



# The “African male literary tradition” and revisionist polemics in Isidore Okpewho’s writing

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African literature has been very polemically, but usefully engaged, by feminists and other concerned gender stakeholders in the past three decades on the note that its foundational discursive platform of representation is patriarchal, largely representing the female body as ‘absent’ and ‘other’ in the imaginative landscape of canonical African(ist) expression. While these critical efforts have significantly succeeded in interrogating phallocentrism in African male writing, they have, however, failed to recognize several masculinist indicators in the latter that have purposively undermined the hegemonic/patriarchal frame of maleness. In this article I argue, through a reading of Isidore Okpewho’s first three novels, that certain representations of African male writing preceding those of the contemporary turn portray revisionist attitudes to patriarchy, or any form of hegemonic masculinity. In these, the African woman is made to gain visibility and she becomes active on her own social terms. I thus debunk popular feminist-oriented claims that the canonical African literary male tradition *necessarily* inscribes the African woman in the stereotypical narrative of being a ‘mother-nation/mother-Africa image’, ‘prostitute’, ‘witch’, or socio-cultural other. I suggest a more careful, distilled, and responsible approach toward the politics of agency and power involving gender and identity (re)formation in the African world, culture, and literature. **Key Words:** African male writing, female body, masculinity, feminism, postcolonialism, African literature, Isidore Okpewho.


### Introduction: The African literary text and gender contestations

The perennial and uneasy position has often been maintained by mainstream gender-conscious criticism of African literature that its epistemological and discursive postcolonial mappings and canonical posture are phallocentric. This unpretentious position, arguably inaugurated in 1966 when Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* became the first published African female-authored novel (Stratton, “The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction”; Andrade, “Rewriting History, Motherhood and Rebellion: Naming an African Women’s Tradition”), began to dominate feminist thought in African literary criticism from the 1980s till date. Writing in a 1987 edition of *African Literature Today*, one of the foundational Africanist journals that notably signified the evolving polemical representations and tensions of gender in African writing, Mineke Schipper suggests that “[i]n Africa, illiteracy is four times more prevalent among women than among men and in the schools the proportion of girls falls as the level of education rises. In this context, it is not surprising to see that most African literature has been written by men, and that most critics of African literature are men as well” (35). Susan Andrade proposes that “[w]hile Africa is explicitly named by Hegel as an epistemic void, the (literary) history of African women has gone unnamed, its absence unnoticed” (“Rewriting History” 91). And reflecting on the intertextual feminist pact between Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* in narrativizing the discursive alterity of woman in the continent’s male-dominated writing, she opines that “their intertextual relation is one that ultimately emphasizes the affinities that marginalized women writing in a shared [male] tradition must acknowledge” (105).

In the view of some Africanist feminists, the patriarchal relegation and regulation of the female body informed the gradual ‘peripheral’ gestation of female-authored writing which, despite its subversive interrogations, produced a series of traumatized depictions of womanhood in sordid existential metaphors, signifying the embattled psyche of the author. In “The Shallow Grave” Florence Stratton posits that female characters in African wom-

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en's writing "are enclosed in the restricted spheres of behavior of the stereotypes of a male tradition, their human potential buried in the shallow definitions of sex" (147). It becomes especially noteworthy when one considers the remark of a male critic of the African critical guild which casts a jaundiced view on the pervasive 'sexist' nature of the foundational African literary enterprise. He proposes that "African literature is a male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art" in which "[a]n honour roll of our literary giants clearly proves the point: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Senghor, Soyinka, Achebe, Mphahlele, and others [...] Male is the master; male constitutes majority" (Ojo-Ade 158). Within the setting of this purportedly chauvinistic picture of the African literary canvas, one does not fail to discern the affirmative protest of a member of the female 'other', as she lamentably relates the Manichaeic dimensions of gender in the construction of citizenry, civil codes, and the legitimizing of creative excellence in her African nation state, which predominantly excludes female considerations. In her view, "Nigeria is male, a fact that is daily thrust in myriad ways on the Nigerian woman. An example of this cultural aspect is the national anthem with its incredibly divisive call on compatriots to serve their Fatherland in the tradition of past heroes" (Ogunyemi 60). On this trail, this critic, implicitly echoing the outcry of a growing feminist consciousness in the developing re-definition of modern African culture, literature, and belonging, pursues that "[t]he literature is phallic, dominated as it is by male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience" (60). In this development, the female body becomes resolute in signifying socio-cultural and textual agency in confrontation with the subaltern enclave it had been discursively veiled and silenced in due to the long legacy of a perceived literary patriarchy that had designed and endorsed its alterity.

Writing against the grain that African male writing of the purported "African male literary tradition" exhibits an absolute tendency to a patriarchal discourse, I argue that the foundational and contemporary appearance of this literature paradoxically portrays what I call "male types", which demonstrate the subjectivist, class, and cultural heterogeneity of maleness. In this context, we could be confronted with models of hegemonic masculinity as much as patterns of their subordinate(d) variants. As Anthony Lemelle Jr. notes in his study on Black masculinity in the United States, "[n]ot all males are the same. The ease of thinking in terms of such essences is seductive. However, social facts often contradict such declarations" (xi). Along this line, I discuss Okpewho's interventions in his first three novels—*The Victims* (1970), *The Last Duty* (1976), and *Tides* (1993)—as prosaic statements pointing to the fact that African male writing evinces several depictions of maleness which have implications on dynamic levels of interaction with the female body. Not including *Call Me By My Rightful Name* (2004)—his fourth but first "migrancy/postnational" novel—in this discussion, is to focus on his earlier "domestic/nation(alist)" writings which were published within the heady days and frames of dialogue with patriarchy in African literary criticism and feminist literature. Appealing to a deconstructive reading of maleness in relation to femaleness in the texts in focus, I posit that certain aspects of the African male literary tradition install a variety of exchanges between men and women that greatly unsettle popular essentialist assumptions about the 'assigned' othering of woman in African male writing.

