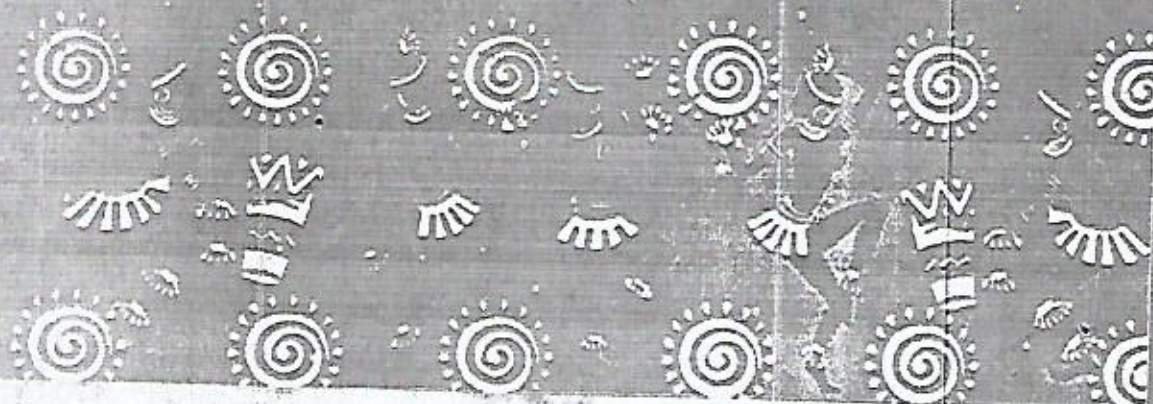


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Gender Discourse in African Theatre, Literature and Visual Arts

A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF
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Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh
Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma

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Chapter

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Echoes of Matriarchy: Patriarchy as Negative Contestants in Selected Nigerian Literature

Fatima Binta Ibrahim

Introduction

The concepts of matriarchy and patriarchy constitute the major focus in this chapter. Patriarchy is the male domineering tendencies to overrule and lord it over the female. It is a political stereotype word assigned to man by the society to control and relegate women to the background. The negation of the discriminatory formats of the female in opposition to the male actions is well known. Matriarchy is therefore a reaction to the reoccurring decimal that inhibits the women's capacity to enjoy their human rights where power and supremacy have been arrogated to men. The struggle by women to be domestically, financially and economically independent is emphasized as being matriarchy. This study, using the sociological framework, examines the theories of matriarchy and patriarchy as treated in the novels of Akachi Ezeigbo, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Adiche, Philip Begho, and Ada Ileokunawa. Part of the findings of the study on gender literature is the functional and contributory essence of African literature (using Nigeria as a focus) in

recent gender studies and developmental policies.

Patriarchy has been generally identified as the recurring decade that negates the capacity of women to enjoy their rights as stipulated in the governing statutes of state and religion. It is a social construct that defines roles and standards and arrogates power and supremacy only to men. Matriarchy and patriarchy are apparently two antagonizing concepts that need feminist scholars' attention. This is perhaps why prominent writers of African feminism accentuate matriarchy and patriarchy as the major factors that enhance female subjugation especially at the domestic level. The practice of matriarchy and patriarchy in Nigeria, as an exemplary African focus, are the dominant causes of gender imbalance. It is pertinent to note here that, gender concepts of matriarchy and patriarchy are socially determined. The evidence of these is highlighted in the later part of this chapter, where the tenets of matriarchy and patriarchy are clearly exposed in the practices of the male characters and in the experiences of the female gender is determined by the roles that humans assigned to the female by the society.

Matriarchy and patriarchy are therefore socio-political realities that demarcate, spell out the gender roles. They are indicators of the division of labour in the stereotyped societal manner. Patriarchy is control and power by the male over the female. It is the rule of the father over the mother, as characterized by the male dominating system where the female is a subordinate. Matriarchy, on the other hand, is the struggle of the female in the unequal class position where she finds herself. This is a means of protecting, on the other hand, the struggle of the female in the unequal class position where she finds herself. This is a means of protecting equity and importance despite her sex. Matriarchy becomes the weapon for female politics in the search for a new identity.

Nigeria is predominantly a patriarchal society. The proposition of this chapter is the investigation of gender roles in the novels of Ezeigbo and Nwapa with emphasis on the use of matriarchy for debunking sexual inequality between male and female sexes. The attempt by these female and feminist writers had been to portray the co-existence of the female and the male without the oppression and subjugation of one against the other. The writers selected use the two sub-concepts of gender: matriarchy and patriarchy to advance the study of African feminism and their distinctive nature and their possible use as strategies for negating inequality. Hence, they create female characters that are economically independent of the male and indicate their equal contribution to societal growth.

