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Epistolary Sisterhood and Textual Healing: A Womanist Reading of Mariama Bâ's (1981) *So Long a Letter* and Alice Walker's (1982) *The Color Purple*

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Abstract:

African and African American women's literature shares a central concern with reclaiming the silenced female voice. The objective of this study is to examine how epistolarity functions simultaneously as a space of sisterhood and a mechanism of textual healing against patriarchal trauma in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Methodologically, the study conducts a comparative, qualitative close reading combining narratological and thematic analysis of Ramatoulaye and Celie. This analysis is grounded in Africana Womanism (Hudson-Weems, 1993) and African Womanism (Ogunyemi, 1985), two African-centered frameworks prioritizing family, community, and cross-gender solidarity over individualist feminist opposition. The findings reveal that sisterhood and healing are structurally inseparable: both narrators transform isolation into collective agency through written address, where the addressee functions as an active witness rather than a passive recipient, culminating in resistance for Ramatoulaye and reunion for Celie. Consequently, the study concludes that epistolary literature must be re-evaluated as an agent of collective restoration, recommending that future research apply Africana womanist paradigms to broaden postcolonial trauma theory beyond Western individualistic models.

Keywords: Africana Womanism, Epistolarity, Sisterhood, Textual Healing, Patriarchal Trauma

Introduction

African and African American women's literature consistently seeks to give voice to women silenced by history, tradition, or racial oppression. Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) powerfully illustrate this reclamation of female speech, each employing a deliberately chosen narrative form: the letter. Both novels open by staging the very act of address. Ramatoulaye begins: "Dear Aissatou, I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress" (Bâ, 1981, p. 2). Celie, forbidden from telling her story to any living soul - "You better not never tell nobody but God" (Walker, 1982, p. 1) - begins instead by addressing an absent listener, a placeholder confidante until a human one becomes available. This shared formal choice, despite the geographic, cultural, and linguistic distance separating postcolonial Senegal from segregation-era Georgia, invites a comparative reading that moves past the disciplinary boundaries too often separating francophone African studies from African-American studies - boundaries that obscure a womanist preoccupation both corpora share: solidarity between women, resistance to patriarchy, and writing as an act of survival.

This shared concern, however, has rarely been read comparatively. Bâ's (1981) criticism has developed largely along two lines. One, exemplified by Obioma Nnaemeka's (1997) reading of



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polygamy as a structural “sign” in Bâ's (1981) fiction rather than a simple autobiographical grievance, situates the novel within debates on modernity's distorting effect on African tradition, in dialogue with Femi Ojo-Ade's (1982) earlier and more polemical account of male guilt in the polygamous household. The other line, represented by Uzo Esonwanne's (1997) reading of the novel's “aesthetic cognition” and Nicki Hitchcott's (2000) work on Bâ (1981) within francophone women's writing, has focused more narrowly on questions of form and voice. On Walker's (1982) side, Barbara Christian's (1985) foundational essays situated *The Color Purple* within a Black feminist critical tradition attentive to voice and vernacular, while Layli Phillips's (2006) later theorization of womanism names the novel outright as womanism's defining text - crystallized in Celie's own declaration to Nettie: “I don't write to God no more. I write to you” (Walker, 1982, p. 199). Despite this substantial body of scholarship on each author individually, few studies place *So Long a Letter* (1981) and *The Color Purple* (1982) in direct dialogue around their shared use of epistolarity as a mechanism of sisterhood and healing - a gap this study proposes to address by bringing Hudson-Weems's *Africana Womanism* and Ogunyemi's *African Womanism*, two complementary African-centered frameworks, into a single comparative frame.

Situating the two novels together in this way immediately raises a central question: how does the epistolary form in *So Long a Letter* (1981) and *The Color Purple* (1982) function simultaneously as a space of sisterhood between women and as a mechanism of textual healing in the face of patriarchal trauma? Put differently, to what extent does the act of writing to a witness-recipient - Aissatou, Nettie - allow the narrators to transform individual suffering into collective agency, rooted in a womanist consciousness rather than a Western feminist individualism?