### **African literature, imaginative labyrinths, and the law of the father**

The inauguration and bite of vitriolic statements against the practice and days of arrant patriarchy in the African societal and literary space were largely informed by the conscientizing and challenging impacts of a global spate of Euro-American feminism(s) on the African socio-cultural and intellectual experience, coupled with a set of African(ist) feminisms that interrogated a number of socio-cultural male superstructures, and correspondingly, the Eurocentrism of Western feminism. These were further crystallized by the African woman's increased accessibility to Western education, an ironic male-developed and largely structured phenomenon that, in its early evolution, seemed to privilege a binary opposition that read the *mind* as a synecdoche of maleness and the *body* as its female other in the Lacanian mode of gendered psychoanalysis. The African woman thus began to revolutionarily engage in "the discourse of the pen", a largely assigned male protectorate of symbolic signifying arbitrarily run by what Lacan identifies as "the Law of the Father". According to Diane Price Herndl, Lacan's unpretentious association of the socio-cultural running of language—and by extension, all its conduits of knowledge production—with male authorization and systemic surveillance, is "because of its structural similarity to the establishment of paternity and its chronological connection to the Oedipal complex" (486). The African woman's contestation of this marginalizing domain thus began to (re)negotiate the intellectual and moral platform on which the male-dominated African intelligentsia operated, forcing the latter to confront itself in a revisionist dialogue against the 'canon' of

African male-centeredness. In a reading on the transition of African literature from a predominantly racialized postcolonial activism to a gender-considerate discursive gaze, Stratton argues:

And while, as Ashcroft and his colleagues claim, “the process of literary decolonization” can be seen to have “involved a radical dismantling of the European codes”, it has also involved the establishment of internal dialogues, which, because they are internal, can be seen to mark the progress that has been made toward decolonization. The literary dialogue between men and women is particularly significant in this regard in that it is occasioning major changes in the orientation of the African literature—a turning away from a concern with the issue of race to a concern with the issue of gender [...] (*Contemporary African Literature and The Politics of Gender* 11–2)

Yet, in the development of the tradition of African female writing, race was a crucial factor of influence. Woman’s marginalization in African literature can be linked to an early postcolonial literary drive which, in its quest to inscribe an African racial, cultural, and nation(alist) imaginary of difference and identity against colonial heritage, (un)consciously masculinized its discourse in an essentialist mode. This literary orientation thus largely participated in “nationalist discourses” in African postcolonial geo-cultural environments that unfortunately “subtly subsumed concerns about women under what turned out ultimately to be patriarchal concerns under the impetus of a nationalist agenda” (Quayson 587). It has been argued that a major postcolonial impetus of resistance against European cultural imperialism and racist demonizations of Blackness in this move was the cultural-nationalist reaction of Negritude, dating as far back to the 1930s (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike; Stratton, “Periodic Embodiment: A Ubiquitous Trope in African Men’s Writing”). Several male-authored African writings premised on the Negritude philosophy adopted culturalist idioms and metaphors of racial difference to whiteness embodied in the trope of “Mother Africa”. Stratton proposes that in a number of male-authored modern African poetry such as Senghor’s “Black Woman” (“Femme Noire”) and “Nuit de Sine”, David Diop’s “To My Mother” and “To a Black Dancer”, Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* prose fiction such as Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Broken Rib*, Mongo Beti’s *Perpetua and the Habit of Happiness*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*, and Wole Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*, the Negritude depiction of the African woman as an index of “the pot of culture” or the “sweep of history” is apparent (“Periodic Embodiment” 112–3). She points out that “[h]er body takes the form either of a young girl, nubile and erotic, or of a fecund, nurturing mother; and it is frequently associated with the African landscape [...] As embodying mother, she gives the trope a name: the Mother Africa trope” (“Periodic Embodiment” 113). In its male-oriented postcolonial cast, “this trope operates against the interests of women, excluding them, implicitly if not explicitly, from authorship and citizenship” (“Periodic Embodiment” 112). In her attack against p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*, which presents two female personae as metaphors of the tension between “the pot of culture” and “the sweep of history” depictions of Africa in Negritude imagination, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie comments:

The “sophisticated” woman like Okot p’Bitek’s Clementina, co-wife of Lawino in *Song of Lawino* is an unreal being. Counterpoised to this “city girl” is the rural woman, another mirage, the “pot of culture” who is static as history passes her by, who wants the old ways of life, who speaks like a lobotomized idiot about “iron snakes” (railways) and “our husband”. (11)

It is remarkable to note that Ogundipe-Leslie’s reaction as stated above is also in dialogic confrontation with some African male culturalist critical celebrations that (would) applaud p’Bitek’s Negritude example such as Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and [Ihechukwu Madubuike’s](#) *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980) and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) as much as an attack on revisionist phallogocentric anti-Negritude/‘Africanist’ anthologies that had no space for woman such as Soyinka’s *Poems of Black Africa* (1975) and Gerald Moore’s *Twelve African Writers* (1980).

The dialogues of re-writing woman in the economy, politics, and signifying of African literature reveal a range of critical and imaginative cues that have put the male writer, maleness, and the gendered literary establishment (to the disadvantage of the female body) on the defensive. At the ‘decolonial’ entry-point of African literary/critical feminism, the female body discursively began to set itself the task to undo its gendered alterity perceived to be the historic product of colonialism and its enabling institutions (see Andrade, “Rewriting History”; Ladele; Arndt). Susan Arndt proposes that African women in pre-colonial times were visible and notable, however, “since colonialism destroyed most of the spheres of official power which women commanded in traditional African societies, in contemporary Africa in public life, as well as in the family, only unofficial opportunities for influence are available to women” (22). In the same vein, Omolola Ladele links the colonial enterprise of European

missionary schools with an intellectual patriarchy that foregrounded the literary careers of male artists such as “Homer, through Hopkins and Aristotle”, a move that disenfranchised women and produced an “emergent elite” who “were schooled into conceptualizing humanity only in male and phallic terms” (309). This colonialist machination therefore explains why the pioneers of modern African literature were male, and why its canonical orientation revolved around them. This is where the association of indigenous culture with a number of African feminisms, predominantly theorized in Nigeria, becomes instructive.