The values of the female gender are well spelt out in the selected novels of the novelists to reassert that there are no specific male or female ways of doing things. To the writers, all humans are the same, despite their genital formations. Patriarchy is a challenge to the female and its negation theory is matriarchy. The latter becomes an indispensable tool for national democratic development. However, an understanding of the former becomes necessary for effective equal negation of it. This chapter bases its concepts on the existing feminist theoretical framework, which examines the female gender as a subordinate, subjugated, oppressed being by the male chauvinistic tendencies.

A Review of Related Literature

All feminist theories see the male-centred social, psychical structures as facilitating elements that enforce agents for those structures. Many African feminists thus present the female as oppressed, repressed and marginalized beings. Some of these African feminists are Zulu Sofola, Mariama Ba, Animala Sowfall, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, Rebecca Njau, and Chimamanda Adichie, among others. They have been able, through their writings, to nullify the male's sense of security, prowess and strong state of mind to the advantage of the female freedom and better perception. The writers have used literature, especially the prose genre to analyze the potentials of women and compare them to men. They have thereby debunked the socio-political constraints imposed on the female sex.

A study of patriarchy and matriarchy is therefore a comparative study of the inter-gender creativity in the sense that, David Cooper produces "comparative studies of men and women and their works with a focus on the social construct of gender rather than concentrating on feminine marginalization" (150). There is consensus of opinion among scholars that it is only the co-existence of both male and female without one gaining advantage over the other that can result into the growth of any society; more so, because according to Show Walter, every human imagination is essentially genderless (209). Hence, the biological difference between the male and the female sexes should not be a barrier to women's self-actualization and any impediment for a woman and the realization of her full potentials in the society should be removed. Okereke further observes that,

Gender is a constitutive element in social relationship based on perceived differences between sexes, and that gender is a primary

The awareness of the role of gender is interpretable to mean matriarchy.

Matriarchy as a Revolutionary Gender Role in the Works of Flora Nwapa

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu* yearn for "gender perception that accommodates the peculiar problem of women at many novels in an attempt to construct a new female identity" (Kolawole 161). She becomes a spokesperson for her gender in these works by creating active roles for her female characters. The role(s) she apportions to her female characters places both genders at par with each other. Nwapa also improves the roles of women in the home by the depiction of communal experiences at the traditional setting. She exhibits how the domestic setting affects women with a view to reconstruct a patriarchal perception of women in a growing society, like Nigeria. Her female aesthetics celebrate women's cultural consciousness and self-identity; and this paves way for equity between both sexes. Nwapa utilized her evocative and descriptive power to depict her characters and scenes to convey her message to the patriarchal society that she belonged. Ola reaffirms that, Nwapa "reveals the problems and yearnings of African women through her female characters" (100). She explores in-depth the beliefs, aspirations, failures and successes of women in African societies, in an attempt to redeem the debased and disparaged image of women.

In *Women in Politics*, Nwapa admonished Nigerian women, most especially those from the rural areas to, "seek election to political offices at the Local Government level where they could insist on basic amenities and infrastructure capable of making life more meaningful in the Nigerian rural areas" (116). She believed so much in the empowerment of Nigerian women. This may not be unconnected with the level of education and exposure of Nigerian women in the early 1960s, the age of independence and the time when women started writing. She trumps the issue of female oppression that had been in existence but not to be pronounced. She becomes, "one who has chosen to write exclusively for her domain, the world of women in African environment." She achieved her success through good descriptive power of her rural characters and settings. For this reason, Emenyonu observes that, "she is good at describing people and events and particularly in depicting

sympathetically the problems and aspirations of her female characters" (29).

Nwapa, in the selected novels, also celebrated female disposition, charm and economic potentials; yet, she declines from the Western feminist ideology and reasserts the African, claiming that she wrote about what she knew. Nnaemeka reinforces this fact when she says Nwapa was an ordinary woman, who was truly,

writing about what she knew, and if the way we frame feminism had corresponded with what she knew, she would definitely have claimed feminism, if our definition of feminism was out of step with what she knew she would of course deny it (81).

