

## Module B Essay

'Speeches have been described as passionate and insightful responses to perceived injustices in the modern world.'

To what extent does this perspective align with your understanding of the speeches set for study?

A speech cannot save the world. It can, however, be an expressive and informed medium which, through creation of a sense of shared immediacy, enables *audiences* to glimpse lost voices, and its *author* to amplify the significance of a voice which is not their own. There exists today a disconnect between the representation of female voices within literature and those that exist within our world. The stories of women are not narratives which we can pretend are homogenized any longer, and it is through speeches by which we find this conceit best expressed. In lieu of delivering an epideictic speech to the Nobel Academy in 2007, Doris Lessing exploits her platform in her lecture, On not winning the Nobel Prize to respond to the cyclic nature in which the third world is deprived of *access* to literature, whilst Geraldine Brooks' lecture A Home in Fiction observes the gaps in historical records created by the *omission* of female voices from literature, which Brooks argues must be added to our lineage through recognizing our shared human experience. In Spotty-Handed Villainesses, Margaret Atwood makes her case for the complex woman, who *cannot locate herself* within contemporary literature due to the internalization of the construction of gender performativity which dictates that women cannot be 'bad.' It is the manner in which each orator grapples with the medium of speech to explore real world ramifications that a cohesive anthology of texts which highlight the need to diversify representations of the female experience is formed.

Doris Lessing was fiercely aware of the grand audience her acceptance speech would receive, and subverts this context to instead grapple with the stories of and injustice that is the lack of access to literature Zimbabwean women face. Lessing's exploitation of maternal metaphor is perhaps controversial, however this lends to its overt passion, imbuing an immediate and empathetic sense of loss. She says, **"If a writer cannot find this space, then poems and stories may be stillborn."** Lessing synonymizes stories as forms of life and calls those that fail to become complete **'stillborn,'** enabling audiences to grasp the African female experience through a shared contextual framework such as maternity. Lessing effectively suggests that African women *do* have these **'poems and stories'**, but they cannot be told due to the cyclic way in which Zimbabwe's lack of access to literature is woven into its societal fabric. Lessing's articulation of this is strengthened most by her insightful anecdotes, which lie in juxtaposition with her Western audience's normalized perception of literature. She tells of a woman who is **"reading slowly, mouthing the words"** of *Anna Karenin*, craving for; consuming the words, whilst a UN officer makes a pageantry of his ability to tear the same book **"into three parts."** The arrangement of recollection and metaphorical discussion, concerning the stifling of expressions of the African experience, which in turn stifles the level of complexity within the international literary canon, which the speech medium allows cultivates a desire to change these grotesque injustices.

Alike Lessing, Brooks simultaneously argues for voices that belong to women to be added to the sphere of literature; however, Brooks calls on her authorial ethos to extrapolate upon the surplus of unjust erasure of past female voices from historical records. She anecdotally walks her audience through the process by which she finds inspiration in, **"Often, the voices that speak to me are the voices of the unheard,"** before citing historical stimuli, **"The maid who was illiterate... [the] Puritan minister's daughter..."** She syntactically stipulates, by placing these two phrases in direct adjacency with each other, that it is not uncommonly women who are the ones to face omission. Brooks guides her audiences through the 'home' in fiction of which she speaks and thus positions one to comprehend the invisible injustice within our historical records. And then, she dares us to **'recognize'** these women – **"...her anger, her sense of injustice, her awareness that she, as a woman, is getting a**

**crook deal.**” We are angry, as they were; we sense injustice, as they did; **“they loved, as I love,”** and so on, and soon we turn to mirrors and see reflections of our past. Brooks effectively communicates that the integrity of our historical records is a concern for all, for they are ours after all, through the establishment of a commonality between contemporary and past women; as lecturer Stella Clarke says, *“Brooks justifies her novelist’s claim on history via her belief in the fundamental constancy of human nature.”* Brooks understands that our records are but a, **‘first rough draft’**, and her positioning of audiences within her historical home in fiction via anecdotal pathos, and logos is central to a perceiving the sameness of our *‘fundamental nature’*.

Atwood’s speech calls for attention to the bad female voice’s omission from fiction through a direct address to authors, and anecdotes which observe the effect of hegemonic understandings of gender upon women. Most notably an articulation of this is an intertextual reference within the exordium to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century nursery rhyme, *There Was a Little Girl*, to which Atwood in her youth took **“to be a poem of personal significance – I did after all have curls.”** Atwood makes sardonic reference to idiomatic literature and individualizes it, for it is not her hair from which Atwood derives **‘personal significance’** from this poem, but her gender, to enable audiences to perceive the manner in which all women share in being convinced through cultural figments that to be bad is to be **“horrid”**. Thus, women are commonly denied complexity, which can often accompany deviousness in literature, which then limits women in real life. Atwood’s exigence is that, **“Female bad behavior occurs... but not at sufficient length.”** Thus, her call to action, **“Women characters, arise! Take back the night!”** is simultaneously an explicit call to authors to indulge in female villainy, for literature and its **‘characters’** have both an ability to construct and dismantle cultural hegemony. Gallagher says that Atwood, *“...connects to the audience to compel the realization that women in literature have been oversimplified.”* Indeed, Atwood’s speech is a testimony to the consciousness, but moreover, through addressing authors within the speech medium, it is an announced reinforcement of the power of literature to shape our understanding of the world, as well as change it.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, *“If... the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.”* It is through the speech form by which audiences are insightfully compelled to perceive the manner in which women are denied their *‘full humanity’*; their books, their remembrance, and their villainy, and are imbued with an anger and passion to change this. We must not turn away from Lessing, Brooks or Atwood now, for this would be outrageously antithetical; they have told us that we must listen to women; they must write, and they must be written. It is what one does with this newfound perception **“that may yet define us.”**