogundipe-Leslie's stiwanism extensively, explaining that it is not an anti-men theory but rather calls for male-female collaboration in transforming African cultural practices that oppress women.²⁰ On the basis of this indigenous model of feminism, Ezeigbo justifies and introduces her own model, which she calls snail-sense feminism. Ezeigbo's engagement with Ogundipe-Leslie's stiwaniist ideas in *Re-creating Ourselves* goes to show how African feminist scholarship has developed organically over the years as scholars build on each other's knowledge to produce new understandings of this complex terrain called gender. Third-generation Nigerian women writers have been nourished by this fountain of indigenously produced African feminist knowledge, even if they do not publicly say so. Adichie has certainly benefitted from this fountain as one sees in her feminism traces of stiwaniist ideas. In her TEDx Talk "We Should All Be Feminists," which also exists in book form, Adichie proposes the idea of feminism for everyone, irrespective of gender.²¹ The very title of this talk speaks to the concept of feminism without gender borders. While Adichie's talk is problematic for inferencing heterosexual men only, it nevertheless strikes one as a direct echo of Ogundipe-Leslie's words in chapter 18 of *Re-creating Ourselves*, in which she states: "I think that feminism is the business of both men and women anywhere, *and* in Africa. I think that all men need to be progressive feminists, committed to a socially just society, wherein a woman

19. Ibid., 123.

20. See Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense Feminism*, 17–19.

21. See Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 25.

can realize herself to her fullest potential, if she so chooses.²² We note here the power of intertextuality in building knowledge on African feminisms.

The examples provided so far make up only a minuscule part of the body of knowledge that has been influenced by Ogundipe-Leslie's book. Scholars from all over the world researching African women have used this book as a reference point for articulating knowledge on subjects like women and development in Africa, women's group activism, women and democracy, women in politics, women and culture, women and sexuality, women and postcolonialism, and women's place in religion. Notable scholars who have cited *Re-creating Ourselves* in their monographs and journal articles in the last ten years include Andrea Noorwood, Chielozone Eze, Ange-Marie Hancock, Sylvia Tamale, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Simidele Dosekun, Cajetan Iheka, and Dobrota Pucherová.²³ Significantly, few of these scholars engage with *Re-creating Ourselves* to contest its ideas; often, they use the ideas to give theoretical grounding to their own views or to offer alternative perspectives.

A notable indication of this book's classical status is that several chapters in the book have been excavated and reproduced as part of other edited books. For example, the book *Feminism and Race*, edited by Kum-Kum Bhavnani, has a chapter titled "Moving the Mountains, Making the Links" that is a reproduction of the introduction of *Re-creating Ourselves*.²⁴ Similarly, the anthology edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson titled *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* includes a reproduction of Ogundipe-Leslie's chapter 18 on stiwanism.²⁵ That chapters in this book have journeyed across time and space into other publications points to scholars' recognition of the enduring merits of the knowledge the book contains.

Ogundipe-Leslie died on June 18, 2019, at age seventy-nine. In a tribute, Adedoyin Aguoru notes that besides the two biological daughters she left behind, "who bear the torch of the light she represented, several other daughters of Africa, whom she influenced with her profundity and Stiwanism, continue to be positively driven and keep the fire aglow."²⁶ As one of those daughters, I fully echo Aguoru's words. Ogundipe-Leslie may have left this planet, but as scholars in the humanities we are grateful that she left us with a gift—*Re-creating Ourselves*—whose value is ageless.²⁷

22. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves*, 230.

23. The publication information for these scholars' works can easily be accessed by looking at the citations record for *Re-creating Ourselves* on Google Scholar.

24. Ogundipe-Leslie, "Moving the Mountains, Making the Links."

25. Ogundipe-Leslie, "Stiwanism."

26. Aguoru, "For 'M.O.' and the Legacy She Left Us," 137.

27. For further reading, see Ayodo, review of *Re-creating Ourselves*; Daniel, "Barren Rivers and Flowery Women"; John, "Culture, Difference and Social Change"; and Mama, "Feminism or Femocracy?"

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