

MOTHERHOOD, PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE RESILIENCE: AN AFRICAN WOMANIST READING OF JOYCE OBIDIEBUBE'S *ỌNỌDỌ UGO ADỌGHỌEGBE MMA.*

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of motherhood, patriarchy, and female resilience in the Igbo novel *Ọnọdọ Ugo Adighi Egbe MMA* through the theoretical lens of African Womanism as articulated by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. African Womanism emphasizes the centrality of family, motherhood, communal harmony, and the complementary relationship between men and women in African societies. Through textual analysis, the study explores how the novel portrays the social pressure surrounding childbearing, patriarchal constraints on women's voices and achievements, and the enduring resilience of female characters within the cultural structure of Igbo society. The characters of Amaka and Ngozi embody the tensions between societal expectations and women's agency. While Amaka's struggle with childlessness reveals the cultural value placed on motherhood, Ngozi's life illustrates the challenges faced by successful women in a patriarchal society that often views female excellence with suspicion. Despite these constraints, the narrative celebrates women's moral strength, communal commitment, and capacity for sacrifice. The study argues that the novel ultimately redefines female fulfilment by recognizing women's contributions to society beyond marriage and biological motherhood.

Keywords: African Womanism, Igbo literature, motherhood, patriarchy, female resilience.

Introduction

In the Igbo traditional belief system and worldview, women are regarded as second class citizen in the society. Hence, the patriarchal nature of men to express their supremacy over the women is usually seen in their daily life activities in the community. This has always placed the women at the receiving ends of the rules and culturally constructed yardsticks because to the Igbo culture, the female gender are seen and not heard in the society. But today, African women are rewriting the narrative by showing resilience and breaking every barrier for greater heights and achievements.

African literature has consistently served as a platform for interrogating social realities, cultural norms, and gender relations within African societies. Many African narratives

foreground the experiences of women as they navigate cultural expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and family responsibilities. Within these cultural contexts, womanhood is often measured through fertility, domestic responsibility, and loyalty to communal values.

African Womanism provides an important framework for examining such representations. Developed by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, African Womanism emphasizes the cultural specificity of African women's experiences and rejects the universal application of Western feminist paradigms to African societies. The theory highlights the importance of family cohesion, motherhood, and community, while also acknowledging the patriarchal structures that constrain women's lives.

The Igbo novel *Onodu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma* offers a compelling narrative that reflects these dynamics. Through the experiences of characters such as Amaka and her daughter Ngozi as well as Uchenna, the novel explores the emotional burden of childlessness, the blame of the mothers on the ill behaviors of their children, the patriarchal silencing of women, and the social suspicion directed toward successful women. The text also portrays the resilience with which women negotiate these challenges while remaining committed to their families and communities.

This paper therefore analyzes how the novel represents motherhood as a cultural marker of female identity, exposes patriarchal authority within family and communal spaces, and highlights women's resilience within the socio-cultural landscape of Igbo society.

Motherhood

Motherhood occupies a central position in many African cultures and literary narratives. In many African societies, motherhood is regarded as one of the most important markers of female identity and social status. Women who bear children often gain respect and recognition within their communities, while those who are unable to conceive may face stigma and social pressure.

Motherhood is often defined as an automatic set of feelings and behaviors that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby. It is an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture. Akujobi (2011). This context of motherhood according to Akujobi strictly points at pregnancy and child birth as a mark and visa to obtaining the title 'motherhood'. This view hence, triggers blame, mockery and pity on the women who were not opportune in life to conceive or carry their own biological babies.

In African literary studies, Igbo literary studies in particular, motherhood has therefore

become an important theme in the analysis of female characters. It occupies a central position in many African cultures and literary narratives. In many African societies, motherhood is regarded as one of the most important markers of female identity and social status. Women who bear children often gain respect and recognition within their communities, while those who are unable to conceive may face stigma and social pressure. For instance, Chinedu Ofomata in his novel *Onye Chi Ya Akwatughi*, explores the complex realities of motherhood within a patriarchal African society, demonstrating how the institution of motherhood can be both oppressive and empowering for women. Similarly, scholars have observed that motherhood in African literature often functions as a cultural institution that reinforces social expectations regarding women's roles within the family and community.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to a social system in which men hold primary power and authority in political, economic, and familial structures. Within patriarchal societies, gender roles are often organized in ways that privilege male authority while limiting women's access to power and decision-making.

Feminist scholars have long examined the ways in which patriarchal structures shape women's experiences in both society and literature. According to Walby (1990), patriarchy operates through multiple institutions including the family, culture, religion, and the state.