The scramble for female visibility in the African imaginative space has also contested inferiorizing male-oriented criticisms that view female expression as portraying “the lack of depth, the lack of subtlety” (Nnolim 32), and projecting “more content than technique” (Nwabueze 195). It has also queried the marginalizing tendencies of the male critic in trivializing, or completely annulling the writings of women as pedestrian, or at most merely ambitious, as once echoed in Flora Nwakpa’s rhetorical question: “Are we not sometimes completely ignored?” (qtd in Opara 2). In reaction to the phallic claims that the female tradition of African writing revolved around ‘domestic’/‘private’/‘feminine’ issues as against the “more mature” engagements of male writing with ‘nationalist’/‘public’/‘able-men’ concerns, Andrade contends that “[t]he domestic, where women historically have set their novels, offers as sharp an analytic perspective on collectivity and national politics as does the arena of public political action” (*The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms* 1). The feminist intervention has also interrogated the ‘subaltern’ drawings of women in African male fiction, which, as in Camara Laye’s, Chinua Achebe’s, Elechi Amadi’s, and John Munonye’s inaugural rural/cultural-nationalist novels, or Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s decolonial writings, limited them to the mere roles of housewives, “existential mothers”, communal old women and witches (Ogunyemi; Chukwuma; Arndt; Opara; Ohale). Yemi Mojola notes that in Nwakpa’s novels, for instance, “[m]en are often regarded as nothing more than instruments for procreation as in *One is Enough* [...] Whether as husbands or lovers, men are generally portrayed as irresponsible, immoral exploiters existing in the shadow of the women sometimes as mere nonentities [...]” (20). The inscription of the “male other”, “riff raff”, “intruder”, or “colleague” may also be seen in the works of writers like Zulu Sofola, Mariama Ba, Tess Onwueme, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Emecheta, Akachi Ezeigbo, Assia Djebar, and Ama Ata Aidoo. However, African feminist thought has also not failed to recognize revised male perceptions of the female body. Chioma Opara, along this line, recognizes that “gynandrim or male empathy for women in African writing has given female subjects as well as female writers a robust leverage in the literary canon” (5).

The African male writer’s persuasion into a sympathetic relationship with the feminist project of eroding and erasing patriarchy from the African literary sphere is in dialectical relation to the interrogative glocal/intellectual currents around the predominantly othered female body. Apart from flagging a new dawn of male-authored African literature with deep consideration and respect for gender issues as largely popularized by the second generation of African male writers such as Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Okpewho, Festus Iyayi, Meja Mwangi, Bate Besong, to mention but a few, this development also informed the reappraisal of works by the older generation of African male writers in the ranks of Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Stratton indicates, along this line, that Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross* is a female bildungsroman, in this case one written by a male author. It tells the story of Wariiga’s development as she passes from girlhood into adulthood and recognizes her identity and role in the world” (*Contemporary African Literature* 159). In *Detained* (1981), his ‘diary’ of prison experiences, Ngugi wa Thiongo remarks that “[b]ecause the women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being” (qtd in Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature* 158). Commenting on the idea that in Beatrice, his heroine in *Anthills of the Savannah*, he had significantly revised his subordinating portrait of women in his novels, Achebe suggests: “Let me take you back to the novel—*The Man of the People*. It ends with a woman, Eunice, shooting the politician who murdered her lover [...] I’m saying that Beatrice was actually prefigured in Eunice in *A Man of the People*” (120).

Despite the laudable re-orientation of African male writing from the quagmire of sexist affiliation to a noble disposition of gender sensitivity, a second-wave critical tirade against the ‘reformed’ male author posits that this new imaginative turn is merely an “ostensibly positive imaging [...] masked by dominant, phallic gender and sexual politics that privilege patriarchy and represent women as prostitutes and peripheral others” (Tsaaior 186–7). In this kind of reading, man (as biological male) is by implication trapped within a “tyrannical unconscious” whose discourse of the pen must forever reinforce its Lacanian imagistic relation to the phallus as a symbol of superior male productivity, rationality, creativity, and judgment. The African male writer is thus compulsively

absorbed in a phallogocentric thought process and extended textual deployment that *must* represent woman in socio-cultural and discursive absence. Taking a swipe against the figuration of the African woman in what he calls the “mother metaphoric imperative”, James Tsaaio opines:

This mother metaphoric imperative is ideologically embodied in the representation of the nation or Africa as fecund, kind and nurturing mother. The mother-nation dialectic or mother-Africa trope defines much of phallic writing as a dominant epistemological mode [...] Concomitant with this dialectic is the metaphorical representation of mother-Africa in the image of a prostitute. This metaphorical representation, at face value, appears to dignify and humanize womanhood. Fundamentally, however, it ideologically serves to engender gender and sexual politics and encode stereotypical images of women as prostitutes. (181–2)

While Tsaaio’s observation may be acknowledged as valid in some respects, his critical thesis, however, joins the several sweeping statements that construct the grand narrative of an “African male literary tradition” that conceptually and doctrinally ignores dissenting voices against patriarchy within it. Maleness, in this kind of reading, represents by extension all male characters and their various existential contexts (including the house boy, the office clerk who reports to a female manager, and the roadside male beggar pleading alms from a benevolent woman) as oppressive stereotypes, a construct which even more mature models of Black/African feminism such as Womanism, Motherism, Nego-feminism, Stiwanism, Femalism, and Snail-Sense feminism have reviewed, and which much of contemporary African female writing has done away with. It is interesting to note, for example, that femalism, proposed by Opara, relies on the African female body as a metaphor linking “the freedom of woman to that of the African nation”, thus foregrounding a revisionist feminist endorsement and agency of the “mother-nation dialectic or mother-Africa trope” (see Nkealah 68). Andrade, in a poststructuralist reading of Stratton’s identification of the split “psychodynamic of male-identified cultural nationalism” in the latter’s *Contemporary African Literature* (1994), allows that African male writing recognized “its need for an idealized mother [...]” arising from “men’s projection of their own sense of anxiety or degradation” pointing to “an underside to the celebration of masculine agency” (*The Nation* 14).