Her admonition for women to seek election into political offices at the Local Government level is now espoused in contemporary African society, as more women seek election into political posts right from the grassroots level. This is more pronounced in the activities of the contemporary wives of presidents in African setting whose attention is mainly focused on the rural women and they are now conscious of their need for mental and material liberation from the domination. Nwapa also attempted to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in her works and proceeded from the assumption that, "all practices that harm women no matter how deeply they are embedded in culture must be eradicated" (Kolawole 21).

Nwapa's early novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* are selected in this study because of their similarity in the character of the protagonists, *Efuru* and *Idu*, the thematic interest and narrative techniques. The protagonists, in the respective novels are created as being beautiful, industrious and exceptionally good. In both novels, Nwapa depicts avenues like barrenness, betrayal, marriage and communalism to advocate gender equity. Nnaemeka refers to these early works as, "a biography, a collective biography of beautiful, strong Ugwuta women and their majestic lake" (81). These works capture the complexity, ambiguities and contradictions of her environment, as they are embodied in the force that lies at the bottom of the lake, Uhamiri, the goddess. Uhamiri appears in both novels as a giver of wealth with has no children. She symbolizes bareness in the two novels and as archetype of a self-sustaining woman, despite barrenness the very foundation upon which the superstructure of society is rested. Her devotees in the respective novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* have difficulty in having children but they live successful lives with their humanitarian services.

In *Efuru* and *Idu*, Nwapa creates protagonists, who are economically independent despite the rural setting of Ugwuta village. In *Efuru*, the protagonist is exposed early to trading and she becomes wealthy early in life. As a result of wealth, she became confident to disobey traditional norms of the Igbo society, as she elopes with Adizua without the payment of her bride price. Nwapa creates her that way to bring about gender equity. No doubt Efuru believes in the traditional payment of bride price; yet, she also believes in freewill and convenience. That poverty or failure to pay bride price should not be a stumbling block to the marriage of two lovers. Efuru joins her husband and both of them worked hard to later get the culturally required items paid. In this case, Adizua cannot claim that he has bought Efuru from her family. The buying of the female makes the female a subjected object in the household expected in her family, to be totally submissive, timid and subjugated.

Nwapa perceives the payment of bride price as an act that is exploited by the African society to subjugate, victimize and make the woman submissive. She therefore creates Efuru to become defiant to such custom and move to Adizua's house. But in a situation where women take over the traditional roles of males through hardwork, inferiority complex sets in. Such men will either oppress their wives so as to retain their position, as the 'head' or abandon them for somebody lower status than the wives. Efuru falls victim to Adizua in a similar situation. She is more exposed to business and more blessed than Adizua. However, her attempt to be submissive and erase the resultant inferiority complex by introducing Adizua to her trade across the river meets with rejection. Adizua feels uncomfortable and insecure in the patriarchal society that frowns at such role switching. He finds solace in his act of betrayal, so he abandons Efuru for another woman across the river. This is because he is conscious of the fact that his wife owns the trade, so he feels unfulfilled maintaining the headship that Efuru surrenders to him. Custom demands:

In *Idu*, the protagonist, Idu is also economically independent as a trader; but unlike Adizua, Adiewere, her husband remains loyal to her despite the societal demand for a second wife for him when Idu cannot give him a child immediately after their marriage. He is described by other men in the village as being good: "Adiewere is such a good man. There is no one like him" (2), which shows that, Nwapa has built on her experience in *Idu*. Unlike Efuru, whose two marriages fail as a result of the hardship that societal expectations create for them, the love between Idu and Adiewere remains intact. According to Taiwo, they

are extremely pleased with each other may have been a shining example to others; and that, Nwapa attempts a similar union in *Efuru* between Efuru and Eneberi.

She created him to be literate and gentle, a Christian who displays the virtue of love and respect for a wife publicly, at times to the amusement and even annoyance of the villagers (56).

This is further confirmed by some of the characters in the novel:

'I like them,' one woman said as Gilbert and Efuru were leaving the stream. 'When two people live like that then the world is worth living in' (*Efuru* 174).