In African societies, patriarchy often manifests in cultural practices that prioritize male authority in matters such as inheritance, leadership, and family decision-making. Literary texts frequently depict the effects of these structures on women's lives, particularly in relation to marriage, motherhood, and social status.

Female Resilience

The concept of female resilience has become increasingly important in the analysis of African literature. Female resilience refers to the capacity of women to endure adversity, adapt to difficult circumstances, and maintain agency despite social constraints.

African literary narratives frequently portray women as resilient figures who sustain families and communities in the face of economic hardship, social discrimination, and cultural restrictions. Through acts of perseverance, sacrifice, and moral strength, female characters often emerge as central pillars of social stability.

This emphasis on resilience aligns closely with African Womanist perspectives, which celebrate the endurance and strength of African women within patriarchal

environments. Rather than portraying women solely as victims of oppression, African literary texts often highlight their ability to negotiate complex social realities while preserving their dignity and sense of purpose.

The theme of resilience therefore provides an important lens for understanding the roles female characters play in sustaining both familial and communal structures within African societies.

Literature and Igbo Literature

Literature has long been recognized as a reflection of social realities and cultural values. Literary texts serve as important cultural documents that capture the experiences, beliefs, and struggles of a people. According to Eagleton (2008), literature does not merely entertain but also reflects the ideological and social structures within which it is produced.

African literature, particularly the novel, has played a crucial role in representing African cultural experiences and social transformations. Writers often explore themes such as colonialism, cultural conflict, gender relations, and identity. Scholars such as Achebe (1988) have emphasized the role of African literature in reclaiming African narratives and presenting authentic representations of African societies.

Within this broader framework, Igbo literature occupies an important place in Nigerian literary studies. Igbo literary texts reflect the cultural philosophy, social institutions, and moral values of the Igbo people. Scholars such as Egudu (1975) note that Igbo narratives often emphasize communal values, moral conduct, and social responsibility. Modern Igbo novels frequently explore issues such as marriage, fertility, social status, and gender relations within traditional and contemporary contexts. Through these themes, Igbo literature provides valuable insight into the socio-cultural realities of Igbo society.

Theoretical Framework

Scholarly discussions of gender in African literature have produced several theoretical frameworks that attempt to interpret the experiences of African women within cultural contexts. Early feminist criticism often applied Western feminist models to African texts; however, many African scholars argued that such models failed to capture the communal orientation and cultural realities of African societies. This study is informed by African Womanism which emerges as a response to this limitation. Ogunyemi (1996) conceptualizes African Womanism as a theory that foregrounds the experiences of African women while maintaining a commitment to family unity and cultural continuity. Unlike radical feminist perspectives that emphasize gender conflict, African Womanism advocates complementarity between men and women while still

challenging oppressive structures.

Similarly, scholars such as Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) emphasises the need to understand African women's struggles within broader socio-cultural contexts, including colonial history, class structures, and traditional institutions. African feminist critics also highlight how African literary texts frequently portray women as resilient agents who navigate patriarchal systems through negotiation rather than outright confrontation.

Within Igbo literature in particular, scholars have noted that motherhood occupies a central place in defining female identity and social status. Women who fail to bear children often face stigma and marginalization, while those who demonstrate moral strength and communal responsibility are celebrated within the society.

The present study builds on these scholarly perspectives by applying African Womanism to the analysis of *Onọdu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma*, focusing on the intersections of motherhood, patriarchy, and female resilience within the narrative.

Summary of the Drama Text: *Onọdu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma*

Amaka wakes up in the night and is having deep thoughts about her condition of childlessness. She has not been able to conceive after four years of marriage. The husband was trying to pacify her as she laments on how the women she married within the same time frame with now have children and how the people were pitying her because she is barren. The husband calms her down and tells her that God will bless them with children at His own time. They later agree to visit a pastor for the condition.

At the pastor's office, he tells them to wait for God's time and advised Amaka to embrace God and she is going to conceive a female child who will be spectacular in the society. Amaka did as she was told. She began to be active in church activities and she conceived. She is made the leader of the church women. Some of the women are not happy with her, like Ijeoma who was envious of Amaka's position saying that Amaka is being active because of her condition. Amaka later gave birth to an outstanding girl child. Her name is Ngozi.