Virtually all of the African feminisms listed above, which draw much ideological content from indigenous African oral culture as a postcolonial statement against the perceived Eurocentrism of Western feminism(s), accommodate the African male world within their epistemic leanings. Ezeigbo’s inspiration in proposing Snail-Sense feminism as panacea to the African woman’s socio-cultural trials is informed by the insight that “a snail-sense feminist negotiates her way around patriarchy, tolerates sexist men, collaborates with non-sexist ones, avoids confrontation with patriarchs, and applies diplomacy in her dealings with society at large” (68). Collaboration with the African male world arguably grounds the orientation of the Africanist feminist brands highlighted above, albeit in varying ideological frameworks. These feminisms are, however, not without their own individual weaknesses, such as seen in the unspecified categorizing of women in the politics of inclusion and exclusion bordering on class, level of education, heterosexual/lesbian considerations, and so forth that often tend to blur their collective feminist gaze.

Another intriguing area of self-contradiction is that they seem disposed to *voluntary* (incoherent) relationships with patriarchy-endorsed African cultural templates since the dominant core of the indigenous traditional culture was *authorized* or *circulated* by the operating male hegemonic structure which had often oppressed women, in a number of ways. It is, however, fair to note that, at the literary level, women writers have often tended to subvert inimical portraits of indigenous cosmology by re-writing narratives of gendered traditional culture, as in Emecheta’s re-casting of indigenous society’s docile image of motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Ezeigbo’s truncation of male spiritual hegemony embodied in *Eaglewoman* in *House of Symbols* (2001).

In what follows, I examine the portrayal of the female body in Okpewho’s first three novels as a revisionist continuum of African male-author textual practice, drawing attention to the difficulty of claiming that the “African male literary tradition” exclusively inscribed patriarchy as a discursive site of male-female relations. In other words, I argue that in Okpewho, straightforward binary portrayals of hegemonic masculinity in relation to the female body is complicated, especially since this tends to violate alternative discourses of masculinity and femininity in the “African male literary tradition”.

### Writing in difference to the norm: Okpewho and (counter)discursive representation

Okpewho's demise at the age of 74 on 4 September 2016, in the United States of America after a robust and challenging career as a seminal scholar of African Oral Literature and Creative Writing, induced a response that defined how shocked and devastated a literary world could be when one of its sterling flag-bearers departs. In a tribute entitled "Isidore Okpewho: Scribal Lord of Orature", Odiya Ofeimun, a Nigerian poet and literary contemporary, notes that "[i]t is a tragedy spelt at the level of the knowledge industry" (5). He anchors the fact that "Isidore Okpewho's passing away hits home with Hampate Ba's appreciation of how it is like a whole library burnt down when an old man dies" (5). Osundare, in a similar elegiac tenor, intones that "[t]he loss is hard to bear, the shock almost impossible to endure. A great tree has fallen in our forest of letters" (1). G. G. Darah suggests that "[l]ike an epic story itself, his career was a compendium of creative energies: he was a critic, theorist, essayist, translator, editor, fabulist and novelist" (1). While these accolades rightly celebrate a literary genius and Africanist scholar, this article recalls Okpewho as an iconoclast among the significantly resonant African male writers of the second generational phase who significantly approached an objective re-inscription of the African woman in African literature. His academic training and versatile understanding of the socio-cultural and political contours of his African society contributed immensely to both the creative and ideological horizons of his counter-normative/discursive set of approaches to socio-cultural/political subject matter.

Perhaps one could hazard that Okpewho's most striking contributions to postcolonial discourse and Africanist scholarship were his engagements with African oral literature which particularly helped to debunk Eurocentric views of the African oral tradition and cultural past. Some of his seminal and pioneering books in this field include *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (1979); *Myth in Africa: A Study of its Aesthetic and Cultural Relevance* (1983); *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (1992); *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony and Identity* (1998); and *Blood on the Tides: The Ozidi Saga and Oral Epic Narratology* (2014). Biodun Jeyifo remarks that "[t]hese were all groundbreaking works of scholarship that brilliantly corrected long-held intellectual biases against the heritage of myth and orature in and of Africa" (138). His orality-based research to a great extent informed his imaginative flight, as demonstrated in all his novels, which have been brilliantly critiqued as fictional theses dissecting complex domestic, national, sociocultural, and political concerns of the Nigerian postcolonial experience (see Ola; Nwachukwu-Agbada, "Oil, Soil and Foil: Isidore Okpewho's Tidal Victims in His Niger Delta Novel of Environment" and "Isidore Okpewho: Scholarship, Imaginative Writing and the Assertion of the African Sensibility"; Ofeimun). In *Call Me by My Rightful Name* (2004), which moves away from his earlier nation-based ruminations to privilege a concern "with general black experience" and the presentation of "the African American's search for his/her authentic name as inextricably linked with his/her search for a true identity and a true home" (Diala 77–8), the affinity to orality is particularly pungent.

Okpewho's evolution as a postcolonial scholar with a deconstructive bent became global in a dramatic and providential manner. As a trained Classicist who was familiar with a number of European and African indigenous traditions, he felt an irresistible pull to challenge a section of Ruth Finnegan's controversial study of the traditional African literary imagination, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), which suggests that the Epic, as a creative poetic element, does not exist in Africa. Okpewho's response to this colonialist opinion led to the publication of *The Epic in Africa*, which gained immense popularity in the field of African Oral Literature. His clear intellectual leadership in this field informed his being the President of the International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa (ISO-LA) for a number of productive years which cemented engagements with African orature as a site of Africanist postcolonial affirmation.