Answering this question requires working toward a general objective which is to comparatively analyze the function of epistolarity as a space of sisterhood and textual healing in Ramatoulaye and Celie, from a womanist perspective.

This general aim unfolds into three specific objectives, each addressing one facet of the problem just raised:

- first, to examine how the letter's structure builds a community of women despite distance and isolation;
- second, to analyze the evolution of narrative voice as a process of healing in the face of trauma - visible, for instance, in the shift from Celie's silenced “Dear God” letters to her declared “I write to you”;
- and third, to interrogate the active role of addressees in shaping the narrators' meaning-making and liberation.

Pursuing these objectives calls for a theoretical apparatus capable of holding sisterhood, trauma, and address together within an African-centered framework. This study relies primarily on Clenora Hudson-Weems's *Africana Womanism*, which privileges a female solidarity rooted in community rather than in outright opposition to men. It is supplemented by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's (1985) *African Womanism*, which independently arrives at a closely related position, defining womanism as a philosophy that celebrates Black roots, the ideals of Black life, while giving a balanced presentation of Black womanhood. Where Hudson-Weems (1993) theorizes from the African diasporic experience, Ogunyemi (1985) theorizes from the African continent itself, and together the two frameworks allow this study to read Ramatoulaye's Senegalese context and Celie's Georgia context through complementary rather than competing lenses - both insisting, against the individualist axis of much Western feminist theory, that Black women's liberation is inseparable from community, family, and sisterhood

rather than opposition to men as such.

Operationalizing this framework, finally, demands a method suited to comparative, text-grounded analysis. The study therefore adopts a comparative, qualitative approach based on close reading of both novels, combining narratological analysis - forms of address, stylistic evolution - with thematic analysis of sisterhood, and liberation, in constant dialogue with the theoretical framework outlined above. All primary quotations are extracted directly from the source texts to guarantee fidelity to the analysis that follows.

I. Epistolarity as a Space of Sisterhood

There is something almost stubborn about the way both Ramatoulaye and Celie insist on writing to someone, even when that someone cannot answer back. Neither Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) nor Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) treats the letter as a mere structural device. In both novels, the act of address becomes the ground on which a silenced woman rebuilds herself, and in both cases the rebuilding happens specifically in relation to another woman, even when that woman is, for long stretches of the narrative, entirely out of reach.

Ramatoulaye's opening pages make this explicit. She does not simply record her grief after Modou's death; she directs it toward someone who already shares her history, reaching back not one but three generations for the roots of the bond. Bâ (1981) writes:

Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the koranic school; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers to restore them to us, more splendid than before (pp. 2-3).

The friendship is not something chosen in adulthood as a coping mechanism for widowhood; it is inherited, woven into the very geography of childhood. A few lines later, the address tightens into something almost incantatory: "My friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times" (Bâ, 1981, p. 3). In many West African oral traditions a name repeated three times is not idle emphasis but a summon - Ramatoulaye is not simply writing to Aissatou, she is calling her into presence.

That same sisterhood resurfaces, decades later, in material form. After Modou's betrayal leaves Ramatoulaye and her children without transport, it is Aissatou who intervenes. Bâ relates:

I shall never forget your response, you, my sister, nor my joy and my surprise when I was called to the Fiat agency and was told to choose a car which you had paid for, in full. My children gave cries of joy when they learned of the approaching end of their tribulations, which remain the daily lot of a good many other students (Bâ, 1981, p. 53).

Ramatoulaye's own gloss on the gesture is worth pausing on: "Friendship has splendours that love knows not" (Bâ, 1981, p. 54). The line reverses the usual hierarchy of feeling in these two novels - love is what fails, betrays, remarries; friendship is what endures. And it costs something specific as illustrated through these words: "You, the goldsmith's daughter, gave me your help while depriving yourself" (Bâ, 1981, p. 54). Sisterhood here is never abstract solidarity; it shows up as an actual car in an actual driveway, purchased by a woman who denied herself to provide it.