In another home, Okika is angry with the bad manners of his children. He is blaming the wife for not training their children right. Also, he is comparing her to Amaka who trained her children in Godly way. The wife also blames him for not allowing her and children participate in church activities. She asks why when a child behaves wrongly its tagged as the mothers' fault but a good child is tagged the father's efforts. Okika's friends came in and were discussing Ngozi who is now famous because of her good manners, academics and athletic skills. Okika's wife bulged in telling them what of Ngozi's only brother Obiora who is not good at anything. The husband and friends started shouting at

her that she has no right culturally to talk when men are talking. That in the olden days, women are seen not heard.

In the university, Adaeze and Uju were discussing about Ngozi's popularity in academics and sports. Adaeze is envious of Ngozi and threatens to deal with her. She later went with her friend Ego to a native doctor to kill Ngozi but the doctor told her after divination that Ngozi is a special child and no one can hurt her.

Ngozi started work in Lagos after graduating. Chinedu wanted to marry her and told his parents. The parents after 'Ijù ase' told him that he can't marry Ngozi because she is too exposed and higher than him. The society sees any woman that is highly academical and successful as a red flag in marriage. To them, she can't be controlled by her husband and cannot be respectful to her husband because of her status. Many people that came to marry Ngozi ran away because of that.

Ngozi was not able to marry in life. She lost her parents in accident. Her two sisters got married. She took care of his lazy brother, built a house for him, married a wife for him and started a business for the wife because Obiora squandered all the money she gave him to start a life. She also built her own house in the village. The village gave her an award as Adadioramma for her philanthropic roles in the society. Ngozi adopts a girl child to be able to help her in her old age. But his brother Obiora is against it. He doesn't want her to adopt so that he can inherit her properties when she dies. He fought her and beat her. The elders were in support of Ngozi and warned Obiora but he was adamant. Ngozi fell sick and died. The burial was fixed, but Obiora doesn't want her to be buried in her house so that the girl she adopted will have nothing to inherit. He wants her to be buried in their parents' family house. With the help of the Odenigbo and Igwe, her corpse was brought from the mortuary and buried in her home. The lawyer read her will and all her properties were willed to her adopted child.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis in examining the themes of motherhood, patriarchy, and female resilience in *Onọdu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma*. The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework of African Womanism as developed by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. The choice of this theory is informed by its relevance to the African socio-cultural context in which the experiences of women are shaped by communal values, family structures, and traditional gender expectations.

Textual analysis involves a careful examination of narrative events, character development, and thematic patterns within the novel. Particular attention is given to the representation of female characters and the socio-cultural conditions that influence their experiences. The characters of Amaka and Ngozi are analyzed as central figures through

whom the themes of motherhood, patriarchal authority, and female resilience are explored.

Motherhood and the Cultural Construction of Female Identity

One of the central themes in *Onodu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma* is the cultural significance of motherhood in defining female identity. The character of Amaka embodies the emotional distress associated with childlessness in many African societies. After four years of marriage without conceiving, she becomes deeply anxious and socially marginalized. Her lamentation reflects the intense societal expectation that a woman must bear children in order to gain full acceptance within her marital home and community.

Amaka: (*Kooro ya nro o roro*). Nna anyị, {na-ajụ m ajụ ihe m ji akwa akwa uchichi? Ọ bụ na ọ bughị n'afọ a ka o mere afọ anọ anyị luru di na nwunye mana atughị m atụ nke m ji amụ amụ. Ụnyaahụ, mgbe m gara iletara Ọbiageli nwa nke abụọ ya ọ mụrụ ọhụrụ, ndị niile nọ ebe ahụ nọ na-emere m ebere n'ihì na a bụ m nwaanyị aga. (ia 1)

Amaka: (*told him her dream*). My husband, are you asking me why I'm crying? Is it not this year that will make it four years that we married as husband and wife but I did not conceive or gave birth. Yesterday, when I went to visit Obiageli and her second new born baby, everyone there were pitying me because I am barren. (pg 1)

The community's reaction further reinforces this expectation. Amaka becomes an object of pity, highlighting the social stigma often attached to infertility. Although her husband attempts to console her by expressing faith in divine intervention, the emotional burden remains largely hers. This dynamic illustrates the gendered nature of reproductive expectations within patriarchal societies. Amaka's eventual conception and birth of a daughter, Ngozi, restore her social dignity and elevate her status within the church community. Her transformation from a marginalized woman to the leader of the women's group underscores the strong cultural association between motherhood and social respectability.

Patriarchal Authority and the Silencing of Women

The novel reveals the operation of patriarchal authority within both domestic and communal spaces. The conflict between Okika and his wife illustrates the unequal distribution of responsibility in child upbringing. Okika blames his wife for their children's poor behavior while praising Amaka's parenting as exemplary.