Okpewho's creative output aligns with the revolutionary predilection of his critical oeuvre. However, scholarship on this dynamic African(ist) intellectual has largely omitted his interventions in the gender debate involving African male writing. This is a gap I address in this article.

### Polygamy and casualties in *The Victims*

Okpewho's first novel, *The Victims*, celebrates perhaps the most caustic attack on a pervasive and sensitive patriarchal social institution of the African cultural hemisphere: polygamy. Arguably, for the first time in the prose work of a male writer in African literature, this institution is approached with a touch that betrays the internal contradictions and oppressive dimensions it offers the (modern) African family, and by extension, woman, as mother and wife. This preoccupation shows a notable departure from the erstwhile treatment of polygamy as a viable and salutary traditional cultural heritage calculated at foregrounding a postcolonial validation of the tradition-

al African home-setting or identity, a deployment which ironically reinforced/reinforces stereotypes of African women as docile and helpless before the traumatizing psychological and physical pressures of male indifference and incontinence. As Vuyiswa Ndabayakhe and Catherine Addison note, “[d]espite the encroachment of Western culture and the great strides towards gender equity being made in many parts of the continent, polygamy survives as an often fiercely protected symbol of African identity [...] a sign of the unreconstituted patriarchy still prevailing in many African societies today” (89). Within this socio-cultural scenario in *The Victims*, Okpewho affirms the essential humanity of the African woman, her need for life, love, fulfillment, and relevance, just as much as her male counterpart craves these. Locating this concern within a relatively rustic setting, Ozala, Okpewho successfully subverts the arguable authorial misogyny of older male-authored texts such as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), set in comparatively rustic communities whose treatment of polygamy invests the husband with a larger-than-life, demi-god personality in relation to his wives.

An immediate recognition of Okpewho’s revisionist stamp in the handling of polygamy is seen at the very beginning of the novel as we encounter the bloody fight between Nwabunor—the first wife—and Obanua, her husband. This is occasioned by the former’s adamant insistence that the latter pays their son’s—Ubaka’s—school fees, a responsibility which he had not been able to fulfill mainly because of his poor sense of family responsibility and shameless addiction to the bottle. This confrontation by Nwabunor, a woman who had been indifferently and callously treated by her husband, first over the inability to bear a child during the first three years of her marriage, and second, for her inability to bear another child over ten years afterwards—a development which leads her husband to marry a second wife, Ogugua—recalls mainstream feminist clamor that women should resist all forms of patriarchal oppression against them, even if the tool is ironically a woman. This self-asserting ingredient had earlier been demonstrated in the novel by Nwabunor upon Obanua’s decision to bring in a second wife into the family. Within the limits of her psychic agony, Nwabunor is forced to desperately decide her line of action: “Nwabunor went away and cried. But with this frustration came a new determination that she was not going to be pulled out of her rightful place. She was the first to come into this house, and she was going to stay first. Anybody else could move in, but nobody was going to make her second” (6).

As a result of the avowal depicted above, Nwabunor packs her belongings from her private room to her husband’s, to deter the sharing of “her rightful place” in her matrimonial home with an outsider. This revolutionary, self-defining stance by Nwabunor in a predominantly rural African environment with a patriarchal socio-cultural outlook on polygamy is a major early achievement of the re-construction and re-writing of the African woman in African male writing as a social change-agent. It sets the atmosphere of deconstructive polemics with older male-authored texts with a similar thematic preoccupation.

Okpewho’s attack on patriarchy in *The Victims* is further delineated in his attitude to events in Obanua’s family, which signifies polygamy as a shortsighted and intrinsically disconnected social institution. An instructive vehicle of this authorial stance is Ogugua, the second wife herself, whose lifestyle of promiscuity and hedonism had culminated in the birth of a set of twin girls out of wedlock with a Portuguese merchant. Ogugua’s insertion into Obanua’s family (though ironically affirming polygamy’s hold in the Euro-modern African experience) can be approached as transgressively pitched against this offensive marital institution and its attendant patriarchal excesses, a fact showcased in her adultery with Gwam Odafe, a community philanderer, after her marriage with Obanua. Upon arrival at her new home, she perceives the “strangeness of the atmosphere she had walked into” and “she didn’t like what she saw or thought, and wondered briefly to herself why she had so foolishly decided to saddle herself with a husband” (7). The spate of violent clashes and ill feelings that follow between Nwabunor and herself eventually descend into an unmanageable crisis that witnesses the loss of Obanua’s authority over his family and the tragic death—through poisoning—of five people in the household: her twin daughters and son, Bomboy; Ubaka; and eventually her own death.

In the novel’s design of rupturing familial patriarchy, Okpewho assembles a string of tragic events that ‘unite’ Obanua’s wives in subjectivist rebellion against oppression at home, while they are in conflict on the discursive plains of their divisive brands of feminism which prove fatal. In the narrative, “the second-wife intruder” in the Western feminist thinking on polygamy is discursively ruptured and (re)presented as a “female type” whose position of in-betweenness in the volatile arena of gender politics is instructive, albeit problematic. Ogugua, in her difficult location as “the other woman”, is notionally (supposed to be) inferior to her husband, signifying the patriarchal establishment, and her “senior wife”, who occupies a yet to be theorized “hegemonic femaleness” in African polygamy. However, in this novel, Ogugua intricately occupies the space of what I call an “in-between

gender(ed) difference”, and also embodies what Djebbar, in *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987), suggests as the agency of woman’s “erotic body” liberating her patriarchal bondage to the essentializing of her “reproductive body” (Olusegun-Joseph 234). In this regard, “[t]he privileging of [...] woman’s erotic body at the expense of the reproductive puts in place a symbolic crossing from her enclosure to her liberation, her veiling to her visibility and her silence to her right to speak” (234). By extension, Ogugua becomes a gender(ed) subaltern negotiating agency between a systemic male superimposition and a silencing female hierarchization.

