



# **The Feminine Ontology and the African Reality: Changing Dynamics in an Evolving Society**

**BY**

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**(PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH)**

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**52<sup>ND</sup> INAUGURAL LECTURE**

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**UNIVERSITY OF UYO, UYO**

**FEBRUARY 23, 2017**

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**Professor Ini I. Uko**

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# *Dedication*

This lecture is dedicated:

To God, the originator, my inspiration,  
who, in His wisdom, created me female;

and

To my parents who ensured that my femaleness was not an  
impediment to my accomplishments;

and

To scores of men and women who recognize  
that being female is not a setback.



## ***Acknowledgments***

I am very thankful to the Almighty God for His love and care over me through the decades that I have trodden the diverse terrains of life, particularly for His consistent guidance that I have enjoyed till the attainment of the apex of my career as a scholar. I am grateful that He has made it possible for me to deliver the 52<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural Lecture of the University of Uyo in my 52<sup>nd</sup> year in life. That is the providential design that usually characterizes my life. To Him I give all glory, honour, dominion and majesty as always.

My special gratitude goes to Professor Akpan Hogan Ekpo, who, shortly after I returned in 1997 from my doctoral programme, felt that even though I was a young scholar then, I could function in a position of responsibility. Through a recommendation by the then Dean, Students' Affairs Division, Professor Des Wilson, he appointed me Vice Dean, Students' Affairs Division, the first one ever. I gained significantly from that appointment, especially because in my naiveté at that time, plus having known Prof. Akpan Ekpo when I was a student at the University of Calabar, and the fact that he is an Elder in the church in which I was raised, I took some liberties by seeking guidance and displaying my characteristic curiosity, and he tolerated me all along.

I owe profound appreciation to Professor Akaneren I. Essien, another Vice Chancellor of this University, who also afforded me an opportunity to serve. While he appointed me Acting Head of the Department of English in 2005, Professor Eno-Abasi Urua, the then Dean of Arts, also appointed me Vice Dean of Arts in 2006. The two positions challenged me and also earned me visibility: visibility by exposing me to people more extensively than previously, especially as I returned shortly before then from my Sabbatical Leave/Leave of Absence in the United States of America, and I became a member of the University Senate. The positions challenged me by attracting to me people's resentment because they found me a bit more disciplined than they expected, as well as uncompromising in my ways, and also unmanipulable, all of which were at variance with my usual demeanor that often betrays the opposite and often gets me misconstrued. Also, Prof. Essien appointed me Acting Director, Directorate of General Studies, and I took over that office from Prof. Des Wilson.

Professor Comfort Ekpo, the immediate past Vice Chancellor of this University, graciously extended the template of her predecessors, and after the expiration of my tenure as Director, General Studies, appointed me Director, Pre-Degree Studies in 2013, the assignment that took me to the Ediene-Abak campus, where I still serve till date. I am grateful to her for all the confidence she had in me. I am especially grateful to Professor Enefiok Essien, the Vice Chancellor, for sustaining the tradition of the Inaugural Lecture series in this University and for anchoring this forum today.

Mr. Chairman, the panorama of my traverse in University administration, along with a simultaneously steady progress as a scholar indicates that I have enjoyed tremendous support, goodwill and mentoring of many reputable colleagues and friends within the University of Uyo and beyond. Prominently, Professor Ernest N. Emenyonu has been at the core of my scholarly accomplishments. He raised me up as an undergraduate student, then he saw me through my graduate studies, and fortuitously, we became colleagues as he was Chair of the Department of Africana Studies, University of Michigan-Flint, USA, where I worked for some years before returning to this University. As my mentor who has made enormous achievements as a global literary scholar, his image always looms large around me, and my assiduousness may be an oblique determination not to fail him, and to controvert the imperative of Chinua Achebe's assertion that "living fire begets cold, impotent ash" (*Things Fall Apart* 109). I thank you, Prof.