Celie's route toward a comparable bond is longer and more broken. Where Ramatoulaye begins already inside a functioning friendship, Celie begins in near-total isolation, instructed by her stepfather: "You better not never tell nobody but God" (Walker, 1982, p. 1). That single sentence contains the whole problem the novel has to solve - a girl told to address her suffering only to someone who cannot write back. Even so, from the earliest pages, her devotion to Nettie

is what keeps her oriented toward the future rather than collapsing into it. Facing a forced marriage, she thinks only of protecting her sister. Walker (1982) recounts:

All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him and he be so love struck with her I could figure out a way for us to run away. Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart to git away (p. 10).

And when their father pulls Celie from school, it is Nettie, not any adult, who stands beside her at the moment of loss as illustrated by this passage "Nettie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand" (Walker, 1982, p. 12). That single image of two hands gripped is illustrative - it establishes, wordlessly, that whatever separations come later, this is the bond the entire novel will be trying to restore.

The restoration arrives only once Nettie's long-hidden letters are recovered, and Celie's address itself changes shape. Walker (1982) writes: "I don't write to God no more. I write to you. What happen to God? ast Shug. Who that? I say. She look at me serious. Big a devil as you is, I say, you not worried bout no God, surely" (p. 199).

In the above passage, Celie redirects her address from an absent, male-coded God to a present sister, transforming private confession into sororal testimony. Shug's gentle interruption reframes faith itself as relational rather than institutional, anchoring healing in female companionship rather than solitary devotion. In her 1983 essay collection, Walker defined the ethic of relation her fiction stages: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (p. 7). The line names precisely what happens structurally here - a move toward something more communal than an individualist framework would predict.

Read side by side, Ramatoulaye and Celie perform the same maneuver from opposite starting points: one sustains an existing sisterhood across the shock of betrayal, the other writes her way toward one that has been withheld from her by force. Femi Ojo-Ade, as cited in Nnaemeka (1997), took a considerably harsher view of Modou's conduct, reading male infidelity in the novel as evidence of a deeper, structural guilt attached to men within polygamous households. Clenora Hudson-Weems's *Africana Womanism* (1993) is useful here precisely because it resists an individualist reading of either heroine's survival. Hudson-Weems (1993) describes a paradigm that prioritizes the Africana family unit - women, men, and children - working together in harmony, without opposition between the sexes. Neither Ramatoulaye nor Celie writes her way out of community; each writes her way back into one. This comparative reading - a Senegalese widow's diary-letters set against a Georgia sharecropper's daughter's confessional ones - belongs to a critical tradition that, as Judith Herman (1992) observed of psychological recovery's own emergence, exists only in the context of a relationship, a convergence that lets the survivors "recreate the capacity for trust that has been shattered. The present study inherits exactly that conjuncture, asking of two very different novels a single question: what does it mean for a woman's survival to depend on having somebody - a specific, remembered woman - to write to?

II. Writing as Healing (Textual Healing)

The letters in both novels do more than build a bond with another woman; they do something to the woman writing them. Neither Ramatoulaye nor Celie writes as a neutral record-keeper. Both use the page to do something closer to what trauma scholar Judith Herman (1992) named: "In the telling, the trauma story becomes a testimony" (p. 199). She went a step further observing in her foundational study on the aftermath of violence, the act of speaking the unspeakable possesses a unique restorative power. She writes "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (p. 12).

Ramatoulaye's healing is gradual and hard-won, and she is remarkably honest about how close she comes to collapse. Reflecting on the abandoned women of her generation, she writes with the flat, exhausted clarity of someone who has studied her own condition from the outside. Bâ (1981) observes:

To overcome distress when it sits upon you demands strong will. When one thinks that with each passing second one's life is shortened, one must profit intensely from this second; it is the sum of all the lost or harvested seconds that makes for a wasted or a successful life. Brace oneself to check despair and get it into proportion! A nervous breakdown waits around the corner for anyone who lets himself wallow in bitterness (p. 41).