Okpewho’s portraiture of Obanua as a lamentable moral cipher and irritable husband figure further accentuates the commanding presence of the African female world in the evolving second-generation, male-authored African novel, intertextually allying with the emasculation of the patriarchal/hegemonic male in the revisionist agenda of revolutionary female writers like Nwakpa, Emecheta, Dangarembga, Djebbar, and Calixthe Beyala. Obanua’s obsession with drinking and his epileptic short appointments at the various places where he worked—products of his ebbing hegemonic masculinity due to familial frustrations—deplete him of the commanding aura of the strong-character husband-figure of Ozala’s patriarchal picture. Obanua becomes ‘castrated’: his loss of prestige—if ever any—and his nightmarish financial descent terminate his previous arrangement that each wife should feed the whole household for a week. Instead, each wife feeds “her own side of the family” (29), and Obanua, in order to keep sane, finds respite at the mercy of a bar mistress and her maid, to whom he is perpetually indebted. Obanua’s claim to male hegemony thus becomes effectively ruptured by a combination of human and existential forces that co-opt the agency of woman as a crucial protagonist.

It is significant to note that the only attractively drawn male characters in the plot of *The Victims* are Ubaka and Bomboy, children whose living and dying depend on the theatre that centers on the survival and sanity of their nurturing mothers. Here, Okpewho imaginatively interrogates the “woman-nation” trope already identified with some male-authored African texts to privilege the natural pragmatic relation of mother and child. The boys spend more time with their mothers than with their father, a statement on the wellbeing of the African society—which patriarchy largely claims lordship over—as being crucially dependent on the vital roles of birthing and breeding which are functionally provided by women. Okpewho’s narrative procedure here, again, arguably preempts Djebbar’s association of dependent boy characters with their mothers in *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987) as a way of “prophesying man’s future place in the world as a phenomenon that belongs to the direction of the female body’s voice” (Olusegun-Joseph 11).

A notable hallmark of Okpewho’s re-casting of the African woman in this novel stems from his keen artistry in the character handling of the two old women who recur frequently in the plot. This is achieved through his innovative reconstruction of *gossip*, a social phenomenon within the African socio-cultural milieu which these women are involved in. This practice, which is often assigned a feminine status, is imaginatively and discursively appropriated to inscribe a postmodern narrative of woman’s presence in social criticism in the patriarchal context of her alterity. Through the intermittent busyboding of these old women on the “real” affairs of society through gossip, we are presented with the “news-within-the-news”, day-to-day unofficial and subjective intervention of the *subaltern* who *speak(s)* to narrate and interrogate male-oriented moral, institutional, and hierarchical codes that condemn women to the margin of silence. Gossip becomes a kind of informal device of surveillance and information gathering by the female body, an unacknowledged but functional media installation of opinionated witnessing which, in its rather “panopticon design”, divulges the happenings in Obanua’s family and the subjective/socio-cultural factors that (il)logically inform them. *The Victims* thus becomes a commentary of shared follies, irresponsibility, losses, and calamities revolving around male and female identities within the grim theatre of polygamy.

It might seem contradictory that, despite Okpewho’s gender revisionism in this novel, the patriarchal pangs of polygamy result in landslide tragedy. The resolution may be found in the pragmatic implication of the novel’s title, *The Victims*, which suggests the fatal result of the collision of female power with offensive male institutions, such as patriarchy. The victims are all that society stands for: individuals, the family institution, cordial and peaceful male-female relationship, social integration, law and order, social identification, and identitarian sense of belonging. The tragic conclusion becomes a catharsis that allows society, humanity, and academia to purge themselves of notions and imaginaries of utopia that eventually become fatalistic when they engender implications of subalternity to some crucial composites within them. This lesson is also consistent with Okpewho’s authorial vision in his subsequent ‘tragic’ novels, *The Last Duty* and *Tides*.



### Fragments of affinity in *The Last Duty*

Okpewho's second novel, *The Last Duty* (1976), continues the enormous task of de-centering patriarchy in African male writing and re-inscribing woman in a more visible socio-cultural context. In this novel, the artist seems to be occupied with identifying the operative "gender of adultery" as a social practice. He seems to ask an intriguing question: "What sex *really* gets punished in the event of adultery?" Okpewho's inquiry thrives in this novel within the context of its subject matter, the traumatic psychological dimensions of the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970), and gains aesthetic persuasiveness through what he calls "the collective evidence technique" (qtd in Ola 65), a confessional device in which each protagonist in the story narrates their experience(s). The major actors in this national gory tale are the Igabo (symbolic of the federation of Nigeria) and the Simba (signifying the secessionist Biafra rebels).

The tragic essence of the story revolves around a woman, Aku, whose Simban origin exposes her to an atmosphere of insecurity in Urukpe, the Igabo town in which this story is set. This complex ethnic context is exploited by Toje Onovwakpo, a megalomaniac who capitalizes on the former's 'despicable' Simban origin to launch a most barbaric form of sexual assault against her. His ploy becomes particularly traumatizing considering Aku's shod sexual chastity and integrity through the long and tortuous three years of her husband's incarceration as a prisoner of war. Toje's sinister machination is set against the backdrop of having damaged the potency of his manhood after his adulterous encounter with a prostitute. Aku becomes his choice of assuring himself of his manhood, a scheme which not only informs his sending Trojan gifts to her, but also ensuring the continued imprisonment of her husband. Toje makes his plan clear in saying:

All that concerns me is that Mukoro Oshevire stays in detention [...] Long enough for me to be able to use his wife to prove that I still possess that power which I am sure still lies within me. By now, I believe, she knows what I want, I believe she understands that I am not investing in nothing, and that she has no reason to expect a man who is her husband's commercial rival to every now and then send her and her child clothes and keep. She knows that the whole town is against her and wants her removed. And I am one of the town. (Okpewho, *The Last Duty* 32)