I am also grateful to my academic progenitors Professor Ebele Eko, Professor Charles Nnolim, Professor Helen Chukwuma, Professor Kalu Uka, Professor Grace Okereke who have been instrumental to my scholastic rearing, and with whom I have worked closely at different times. I wish to respectfully pay posthumous homage to late Professor Ime S. Ikiddeh, who as a father tended my feet so that I did not falter along the academic terrain that I trod from infancy to maturity. I believe that he is right now watching me from Heaven with pride that his harvests are credible even though he is not right here to share in them. With grave feelings of loss, I acknowledge my two uncles who cared for me and gave me the right orientation from the time I joined the staff of this University, but who passed away before I was mature enough to attain this scholarly milestone. They are Professor Udo Isaac Anwana, my father's brother, and Professor Ukana Blankson Ikpe, my mother's brother. Incidentally, as they left, God brought Professor Eno Blankson Ikpe, my mother's sister, from the University of Lagos to join this University, so that the legacy may continue. She is the immediate past Dean, Faculty of Arts, and now, a member of the Akwa Ibom State Executive Council. I am grateful to her too.

I wish to appreciate the collegiality that I have enjoyed over the years among my friends and colleagues: Professor David Eka, Professor P.E.C. Onwurah, Professor Okon Ansa, Professor Inyang Udofot (now Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic), Professor Eno-Abasi Urua, who

should now rest from her anxieties about my presenting my inaugural lecture, Professor Imelda Udoh, Professor Effiong Johnson, Professor Best Ochigbo, Professor Linus Asuquo, Professor Margaret Basse, Professor Benjamin R. Etuk, Dr. Pat Emenyonu and several other colleagues and friends, as well as others who I mentor and who also challenge me in diverse ways.

Special posthumous credit goes to the late Paramount Ruler of Etinan, Nsobom John Dickson Ekwere, the pioneer Director-General of Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation, with whom I began my working life in the Television Service. The brief period I worked with him before I moved to the University made significant imprints on me in terms of meticulousness and industry for which he was widely reputed. In the same context, I am thankful to my father-in-law, late Surveyor R.F. Uko, a pioneer licensed surveyor in Nigeria. I still miss his generosity and warmth that he exuded and the rib-cracking humour that characterized his disposition. I also appreciate with nostalgia my mother-in-law, Mrs. May R. F. Uko, whose patience, resilience and rare humility were virtues I coveted. I am grateful to my husband's siblings and other relations who have always been my support and inspiration.

Mr. Chairman, I remain deeply indebted to my parents, Elder Michael and Deaconess Dora Anwana, who nurtured me with a high sense of discipline, love and the fear of God. I hope that I have made good their age-long investments in me. I acknowledge my four brothers – Umoh, Koko-Ikpe, Otu and Ekerete – who always dote on me and make me feel really special, and insist that I get the best in all things. Growing up with them were diverse lessons in resilience and self-representation. They may not have realized that each of them put me through different aspects of toughness and endurance. My gratitude also goes to my other sisters, Oby, Nkpoidem, Usen, Victoria, Eno, Emem, Ama and Grace for all the love that we share.

I appreciate my husband, Roy, who got to terms with the uniqueness of my womanhood and who accepts that my career is as important to him as I am. I thank him for his patience and understanding through all the periods of my frequent travels from home because of my work, and the long durations that I spend in the Study peering over books or the laptop computer. Thank you very much, Sir. And to my pearls, my ever-loving and adorable possessions of inestimable value... my children, Odudu-Emmanuel, Edidiong, Ini Jnr., Teyima, Akutama, Anwanga-Abasi, and many more, as well as my caring son-in-law, Robert, no expression can capture my profound appreciation for all their thoughtfulness and support over the years, and for always ensuring that the gaps are filled. Through all of them, my womanhood gains authenticity and concreteness, and by them, I appreciate the values of modern parenting in Nigeria. I thank you for adding value and variety to my life.

I knowledge with delight the triad among whom I oscillate in University operations: the faculty of Arts, the Department of English and the Directorate of Pre-Degree Studies.

I remain grateful to my Pastors and other men and women whose anointing have been the source of my spiritual well-being and balance over the years. Prominent among them are Apostle & Deaconess Gideon Basse, Elder & Deaconess Macaulay Etuk, Reverend Pastor & Deaconess Ime H. Usoro, Reverend Pastor & Deaconess F.W. Umoren, Reverend Pastor & Deaconess Aniefiok H. Usoro, Apostle & Deaconess Ibanga Umana and others.

To my various other friends from whose crest of affection I have enjoyed nurture and love at different stages of my life, I owe deep appreciation.

I thank Dr. Happiness Uduk for making time to proof-read the manuscript of this Lecture.

To God be all the glory!