This is not abstract philosophizing; it is diagnosis, and Ramatoulaye knows the disease from close observation - she has just finished recounting Jacqueline's collapse into unexplained physical pain, a suffering doctors could not locate on any X-ray because its source was not the body but marriage. Against that danger, Ramatoulaye finds smaller, stranger remedies, she says: "What a great distraction from distress is the cinema!" (Bâ, 1981, p. 51) she admits, an unglamorous, very human coping mechanism, worlds away from the grand rhetoric of resilience. By the letter's final pages, she is able to look back at the entire act of writing and name, plainly, what it has done to her in these words:

I take a deep breath. I've related at one go your story as well as mine. I've said the essential, for pain, even when it's past, leaves the same marks on the individual when recalled. Your disappointment was mine, as my rejection was yours. Forgive me once again if I have re-opened your wound. Mine continues to bleed (Bâ, 1981, p. 55).

Here Bâ (1981) captures something Herman's (1992) clinical language does not quite reach: healing through narrative is not painless. Ramatoulaye reopens a wound in the telling - hers and Aissatou's both - even as the telling is what allows her, elsewhere in the letter, to admit without flinching: "I try to spot my faults in the failure of my marriage" (Bâ, 1981, p. 55). That capacity for unsparing self-examination, offered to a friend rather than a judge, is itself the healing. It would be unthinkable directed at Modou's family, or at Tamsir, or at the Imam.

Celie's healing follows a rougher, more violent arc, because for most of the novel she has no safe page to write on at all, only a God who never writes back. When healing does arrive, it comes first as raw, half-mystical speech rather than measured reflection. Confronted by Albert after Shug's departure is announced; Celie finally turns her long-buried rage outward. Walker (1982) narrates:

I curse you, I say. What that mean? he say. I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble... Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees (p. 213).

The line "it seem to come to me from the trees" says a lot: Celie experiences her own healed voice as something bigger than her individual will, closer to what Ogunyemi (1985) describes as African womanism's grounding in black roots, the ideals of Black life, a philosophy that Ogunyemi (1985) insists gives a balanced presentation of Black womanhood rather than an isolated individual triumph. Celie's curse does not read as personal psychology alone; it reads as an ancestral, communal force finally breaking through a body that has absorbed violence for decades. The declaration that follows minutes later condenses the whole arc into a single defiant sentence: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook.... But I'm here" (Walker, 1982, p. 214).

Right after this radical awareness, followed almost immediately a quieter, more sustained form of healing: craft, done in company. Piecing a quilt with Sofia on the porch, Celie notes without

fanfare:

"Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get. It a nice pattern call Sister's Choice" (Walker, 1982, p. 61).

The pattern goes without comment. Healing here is stitched, literally, out of scraps donated by other women, assembled slowly, communally, without drama. It is in this unremarkable domestic scene - not the curse, not the confrontation - that Celie reaches her quietest and most convincing statement of recovery as described below:

For the first time in my life I wanted to see Pa. So me and Shug dress up in our new blue flower pants that match and big floppy Easter hats that match too, cept her roses red, mine yellow, and us dam hi the Packard and glide over there (Walker, 1982, p. 184).

This domestic quilting pattern mirrors Celie's communal healing. By transforming literal and emotional scraps with Shug's support, she replaces past trauma with agency and joy. Her matching outfit and "glide" in the Packard signal a quiet, triumphant recovery.

Read together, Ramatoulaye's confiding diary and Celie's shifting address (God, then Nettie, then her own reclaimed voice) both bear out Irène Assiba d'Almeida's (1994) account of what writing accomplishes for women silenced by their circumstances. It functions as destroying the emptiness of silence. Neither Ramatoulaye's reopened wound nor Celie's ancestral curse is comfortable to read. But both confirm the same premise: healing in these novels is not a private, interior event achieved in isolation.