Aku's morality in the novel becomes a solid philosophical platform on which Okpewho builds his argument against the patriarchal African society's reductive view of female humanity's sterling virtues. Oshevire (Aku's husband) amplifies his wife's priceless femininity as he ruminates in detention on her steadfast love in staying with him, even "when every single one of her tribe did not hesitate to desert home and family and take to her heel" (209). However, the tormenting protraction of the war and the continued persecution of the Simbans by the Igabo translate into an unendurable acidic trial for Aku, which eventually results in her crumbling into the shameless sexual scheming of Toje and illicit affair with Odibo, the physically challenged servant character. Eustace Palmer points out that:

We are convincingly shown that Aku succumbs to Odibo, not out of licentiousness or infidelity, but because Toje has aroused and failed to satisfy feelings in her which had long remained submerged. At the start she is determined not to shame her husband and give in to Toje. But when she decides to let him have his way with her it is largely because she has no choice. Toje offers the only protection she has in a very dangerous situation and only he stands between her and starvation. It is Toje who is to be condemned for exploiting a defenseless woman. (30)

Aku's personality, though sexually challenged and tried, looms large in our appreciation of its doggedness in the face of persecution and psychological lynching. Beyond Palmer's argument above, Aku's fall could be seen as being largely occasioned by her consideration for her son whom she could not bear suffering starvation. It stands to reason that Aku might have defied all odds if she had been the only one left to wait for Oshevire. Also, Toje's manipulation in making sure that Major Ali—the Commander of the Brigade Army in Urukpe—does not put Aku in his protective custody after he had been alarmed at her exposure to the community's hostility is an immense factor that affects this tragedy. It goes without saying that had Aku learnt of the Major's plan for her, she could have gladly embraced it.

Aku's plight becomes a problematic trajectory through which Okpewho challenges certain cultural and epistemological orientations in the patriarchal African environment that tend to incriminate against women for sins men are comparatively excused of, if not given an approving nod over. In the context of the Nigerian civil war story depicted in this novel, Okpewho does not navigate woman's tenacity or physical military involvement in warfare as in Djébar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985), Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1999), or Maaza Mengiste's

*The Shadow King* (2019), but explores woman's moral and psychological tallness in the face of the systemic and psychological series of warfare unleashed by patriarchal capitalism and its subjectivist tendencies. Aku is a metaphor of the brutalized conscience of the Nigerian capitalist society's patriarchal depravity which disintegrates into landslide war, symbolized in the military clash between the Igabo and Simba. But beyond this, she personifies an embittered and embattled "mother-nation" ideal (a far cry from the queried feminist picture of this figure), persistently ruptured by the corrupt patriarchal hegemony. This becomes heightened in Aku's incisive spiritual and psychological travails that eventually consummate in the tragedy that leads to Oshevire's death. His death occurs, unfortunately, because he could not project himself beyond the limits of his puerile selfishness and male self-centeredness in comprehending the peculiarity of his wife's dilemma (Palmer 27). But again, just as in *The Victims*, tragedy becomes a fatal consequence society is forced to experience when male incontinence or inimical superimpositions clash with *sacrosanct* projections of the female body. This warfare is dramatically depicted, in another context, when Toje approaches his wife with the insinuation that his present impotence was caused by her probable infidelity, despite the fact that he knew it was caused by his extra-marital philandering. In a confrontation which signifies female agency, Toje's wife affirmatively and bitterly stands up to this implied mudslinging, making her husband remark that "I just couldn't sit there and let her run her mouth and pour her petulance standing over me as though she owned the house" (qtd in Okpewho, "The Last Duty" 74).

*The Last Duty* can also be viewed as revealing contradictory shades of maleness that construct or strive to appropriate hegemonic masculinity—in socially acknowledged terms—which *may not* necessarily be patriarchal or violent. R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt contend that hegemonic masculinity engenders "the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it [...] Hegemonic masculinities therefore came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change" (832–3). In this discursive site, "there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones" (833). This intra-group gender contention is apparent in Toje's clandestine appeal to an old and worn patriarchal form of masculinity which had to stealthily evade a superior and contemporary one personified and formalized in Major Ali's characterization. Felicia Annin and Cynthia Osei note that "[t]he theme of the vanity of human wishes brings to mind men's craving for power, wealth and recognition which Okpewho portrays through the character Toje [...] His arrogance is expressed as 'I am a big man and there's no question about that [...] recognition must be given to where it's due and goes without question'" (19). In this, Annin and Osei rightly capture Toje's megalomaniac tendency, which is a disturbing type of masculinity in the novel. Despite this remark, their reading descends to the flaw of an uncritical feminist politics by representing Toje as a synecdoche of what they call "men's craving for power" despite the presence of men like Major Ali and Oshevire who clearly do not portray Toje's delusory tendency. Palmer, however, suggests in his appraisal of 'duty' as a masculine index in the novel that Oshevire "comes closest to the ideal" (26). To him, the latter demonstrates the premium masculinist character which "involves standing up to one's enemies in defense of the cause of honesty, justice, and truth, no matter what the consequences" (26), a trait he upholds towards his wife until his unfortunate misjudgment beclouds his reasoning.

### ***Tides and the tempest of nation building***

Okpewho's third novel, *Tides* (1993), re-states the place of the woman as fundamental to African male writing and imaginative landscape. Produced in an epistolary mode, the novel x-rays the wracking question of the exploitation and brutalization of minority ethnic groups in African nation-states which ironically contribute significantly to the economy. The novel finds its major artistic strength in the dialogue between the two main characters, Piriye Dukumo and Tonwe Brisibe, who write letters to each other as regards the physical oppression of their minority ethnic group, the Delta, by the Federal Government of Nigeria in collusion with multi-national oil companies in a dizzying display of corruption. This lamentable scenario involves traditional rulers, chiefs, and indigenes of the Delta who are compromised on the platform of self-centered material gains. As J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada observes, "[t]he traitors to the people's cause in Okpewho's *Tides* are more of insiders than outsiders. They are mainly composed of people whose personal interests are of more importance to them than the welfare of their people" (7). The correspondent protagonists, who are community journalists, represent a marginalized section of men in the patriarchal enclave of the Nigerian nation-state. They are victims of mass retrenchment at *Chronicles*, a newspaper outfit, being an extension of a series of administrative persecutions by the hegemonic-male composition of the Federal Government.