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## CITATION

Professor Ini Uko was born Ini Anwana on April 8, 1964 as the fourth of the five children of Michael I. Anwana and Dora M. Anwana (Nee Ikpe) in Ikot Edong, Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. She commenced her primary education at the Convent Girls' Primary School, Calabar Road, Calabar in Cross River State between 1970 and 1975, and then proceeded to Mary Hanney Girls' Secondary School in Oron for her secondary education between 1976 and 1980. She spent a year at the School of Arts and Science in Uyo and then got admitted in 1981 to read English & Literary Studies at the University of Calabar, Calabar. She obtained a Second Class Upper Division in 1985, and then underwent the mandatory National Service in Yola, in the defunct Gongola State.

The young Ini Anwana returned straight to graduate school at the University of Calabar in 1986 for a Masters programme in English & Literary Studies. She successfully completed that programme on record time in 1988, but had prior to that in 1987, got an appointment as Presenter II at the Akwa Ibom State Broadcasting Corporation, Television Service in Uyo in the newly created Akwa Ibom State. She relocated to Uyo, but realized shortly afterwards that she was a misfit in a career in the media because of its characteristic high publicity and social acclaim. With her M.A. in English, she sought an appointment in the defunct University of Cross River State, and in 1990, was appointed Assistant Lecturer in the Language and Study Skills Centre of the University, which was later merged with the Department of English. In 1993, she proceeded to the University of Port Harcourt for a doctoral programme in English, and graduated in 1997.

Shortly after her return to the University, she was appointed the first Vice Dean, Students' Affairs Division in 1998, a position she held till she left on Sabbatical Leave/Leave of Absence at the University of Michigan-Flint in 2002. She returned to the University of Uyo in 2005 and was appointed Acting Head, Department of English. That appointment lasted till 2008. In 2006, she was also appointed Vice Dean, Faculty of Arts. That responsibility ran concurrent with the headship of the Department. The professional development of this scholar moved rapidly and she was promoted to the rank of Professor in 2009. In the same 2009, she was appointed Director of General Studies. She ended her task at that Directorate just as she obtained a Sabbatical appointment at the University of Calabar, Calabar in January 2012. That was a kind of homecoming for her because she was back in the Department where she was trained, to train other young people, and to work closely with many of her own lecturers. As Professor Uko got back to the University of Uyo in January 2013, she was immediately assigned to take charge of the Directorate Pre-Degree Studies on the Ediene-Abak campus, an appointment that is running currently.

Professor Uko has handled various tasks in the University, some of which are:

- Member, Committee on Professional Ethics – 2015
- Member of Senate 2005 – date
- Member, Local Organising Committee (LOC) for the Hosting of the 6<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Nigerian Universities Research & Development Fair (NURESDEF) – 2015
- Chairperson, Protocol Sub-Committee, 21<sup>st</sup> Convocation – 2015
- Member, Review Committee on Anti-Corruption & Transparency Monitoring Unit – 2014
- Member, In-House Accreditation Committee 2014
- Chairperson, Protocol Sub-Committee, 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> Convocation – 2014
- Member, Committee on Incubation – 2011
- Member, Committee to Source for Funds for the University of Uyo – 2010
- Member, Task Force on the Assessment of Losses & Damages during the June 2012 Students' Crises – 2013
- Coordinator (Protocol/Accommodations) for the Special Stakeholders Fund Raising Forum – 2013
- Member, University Sports Council -- 2013
- Senate Representative on the Appointments & Promotions Committee (Academic) – 2011
- Member, Protocol & Accommodations Sub-Committee, Convocation – 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011
- Member, Anti-Corruption & Transparency Monitoring Unit -- 2007
- Senate Representative on the Advisory Committee on Students' Affairs – 2007
- Congregation Representative on the Appointments & Promotions Committee (Academic) -- 2006
- Coordinator, General Studies – Use of English (GST 111 & 121) – 2006-2009
- Chairperson of several Panels of Investigation

Professor Uko has been involved in various professional and community services outside the University, notable among which are:

- Judge, UBA Foundation Annual National Essay Competition – 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016
- Member, National Universities Commission (NUC) Accreditation Teams to assess the Faculties of Arts programmes in:
  - \* Nasarawa State University – 2015
  - \* Olabisi Onabanjo University – 2014
  - \* University of Lagos – 2014
  - \* University of Ibadan – 2014
  - \* Ebonyi State University – 2014
  - \* Bowen University – 2013
  - \* Lagos State University – 2013
  - \* Babcock University – 2013
- Supervisor, Joint Universities Preliminary Examinations Board (JUPEB) examinations, University of Lagos (August 2014 and August 2015)
- External Assessor, Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG)-sponsored Nigeria Prize for Literature (2014)
- Coordinating Editor, *Masterpieces of African Literature* (2014)
- Judge, Ati Annang-sponsored Essay Competition among selected Senior Secondary Schools in Akwa Ibom State (2010-2011, 2013-2014)
- Judge, The Clement Isong Foundation (TCIF) Competition on Essay Writing among selected Senior Secondary Schools in Akwa Ibom State (2010-2015)
- Judge, Nigeria Prize for Literature (2011)
- National Treasurer, Nigerian English Studies Association (NESA) (2008-2013)
- Associate Editor, *African Literature Today* (ALT) (2007 Date). This is the oldest literary journal in the world.
- External Examiner – Patience Jonathan Center for Gender and Women Development Studies, University of Port Harcourt (2013/2014 to Date)
- External Examiner for undergraduate students, Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Calabar (2010-11; 2013-2015)
- External Examiner for Masters & Ph.D students, University of Port Harcourt (2012 to Date)
- External Examiner for undergraduate students, Nasarawa State University (2012/2013)
- Chairperson, Parents/Teachers Association, Q.I.C. Nursery & Primary School, Aka Road, Uyo (1997-2011)
- Member, Akwa Ibom State Education Summit Planning Committee (2006)
- Member, Governing Board, Q.I.C. Nursery & Primary School, Aka Road, Uyo (1998-2010)
- Guest Lecturer at many Seminars, Workshops, Colloquia, Round-tables, etc.

Professor Ini Uko is a member of some professional bodies which include:

- \* African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA) (2015) The Literary Society of Nigeria (LSN) (2012)
- \* Nigerian English Studies Association (NESA) (2006)

\* African Literature Association (ALA) (2003)

Over the years, this scholar has undertaken extensive researches in her area of specialisation, which is Literature, with specific focus on gender and women's studies. She has to her credit 53 published articles in national and international journals and books, and a seminal book *Gender & Identity in the Works of Osonye Tess Onwueme* published in the United States of America on the vivacious Nigerian-born, American-based playwright, Osonye Tess Onwueme. It is remarkable that 17 of Professor Uko's publications are post-professorial materials, which is evident that she is still publishing even after becoming a professor. It should be noted that nearly half of Professor Uko's publications are published in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, South Africa, Ghana, Canada, China, Swaziland and Germany.

Most of Professor Uko's publications are harvests from academic conferences and workshops which she attended. She has attended over 40 academic conferences in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. She has taught several Literature courses to undergraduate and graduate students, specifically, Oral Literature, Gender Studies, African Drama, Research Methods, Nigerian Literature, etc. This scholar has supervised many researches by undergraduate and graduate students of English in the University of Uyo, University of Michigan-Flint as well as University of Calabar.

Mr. Chairman, Professor Ini Uko is a firm believer in God, and the efficacy of sincere prayers. She is a 2009 Jerusalem Pilgrim. Her Christian disposition always radiates and positively affects her environment as well as the people who get in contact with her. Many people who know her describe her as very friendly, modest, meticulous, and result-oriented, yet she also often prefers to be inconspicuous. Professor Uko loves people, and that accounts for the reality that she almost always has people's matters to resolve. Providence could not be any more correct by the job that Professor Uko has been handling at the Directorate of Pre-Degree Studies among the young mostly teenage students of this University. She is very accommodating and the students of the Pre-Degree and Basic Studies programmes regard her as a mother because of her passion, care and patience.

She is married to Dr. Roy Uko, and they are blessed with many children.

Vice Chancellor and Chairman of this occasion, distinguished scholars, ladies and gentlemen, I have the pleasure of presenting to you, this 23<sup>rd</sup> day of February, 2017, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural Lecturer of the University of Uyo, **Professor Ini Uko**.