III. Textual Sisterhood and Womanist Liberation

The addressees in both novels are never passive. Aissatou and Nettie do not simply receive letters and disappear into silence. Their presence, even unspoken, shapes what the letter-writer dares to say, and their eventual return or reply completes an arc that neither woman could have finished alone.

Ramatoulaye's clearest act of political resistance in the entire novel happens not in a letter to Aissatou but in a face-to-face confrontation - yet it is unmistakably her correspondence with Aissatou that has trained her to speak this way. When Tamsir proposes to inherit her as a wife, forty days into mourning, Ramatoulaye finally breaks a silence she describes in exact, almost clinical terms:

My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous. Did you ever have any affection for your brother? Already you want to build a new home for yourself, over a body that is still warm. While we are praying for Modou, you are thinking of future wedding festivities (Bâ, 1981, pp. 57-58).

The refusal that follows is unambiguous: "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand" (Bâ, 1981, p. 58). Florence Stratton (1994), in her study of African women's fiction, titled her chapter on Bâ "Literature as a Weapon" - and this scene is precisely where that phrase earns its force. Ramatoulaye's years of confiding in Aissatou have not simply comforted her; they have armed her with a vocabulary of selfhood that Tamsir, expecting silent compliance, is not prepared for.

That armed vocabulary passes, visibly, to the next generation. Daba, Ramatoulaye's eldest daughter, articulates a position on marriage that goes further than her mother ever allowed herself to say aloud:

Marriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over a life's programme. So if one of the partners is no longer satisfied with the union, why should he remain? It may be Abou; it may be me. Why not? The wife can take the initiative to make the break (Bâ, 1981, p. 74).

Daba's declaration marks a generational shift that surpasses Ramatoulaye's endurance. Marriage is presented as contractual, revocable, and gender-symmetrical rather than as a sacred obligation. Her casual "why not?" signals inherited confidence, the sisterhood-forged self-assertion Ramatoulaye modeled has hardened into her daughter's unapologetic autonomy.

Mary Modupe Kolawole's (1997) definition of womanism as "the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways" (p. 24) captures exactly what Bâ (1981) stages across two generations of women in one household: Ramatoulaye's self-retrieval through the letter enables Daba's more confident self-assertion in the next breath. In this reading, sisterhood is not confined to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's bond; it becomes a transmissible inheritance, passed from mother to daughter as surely as any material legacy. Nettie's letters perform a comparable function for Celie, though from a very different angle. Where Ramatoulaye's confrontation is domestic and immediate, Nettie's witness is explicitly political and transnational. Writing from the Olinka mission, she and Samuel articulate their solidarity with Africans in terms that refuse the racial hierarchy the missionary society tries to impose on them. Walker (1982) depicts: "We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere" (p. 143).

This is Nettie functioning as active witness rather than passive recipient of Celie's confessions - she is out in the world, testing and expanding the very idea of sisterhood beyond the private page, extending it toward what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) calls the kind of knowledge "grounded in concrete lived experience," (p. 257) inseparable from the community it serves. Nettie's letters do not simply report events back to Celie; they carry an entire political education, one that eventually reaches Celie and changes how she understands her own oppression.

The novel's climax makes literal what has been figurative for hundreds of pages: the two sisters are physically reunited, and the address finally collapses into presence. Walker (1982) poignantly narrates:

When Nettie's foot come down on the porch I almost die. I stand swaying, tween Albert and Shug. Nettie stand swaying tween Samuel and I reckon it must be Adam. Then us both start to moan and cry. Us totter toward one nother like us use to do when us was babies. Then us feel so weak when us touch, us knock each other down (p. 291).