When one sex subjugates another, it makes life miserable for the opposite sex. Nwapa exposes barrenness as an avenue through which women are betrayed and abandoned in a patriarchal set up. She, however, presents barrenness as a natural occurrence that should not be a hindrance to equity. Efuru's love for her respective husbands in *Efuru* is betrayed by them as a result of her childlessness. The Igbo culture like any other African culture demands that, if a marriage fails to bring forth children. Then, another one should be contracted and such marriage is ridiculed. This is reflected in the novel by the gossip who says, "it was a curse not to have children. It was regarded as a failure" (165). In the same novel, Omirima, the village gossip with some other women, make jest of Gilbert and Efuru, even in their happy moment together on their way from the stream. They mock their childlessness saying:

Children? You don't pick children from the tree you know. You don't fight for them either. Money cannot buy them. Happiness cannot give children. Children indeed, they have no children (*Efuru* 175).

The fact that children cannot be bought or fought for is real; but Nwapa wanted to create happiness in the lives of barren women. So, the message of *Efuru* is that, "motherhood is not the only part to happiness and contentment. A woman can lead a life of fulfillment through selfless service to others" (Mojola 23). When her second marriage fails, as a result of barrenness, Efuru takes a positive step by quitting her matrimonial home to live an independent life that affects her gift of self-hood and self-fulfillment. Her wealth and humanitarian assistance do not fetch her joy and peace in Eneberi's house because she must be able to procreate. Her inability to procreate therefore induces her agitation for a second wife, who will give birth to her husband's children. To support their agitation,

Neighbours talk as they were bound to talk. They do not see the reason why her husband should not marry another woman since according to them two men do not live together. To them, Efurú was a man since she could not produce (*Efurú* 26).

Idu, the protagonist of *Idu* is faced with similar challenges like Efurú as a result of barrenness. She is tagged barren because he fails to give birth immediately after marriage. The husband is therefore compelled to take a second wife who proves irrational and ungovernable (Taiwo 56). The other wife is portrayed by the novelist as an intruder who has come to disrupt the peace in that home but despite her presence in the house, the love between Adiewere and Idu remains solid. Instead of Idu being affected by the choice of another wife, Adiewere is created by Nwapa to bear the brunt of polygamy. He resorts to excessive drinking, which eventually leads to his being afflicted by a mysterious disease that later kills him. The kind of mutual love and trust that should exist between husband and wife are depicted in *Idu*. That is the kind of closeness that will truly portray them as one. That is why Idu, despite the joy that a long awaited pregnancy should have given her even after her husband's death, she still finds it difficult to cope with life without him. She confesses saying:

I will not weep, that is not what we agreed. Adiewere and I planned things together. We did not plan this. Who will I live with? Who will be my husband the father of my only son? Who will talk to me at night? What are you telling me? Asking me to weep? (*Efurú* 210).

Idu truly refuses to weep and dies a few days later. Adiewere and *Idu*'s problem starts when he tries to meet up with societal expectations by taking a new wife. The society withdrew at the verge of his ruin, nobody showed up again when what they wanted for him for joy and peace brought him psychological torture and death.

Infertility in a patriarchal society is deployed to relegate and confine women against progress. Eshiet sees it as, "a chronicle of how patriarchal forces converge in a monumental effort to thwart the humanity of the female homo-sapiens" (27). Women are excluded from positions of influence and power and the pace and limit at which they must operate within the society are delineated for them. But both *Efurú* and *Idu*, using matriarchal traits, reject such acts of subjugation because they are economically independent and what is denied them in child bearing (especially *Efurú*) they gain in humanitarian services.

Women always bear the brunt of childlessness in African society. They are always blamed for infertility even when men are at fault. Nwapa debunks this notion in *Idu* with the marriage between Amarajeme and Ojiugo. For a long time after her marriage, Ojiugo does not bear any child; but before she is apportioned the blame by the society, she exposes her husband's impotence by having a child for his friend. With this act, the wife has exposed his nakedness for all to mock at. He finds it difficult to bear and commits suicide to cover his shame. Thus, Nwapa has cleverly depicted the fact that either of the sexes can be responsible for childlessness in a marriage and such marriage can only be saved when the society stops probing couples' affairs, especially when a marriage is childless.

Patriarchy in the Works of Akachi Ezeigbo

Patriarchy treats women differently from men with a bias for the men. For this reason, writers like Akachi Ezeigbo designs new literacy nomenclature for the African female. To Ezeigbo, certain matriarchal strategies readdress the female image and correct the status quo in the patriarchal setting like Nigeria. The types of females that Ezeigbo creates fall into the category of Acholonu's principles of a mother and not a female. It is the female that is courageous yet humble, powerful, close to his or her history, questions the status quo and promotes reforms.