**The Feminine Ontology and the African Reality:  
Changing Dynamics in an Evolving Society**

**PROTOCOL**

The Vice Chancellor and Chairman of this occasion, Professor Enefiok Essien  
The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Administration), Prof. Godfrey Udo  
The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), Prof. Inyang Udofot  
The Registrar and Secretary to Senate, Mr. AniediAbasi Udofia  
The University Librarian, Professor Ahiaoma Ibegwam  
The University Bursar, Mr. Jacob Eseneyen  
The Provost, College of Health Sciences, Dr. Augustine Umoh  
The Chairman, Committee of Deans, Prof. Ignatius Uduk  
Deans of Faculties and Dean Students' Affairs  
Directors of Directorates, Institutes and Units  
Heads of Departments  
Distinguished Professors and other Members of Senate  
Members of Congregation  
Eminent Scholars of the University of Uyo and Sister Universities  
Members of Non-teaching Directorates and Units in the University of Uyo  
My Lords, Spiritual and Temporal  
Great Nigerian Students  
Friends, Associates and Well Wishers  
Gentlemen and Ladies of the Press  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

## 1.0 Overture

May I start by stating that it is a rare honour for me to deliver today the 52<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural Lecture of the University of Uyo, and to formally register the great privilege that I enjoy as the first scholar in Literature to present an Inaugural Lecture in this University, the second female Professor of English to do so, and the third Professor of English to present an Inaugural Lecture in this University. Professor David Eka and Professor Inyang Udofot of the Department of English who had earlier presented Inaugural Lectures are both in the Language component of English, and there was a gnawing gap in Literature that yearned to be filled. That is the major role of this forum today.

Mr. Chairman, I am a literary scholar, I study both oral and written literature across borders. I am disposed to feminism and the place of women in the society. I network extensively with scholars to ensure that my contemporaneity remains intact. As I mentioned the fact of my feminist disposition, I do not wish to cause discomfort, but I rather hope to get everybody to appreciate that the development of a system can neither be effective nor complete if women are excluded from the core of the operations and processes, and that also implies consistent and efficient collaborations among women, something like Achebe's "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break" (*Things Fall Apart* 14). The issues that will engage us during this Lecture are largely those that we confront everyday as we interact between and among genders. And essentially, as Achebe says again in *Things Fall Apart* that "when a man is at peace with his

gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm” (13), he highlights the exigencies of diligence and commitment in human endeavours. In that connection, I believe that by the end of this Lecture, many of you will establish the quality of my harvest as well as the degree of the strength of my arm as a scholar in Literature.

Significantly, in this Lecture, I will highlight my contributions to the enhancement of my main area of research, which is African Literature, with specific focus on gender issues/women's writings, as well as the diverse issues that confront black women daily in all spheres of life in different cultures of the world. Though I am likely to make passing remarks on gender issues and femininity in non-African cultures, I will dwell largely on what obtains in Africa, because I always feel that African scholars owe Africa the obligation of attending to African matters, rather than focusing on non-African realities, and allowing non-Africans, who know very little, if at all, about being African, to explore our Africanness, to evaluate what it means and how it feels to be African. I am faithful and committed to that obligation in the entirety of this Lecture today. I will also make some modest recommendations for African women and, of course, men, and prominently, what issues may engage African women's writings as the twenty-first century wears on. Permit me to describe briefly the gender paths that I have traversed to get to where I am today, the different murky waters that I swam through and how the divine finger of God had charted my course from birth. Having been born the fourth of five children, and an only girl, whose father as well as paternal grandfather never had any sisters, I was generally treasured beyond imagination, and always made to feel truly special.

My parents made me know that I could get anything I needed, and so there was never a time I looked for anything outside of my family.

I was at the centre of everything that took place in the family; I guess this is still largely so till today, but I was also made to know the values of humility, hard work, love and appreciation. Thus, my four brothers, especially the elder three, never saw me as a threat. I hope I am correct.

As a child, my parents had a schedule for my brothers and I to be going to read at the State Library in the town where we were raised. I recall how fascinated I was towards fiction and creative writings. I believe that that set the pedestal for me to be interested in literature later in life. I learnt to read any and every material. Unfortunately, on the contrary, I had an aversion to figures and figuration. Perhaps that would not have endured if the male teacher that taught Mathematics in my secondary school did not harass me out of interest for the subject. My intense aversion to the subject contradicted the reality that my father was the Auditor-General from 1975 of the defunct Cross River State, and continued from 1987 in the newly-created Akwa Ibom State till he retired much later. But I am always thankful to God that I have managed through life so far without a grave need for Mathematics, though it would not have been so today as the subject is a requirement for all admissions to Nigerian universities.

