In *A Room of One’s Own*, the narrator muses on the contents of a London newspaper:

I began idly reading the headlines. A ribbon of very large letters ran across the page. Somebody had made a big score in South Africa. Lesser ribbons announced that Sir Austen Chamberlain was at Geneva. A meat axe with human hair on it had been found in a cellar. Mr. Justice commented in the Divorce Courts upon the Shamelessness of Women. Sprinkled about the paper were other pieces of news. A film actress had been lowered from a peak in California and hung suspended in mid-air. The weather was going to be foggy. The most transient visitor to this planet, I thought, who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware, even from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy. (ARO, 33)

In reading idly, Woolf’s persona gleans news that has little to do with any single event. She realizes instead with shock that the front page consists of an overwhelming display of masculine bias. Taken individually, each story may present a reasonable claim to be news on a given day, although it is unlikely that a feminist newspaper from the 1920s would lead with cricket scores, the referent, according to newspapers from the time, for “the big score in South Africa.” Taken together, however, the dominance of the male perspective is nearly complete. Women are only alluded to twice—once as hussies and once as a damsel in distress. No reasonable woman appears. Only the weather—foggy—offers its barely audible ironic commentary on how the paper passes off patriarchy as universal and normative.

I have singled out this familiar passage because in texts by three African writers—Doris Lessing, Nawal El Saadawi, and Ama Ata Aidoo—the female protagonist experiences a similar “splitting off of consciousness” (ARO, 97) while reading the newspaper. The newspaper, then, serves as a metaphor for an encounter with patriarchy for all four feminists, Woolf and her three African successors. Whereas the
El Saadawi passage sounds most like an allusion to Woolf; her work is a translation, and her connection to Woolf has been the hardest to establish. The Lessing passage almost certainly is not a reference to Woolf; the Aidoo passage may be. Both Lessing and Aidoo have amply documented their engagement with Woolf. In any case, the recurring trope of the newspaper, be it directly Woolfian or a signal of a more indirect sympathy, serves as an opportunity through which to analyze the different Woolfian resonances found in each of these writers.

As the backbone of the public sphere, the newspaper has been credited with creating not only a community, but also a sense of a nation. When Benedict Anderson contemplated the front page of a colonial newspaper, he saw not the alienation of a woman under patriarchy but the unification of citizens: “what brought together, on the same page, this marriage, with that ship, this price with that bishop, was the very structure of the colonial administration and market-system itself.”1 For Anderson, the newspaper becomes the evidence upon which people base their sense of belonging to a nation. Thus, he writes,

Factory-owner in Lille was connected to factory-owner in Lyon only by reverberation. They had no necessary reason to know of one another’s existence; they did not typically marry each other’s daughters or inherit each other’s property. But they did come to visualize in a general way the existence of thousands and thousands like themselves through print-language.2 For Anderson, this is a good and interesting phenomenon: reading the newspaper links men across space; it turns men into citizens. Still, even a moderate feminist might see that singling out the newspaper for criticism is striking and perhaps a little unfair. After all, newspapers are not as discriminatory as most patriarchal institutions: where literacy rates for women lag behind men, newspapers seldom require the superliteracy of a university degree; one need not own property or possess the right to vote in order to read the newspaper; one need not be a citizen. As novelists from Charles Dickens to Ben Okri have shown, the newspaper has often been on the side of the disempowered—representing them and their concerns. But, as these women would remind us, newspapers have yet to represent the concerns of women with the same vigor and criticism as they sometimes have championed the lot of the poor.

Writing about Woolf in Africa is an unusual choice. I am emphatically not writing about Woolf on Africa: Woolf’s few comments on Africa were limited, racist, uninformed, and disengaged. Furthermore, reading