Okika: Egbe bukwara gi ebe ahụ. Ọ bụ omume ọjọọ gi ka I buru mụọ ụmụ gi. ihe ọjọọ niile di na be nna gi ka I mụnyere n'ime mụọ ụmụnwoke na ụmụnwaanyi i mụrụ ha were na eme ka anụ bi n'ohia. o nweghi nke nwere isi n'ime ha.....

Uchenna: etu o di be nna gi ka o dikwa be nna m. i na-achọ ka ụmụ gi nwee ezigbo omume, gi onwe gi, I nwere ezigbo omume n'onwe gi? omume obula mmadu na-eme n'ụwa nwere ugwo. ugwooru bu n'aka n'aka.

Okika: (O welie mkpọ, chọọ ikpwa ya isi). Ọ bụrụ na I jighi osọ mechia onụ gi ugbo a m bilite otọ bie gi aka ahudebe gi. ọ bụ na ọ bughị ụmụnyaanyi ibe gi na-agbanwe onodu ezinaulo ha. Lee ihe Amaka mere na ndu Okonkwo na eninaulo ya. Ezinwaanyi amaka. Ọ na-aga uko ofuma na-azu ụmụ ya nkeoma. Ụmụ anọ ọ mụrụ bara uru. Lee ada ya nwaanyi. Ọ na-eme ezigbo omume, na-ama akwukwo. (ia 30)

Okika: get lost. You beared all your children with your bad character. All the bad manners in your fathers house is what you birthed in all your male and female children that they behave like wild animals. None of them is trustworthy...

Uchenna: As it is in your father's house, so it is in my fathers house. You want your children to be if good manners, but you, do you have good manners yourself? There are rewards to human actions on earth. Reward is per hand.

Okika: (raises his staff to hit her). If you don't shut up immediately, I will get up and beat you till you disappear. Is it not your fellow women that changes the situation in their family. Look at what Amaka did in the life of Okonkwo and his family. Good woman is good. She trains her children well. Her four children are all good. Look at her first daughter, she is good mannered and intelligent. (pg 30)

Okika's wife challenges this assumption by questioning a child's misconduct is

attributed to the mother while success is credited to the father. Her criticism exposes the gendered double standards embedded in patriarchal family structures. However, her attempt to participate in a conversation among men is suppressed, as Okika and his friends insist that women have no right to speak when men are discussing issues.

Anyaso: ihe emebiela. Kedụ nnọọ nke bụ na ụmụnwokwe ga na-ekwu okwu nwaanyị esi ebe ọ nọ machaputa tinye ya ọnụ? (Ia 37)

Anyaso: things have changed. How will the men be discussing and a woman jumps in to lend a voice? (pg 37).

This episode reflects broader cultural mechanisms that silence women and restrict their participation in public discourse.

Female Achievement and Patriarchal Anxiety

Ngozi's life story represents the tension between female achievement and patriarchal expectations. She excels academically, athletically, and morally, becoming widely admired within the community. However, her accomplishments become a barrier to marriage.

Several potential suitors withdraw after learning about her educational and professional success. Their families fear that an accomplished woman may challenge male authority within marriage. This situation illustrates the patriarchal anxiety surrounding female empowerment.

Ojukwu: ị sị na ọ bụ onye? – Ngozi? Chinedu nwa gị ọ na-ezukurara onwe ya ndụ. Nwata nwaanyị riwara anya ka Ngozi ka nwa gị choro ilu. Nke mbụ bụ na Ngozi ga-atọ Chinedu; ọzọ, ọ gụrụ oke akwukwọ, ọ bụ akada. Ọzọ, ọ jirila ihe gbasatara egwuregwu gaa otutu ebe. Gwa nwa gị pụta na mmadu anaghị anyu nsị ebe ahịhịa ka ya ogo. Udele buru anu oriri, ndi mbu ala erielala ya. (ia 56)

Ojukwu: You said it's who? – Ngozi? Doesn't Chinedu your son want to live long. A girl that is too exposed like Ngozi that your son wants to marry. First, she will be older than Chinedu; again, she is highly educated, a genius. Again, she has gone many places with her athletic skills. Tell your son that one does not defecate where the grasses are taller than him. If vulture is edible, the ancestors would have eaten. (pg 56).

The narrative therefore highlights the paradox in which society celebrates women's

achievements in public while discouraging them from surpassing traditional gender expectations.