Among the offensive projects embarked on by the latter is the construction of the Kwarafa Dam, which greatly reduces the volume of water flowing down the Niger, and so curtails the fishing activity in the Delta. Coupled with this is the construction of oil rigs which impose the ecological disaster of oil spillage on agricultural life, “for many farms are practically buried in thick layers of crude, which kills off many fishes and other forms of life” (Okpewho, *Tides* 2). Every attempt by the naturally concerned indigenes to represent their grievances is met with the most unimaginable indifference, and at times, military force. This development forms the seeming ethnocentric nationalism of the protagonists, but nationally instructive intervention.

The import of the African woman’s social role in this novel is driven home through Lati, a former lady colleague of the protagonists who later becomes Piriye’s fiancée. This is particularly noticed in her intelligent and self-sacrificial intervention in the ideological stalemate imposed on the Beniotu-Delta course through the terrorist position espoused by a highly intelligent and philosophically radical “son of the soil”, Noble Ebika Harrison (‘Bickerburg’), and the moderate, round-table-dialogue stance insinuated by the opposing bloc which includes Piriye and Tonwe. Impelled by the countless torture on his people and his incarcerations by the police ever since his days with the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), a pressure group, Harrison becomes hardened into making sure that the nation ‘suffers’ for it. Thus, he embarks on a series of strategic bombings. A fatal pursuit of this resolution is driven home when Harrison bombs an oil rig, causing physical and economic havoc of epic magnitude. This is expertly done in such a way that only his *very* close confidants could ever guess who is behind the scene. However, Lati’s exceptional brilliance in following the trend of bombings makes her to rightly anticipate Harrison’s next likely target, the Kwarafa Dam, which shocks Piriye in a conversation with her: “[...] at this point I was forced upright by the growing revelation—he talked about the Kwarafa Dam. God, Lati, you don’t mean [...]” (*Tides* 189). Piriye’s sluggishness in following up the pictorial aspect of his co-authored book on the Delta experience stirs Lati’s journalistic impulse in risking her life for the opportunity. Consequent tragedy occurs as Harrison blows up the dam before the police’s arrival; Lati (who is pregnant) could not be found. Harrison is eventually arrested and the avalanche of blasts abates.

Lati’s character in this novel is significant in a number of ways. First, with regard to Okpewho’s projection of his protagonist female characters, Lati is arguably a revised version who very comfortably inhabits the space of modernist urbanity, the site and discursive semiotics/negotiations of Euro-modern literacy, the arena and politics of male-dominated knowledge production/media propaganda, and the agency of a more articulate nationally-conscious and transculturally-informed womanhood.

Second, and very significantly, Lati also becomes an interventionist tool with which Okpewho seeks to correct the unequal distribution of gendered bodies involved in redressing the ecological, political, and transnational disasters of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta in Nigerian (male) writing. The writers of Okpewho’s literary generation that have explored the Niger-Delta question, such as Ojaide, Ofeimun, and Ken Saro Wiwa, are/were male, and seem(ed) to be more involved, in structural male terms, with reflecting the heinous human and environmental dimensions of this region’s “petro-woes”, rather than representing gender concerns with a particular ‘liberating’ gaze on the female body. In creating Lati as a journalist and activist female protagonist, Okpewho could be said to have definitively inscribed woman in the national emergency of confronting “petro-tyranny” in the Niger Delta.

Third, Okpewho also arguably transforms the “mother-nation”/“mother metaphoric imperative” stigma of the woman in patriarchal Nigerian (African) writing into a signifier that extends Motherism or femalism (in Acholonu’s and Opara’s terms respective) into a functional *matriarch-martyr* narrative of the dialectically-driven, nation(ally)-conscious woman. In the blow up of the Kwarafa dam, which involves her purported life sacrifice, Lati could be viewed to have exchanged her identity as a would-be mother (being biologically pregnant) for the “higher calling” of a matriarch-martyr ‘pregnant’ of the salvation of a threatened but developing (fetal) nation, which is delivered through her sacrificial death.

A further demonstration of woman’s social capital is made in the authorial interrogation of a socio-cultural stance on the source of childlessness which is often linked to women. This opinion is engaged through the event of the sour marital relationship between Piriye and Tony— his ex-wife—which later fails. In his confession to Tonwe in a letter, Piriye laments: “But why must a man suffer in his own house simply because *he has not given his wife a child?* For some three years now she has not cooked me a single meal or even allowed me to make love to her. What have I done?” (*Tides* 62, emphasis added).

In the above, Okpewho discursively ‘acquits’ women of a social narrative that conventionally demonizes them for “marital non-performance”. Making the husband concede guilt for childlessness in the family is to re-

write that narrative in an idiom that grants the modern African wife agency at the turbulent site of spousal power relations. Tonwe not allowing Piriye “to make love to her” simply seals this revisionist tendency. The male-female relations in this novel significantly defy the marginalizing patriarchy-woman relation in African writing.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that gender, as an instrumental tool of power politics in African society and literature, intersects widespread sections of society and sensitive levels of relationships within it. As the novels in focus show, it negotiates a series of influences and dialogues that are fundamental to male-female relations. However, these novels also represent a set of male-authored texts that re-write the African woman who is often portrayed as the stereotypical picture of a ‘witch’, ‘prostitute’, and the “mother metaphoric imperative”. In so doing, Okpewho shows that maleness and femaleness are fluid and negotiable in dynamic socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts that distinctly produce them. The tragic denouement of the novels, however, points to the catalytic agency of the female body to initiate (perhaps in a ritualistic motif) socio-cultural renewal where patriarchal detractions had long been on the way.

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