Ezeigbo reflects history and presents its negative reforms and contradictions thereby removing the mysteries placed on gender by the society and religion. She presents four Oluada (legendary women) of her society in the last of the strong ones. She thereby focuses on the gender relationship that existed between the male and female in the land even before the coming of the white colonialists. The Oluada, (legendary women) became members of the Obufo – the highest decision making body in the land of Umuga and made valid contributions for the progress of their land during Obufo meetings. The women are said to have actually become members of this body through their individual inputs and not through the personality of their husbands. They were active and economically viable women, who distinguish themselves in the women associations like Umuoda, the association of the daughters of the land and the Alutaradi, the association of wives of the extended family members. This contention by Ezeigbo is in line with Tong's theory of 'otherness' and 'self.' Tong contends that, "a woman is other because she is a non-man. Man is the self, the free, determining being who defines the meaning of his existence, and woman

is the other, the object whose meaning is determined for her" (Tong concludes and reassures is that:

A woman become a self, a subject and like a man and not an object by transcending essences that limit her existence. She can make herself be whatever she wants to be; in a way live above tradition, culture, customs and beliefs as a full human being regardless of sex.

The Oluada women, namely, Ejimnaka, Onyekezuru, Chieme and Chibuka in *The Last of the Strong Ones* made themselves renowned full human beings, as they excelled both at the home front and in the public sphere. They farm, trade in various articles, like kola nuts, melon, maize, selling, and so on; and at the same time, they serve as sanitary workers that keep their towns neat. The bodies that the women formed, Alutaradi and Umuad, served as matriarchal bodies as they check men's excesses. They take action against any oppressed wife, who reports her husband. The women had their power all the time. Ejimnaka chose her spouse herself in negation to the parents' choice for the female child. Onyekezuru, said no to levirate and refuses any other lover after losing Obiatu, her husband, to Onyekezuru.

African parents choose husbands for their female children and such children are expected to accept the choice of their parents who believe they know the history of the members of the society more, "where the girl is headstrong and refuses but set aside societal norms and marries a man of her choice, everybody expects the marriage to come to grief" (Taiwo 3). A society easily subjects the girl to submission to accepting the choice of her parents without argument. Where she is insistent on her will, Divorce also has a more devastating effect on women as they are stigmatized for embarking on it.

The choice of her spouse that many feminists advocate is actualized by Ejimnaka in the novel. Ejimnaka decides for an old man and also decides against him at will even against her parent's wishes. This is an accentuation of self will no matter the sex. Ejimnaka frees herself from marriage with the old man, when she sees that the man is going to use her as sex object. As a husband Umeozo punitive measure refuses to build for Ejimnaka her own hut like the other four wives, yet prefer to meet with her more frequently than with others. Her husband disallows her to go to the markets of her choice to trade.

Conclusion

Flora Nwapa in novels celebrated female disposition, charm and economic potentialities. She had artistically delineated the evaluation of women among the Igbos in the eastern part of Nigeria by portraying in *Efuru* and *Idu*, the oppression that women pass through in such a patriarchal society, Nwapa believed that through a collective effort of both male and female genders, a virile nation will be built and she therefore, advocated for women to be accorded important posts in the ruling and the growth of the nation. She treated the act of betrayal and abandonment especially in *Efuru* with levity to prove that marriage and children are not the only means to happiness. She depicted in *Idu* the need for women to be economically independent without sacrificing their matrimony. Also portrayed in her works is the ability of women to live fulfilled lives with or without husbands and or children.

Nwapa was also consisted in her commitment to the cause of women and their freedom from all forms of oppressions and subjugation that hinder their self-actualization in a patriarchal society. Though brutalized, the respective protagonists remain undaunted so as to be at par with their male counterparts. Technically, through narrative power, Nwapa has attempted to examine the moves of Africans in relation to male and female issues as she "seeks to change not simply man or woman; but seeks to change the relations between them" (Agbada 61). She created the protagonists as resident and devoted wives who accommodate every thing around them without sacrificing the commitment to self-actualization.

The interesting literary aesthetic of Ezeigbo, the last of the strong ones, does not also present the female figures as helpless beings marred by patria dual tendencies, the women lives above their community's patria dual traditions and social milieu thereby saving as examples fir other struggling females in the face of patriarchy. Ezeigbo concludes that stigmas such as divorce physiological and biological deformities of the female, bareness, bondage polygamy, marriage to old men are patria dual facts that should not humanize a strong woman to Ezeigbo, a woman can excel to the highest position in the society when she decides to be herself, in spite of patriarchy.

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