Female Sacrifice and Communal Responsibility

Despite the obstacles she faces in her personal life, Ngozi remains deeply committed to the welfare of her family. She supports her brother Obiora by building him a house, financing his marriage, and establishing a business for his wife. Her actions demonstrate the communal orientation emphasized in African Womanism, where individual success is often directed towards the wellbeing of the extended family.

However, Obiora's later hostility towards his sister reveals the persistence of patriarchal entitlement. When Ngozi adopts a girl child and designates her as the heir to her property, Obiora violently opposes the decision because it threatens his expectation of inheriting her wealth.

Obiora: Ngozika, nke ahụ agaghị eme eme n'ezinaụlọ a. ịgba ohu alaala, ị ka na-achọkwa ịga gbata ohu bịa dobe n'ụlọ. Nwa mmadụ amaghị onye mụrụ y ana ebe o si ga-abịa rie ihe dum I nwere nan dū a. chineke agaghị ekwe ka ngwere gbaa aji. Ihe dum I nwere bụ mụ na ezinaụlọ m nwe ya. (ia 80).

Obiora: Ngozika, that would not happen in this family. Gone are the days of slavery, but you want to get a slave into this house. A child that no one knows the parents and origin will come from nowhere to inherit your wealth. God forbid. All you have is for me and my family. (Pg 80)

Community Recognition and Female Legacy

Although Ngozi remains unmarried, the community eventually recognizes her contributions by awarding her the title Adadioramma. This recognition challenges the traditional assumption that female fulfilment depends solely on marriage and biological motherhood. The intervention of traditional authorities, including the village elders and the Igwe, during the dispute over her burial further demonstrates that cultural institutions can sometimes support justice and protect women's rights. Through these events, the narrative ultimately affirms Ngozi's legacy as a woman whose life was defined not by marital status but by social contribution, moral integrity, and communal service.

Summary of Findings

This study examined the themes of motherhood, patriarchy, and female resilience in *Onọdu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma* using the theoretical framework of African Womanism

developed by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. The analysis revealed several important insights regarding the representation of women and gender relations within the socio-cultural context of Igbo society.

First, the study found that motherhood functions as a central marker of female identity and social validation within the narrative. The emotional distress experienced by Amaka due to her inability to conceive reflects the intense cultural expectation placed on women to bear children. Her eventual conception and the birth of Ngozi restore her dignity and elevate her social status, demonstrating the cultural importance attached to motherhood in Igbo society.

Secondly, the study revealed the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures in shaping gender relations within the family and the wider community. Patriarchal authority is evident in the way male characters dominate decision-making processes and silence women's voices, particularly in communal discussions. The episode involving Okika and his wife highlights the gendered double standards in which women are blamed for children's failures while men receive credit for their successes.

The study also found that female achievement often generates social anxiety within patriarchal societies. Ngozi's academic excellence, moral uprightness, and professional success attract admiration from the community but simultaneously become obstacles to her marriage prospects. This reflects the persistent cultural perception that highly accomplished women may threaten traditional male authority within marriage.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that female resilience and sacrifice are central characteristics of the female characters in the novel. Despite facing social limitations, Ngozi demonstrates remarkable resilience by dedicating her life to supporting her family and contributing to the welfare of her community. Her philanthropic actions, including providing for her brother and supporting community development, highlight the communal values emphasized in African Womanism.

Finally, the study found that the novel redefines female fulfillment beyond the conventional expectations of marriage and biological motherhood. Although Ngozi remains unmarried throughout her life, her contributions to society earn her recognition and respect from the community. The eventual inheritance of her property by her adopted daughter symbolizes the preservation of her legacy and reinforces the notion that a woman's value extends beyond marital status.

Overall, the findings suggest that *Onọdu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma* presents a nuanced portrayal of women's experiences within Igbo society, illustrating both the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures and the resilience with which women negotiate these

challenges.

Conclusion

An African Womanist reading of *Onodu Ugo Adighi Egbe Mma* reveals a nuanced portrayal of gender relations within Igbo society. The novel highlights the cultural importance of motherhood while simultaneously exposing the patriarchal structures that limit women's voices and opportunities.

Through the experiences of Amaka and Ngozi, the narrative illustrates how women negotiate these challenges with resilience, moral strength, and commitment to communal wellbeing. By recognizing Ngozi's social contributions and validating her legacy through her adopted daughter, the text ultimately expands the definition of female fulfilment beyond marriage and biological motherhood. The novel therefore affirms the central tenet of African Womanism: that women's empowerment can coexist with cultural values of family and community while challenging the patriarchal systems that constrain women's lives.

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