Walker (1982) stages this reunion, pointedly, on the Fourth of July. Harpo's remark that "most black folks don't have to work" (p. 294) that day because white people are "busy celebrating they independence from England" (p. 294) reframes the holiday entirely: "Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (p. 294). The line is very evocative, for it takes a nation's language of independence and redirects it toward a family, a sisterhood, a homecoming that white American history never accounted for. Celie's own closing assessment, "this the youngest us ever felt" (p. 295), reads less like nostalgia than like vindication. The letter-writing that began in coerced isolation ends in a yard full of reunited women, refusing to be diminished by age, distance, or history.

Read against Simone de Beauvoir's (2010) account of woman constituted as man's Other, both novels quietly resist that framework's individualism. Neither Ramatoulaye's confrontation with Tamsir nor Celie's reunion with Nettie is a story of one woman achieving selfhood against a man's gaze. Both are stories of women recognizing each other, addressing each other, and finally standing beside each other. The letter, in both texts, turns out to be not merely a record of suffering endured alone but the very mechanism by which two women build, across distance and silence, a liberation they could not have reached separately. That, finally, is what makes

the epistolary form itself a revolutionary act in both novels. It does not just describe sisterhood, it produces it, one address at a time.

Conclusion

This study examined how the epistolary form in Mariama Bâ's (1981) *So Long a Letter* and Alice Walker's (1982) *The Color Purple* functions simultaneously as a space of sisterhood between women and as a mechanism of textual healing in the face of patriarchal trauma. Framed within Africana Womanism rather than an individualist feminist model, the inquiry asked to what extent writing to a witness-recipient - Aissatou, Nettie - allowed each narrator to convert private suffering into a shared, collective form of agency.

Three findings emerged; each grounded directly in verified primary quotations from both novels. First, Section one showed that epistolarity in both texts activates a sisterhood rooted in shared history rather than invented from scratch - Ramatoulaye's childhood bond with Aissatou, "our grandmothers in their compounds," and Celie's protective devotion to Nettie, "holding tight to my hand," both precede and outlast the marriages and violence that structure each plot. Second, Section two demonstrated that writing operates as genuine textual healing, though not a comfortable process. Ramatoulaye admits her letter "re-opened your wound," while Celie's healing surfaces first as an almost ancestral curse – "it seem to come to me from the trees" - before settling into the quieter, communal labor of quilting with Sofia. Third, Section three established that the addressee is never a passive vessel. Aissatou's material intervention and Nettie's political testimony from Olinka both return to reshape the letter-writer's own consciousness, culminating in Ramatoulaye's public refusal of Tamsir and in Celie and Nettie's physical reunion on the porch. Taken together, the data - drawn exclusively from verified passages in the two source texts - support the claim that sisterhood and healing are not parallel themes in these novels but a single structural mechanism operating through address itself.

This study's principal contribution is comparative. It places a Senegalese widow's diary-letters and the confessional letters of a Georgia sharecropper's daughter within a single womanist frame, an approach rarely attempted across the francophone African and African American critical traditions, which - as the literature review showed - have largely developed in parallel rather than in dialogue. By reading Hudson-Weems's (1993) *Africana Womanism*, Ogunyemi's (1985) and Kolawole's (1997) African-centered definitions of womanism, and trauma theory against two novels not usually paired, the study offers a transferable model for reading epistolary trauma narratives by women of the African diaspora more broadly - one in which the addressee, not merely the narrator, is treated as an object of analysis.

One avenue in particular deserves further attention: translation itself. Bâ's original French inevitably shifts register in Modupé Bodé-Thomas's English translation - a diary written in the cadences of Wolof-inflected French becomes, in English, something subtly different in tone and rhythm. A future study working directly from the francophone text, *Une si longue lettre*, could test whether the intimacy and repetition this article identifies as central to Ramatoulaye's sisterhood with Aissatou (the threefold "mon amie, mon amie, mon amie," for instance) survive translation with the same emotional weight, or whether the comparative reading with Walker's American vernacular English is in part an artifact of two translated registers meeting on more equal footing in English than they would in their original languages. Such a study would refine rather than overturn the present analysis, while sharpening the claim that the letter's healing power lies partly in its specific linguistic texture, not only in its structural function as address.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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