However, as maturity set in and I gained exposure from the home and also became critical about my environment and trends around me, I realized the various forms of deprivations and oppressions that some of my contemporaries



experienced: how a girl was made to stay away from school for her (often younger) brother to have the opportunity to go, how poverty caused many families to have their girl-children hawk wares to supplement the family income, a trend that subsequently got the girls exposed to several forms of threats, dangers, male molestations and abuses, etc.

With the benefit of hindsight, I figure that I gained tremendously from my natal family, which was home for several relatives and non-relatives, who spent diverse durations of time to school, work, learn vocations, etc. I recall two Ghanaian nationals who stayed with us at different times to undergo some training at the School of Health Technology, of which my mother was Director-General in the town where I grew. We were often entertained when they would measure with the teaspoon the evaporated milk that they had to add to their beverage! I think we had a subtle dislike for them for such and other obvious acts of brazen and obnoxious displays of poverty. Perhaps we could not reconcile those traits with the reality in our family where there was just enough for everyone at every time.

We were all raised to know what was right to do, while with people and while alone. My mother was a nurse-tutor, one of the pioneer ones in Nigeria. But to us, she was a general tutor, because she never was too occupied or tired to get us to do our school work, prepare for school, examinations, church, and also do housework in full. That background set me up to be quite modest, yet intensely critical and curious-minded towards practically everything. Indeed, a credible literary scholar requires a sound and critical mind, which can analyse situations and scenarios. Thus, I found myself treading those very familiar and convenient paths from the outset.

The nature of women has always intrigued me. A major contribution to my inquiry about women's matters may have been the ways my parents related (I believe they still do); the ways my father so efficiently understood (in fact, still understands) my mother, who was (and perhaps still is) widely regarded as being very forthright about life. I do not want to say that she always sought (and still seeks) to get people around her to be so too. Yet, my father always knew how to get her to be the wife. I was attracted to that enigmatic relationship, which till date, hardly presents one party as being “under” or “above” the other. I was curious to know why some other such structures functioned differently in our neighbourhood, in the church, in the extended family, etc. I was worried about why the others involved fights, abuses, and separation, or generated tremendous gossips and tales among households and dependants. The list is endless.

Furthermore, I was interested about why there was inequality between and or among children in some families as I saw during my growth process. I wanted to know why there were so many men everywhere, and just too few women among the people who featured often in the big black-and-white television with doors, which we had in the family living room, and used to watch while I was growing. I wondered why women were not among the very top functionaries in the church. I was curious about the fact that in the Government Reserved Area (GRA), which quartered top government personnel, where we lived among other families, the top government personnel were all male, and we knew each of them, and his official cars. And when we visited the village, I

was concerned that while most men who went to the stream (and they had to pass by our house), returned with their towels hung around their necks, discussing in groups, exchanging/sharing jokes, the women would return carrying various sizes of water-pots filled with water. I used to query why the men hardly collected water from the stream as well. The few that did, conveyed their water containers by bicycles. Those were few of the many issues that engaged me and gradually and mysteriously plotted my track to gender studies, specifically, women's studies.

I have always probed into what constitutes womanhood, which is described in this Lecture as femininity. I always wonder if the male biological constitution endows the man with more knowledge and power – and therefore, authority and influence – than that of the female does for the woman; why women seem to be late-comers, slower achievers than men; why women often have to look up to the men, and hardly (or never) the other way round, etc. Fortunately, contemporary realities reveal that gender issues have become central to any attempt to evaluate, analyse or understand the dynamics of micro and macro societies in their evolutionary processes.

## **2.0 The Epistemology of African Femininity**

The focus of this Lecture requires that we deal with African femininity as a unique component of the global phenomenon of femininity, and pay prominent attention to the different stages of its evolution, and the peculiar features by which each

stage is identified. The feminine episteme in Africa derives from the position, relevance, productivity and efficiency of women in relation to men in the society. Femininity involves the whole corpus of the woman's life, her perception of her environment, the treatment she receives from men and co-women, her coping strategies, her responses to the trends around her as well as those matters that remain unresolved in her purview as a woman. Indeed, everything conceivable about the woman and womanhood constitutes femininity. Its essence is visible in the various inter- and intra-relationships that involve women, and how women strive to survive meaningfully at different ethos and milieu, and also contribute effectively to the family and society.

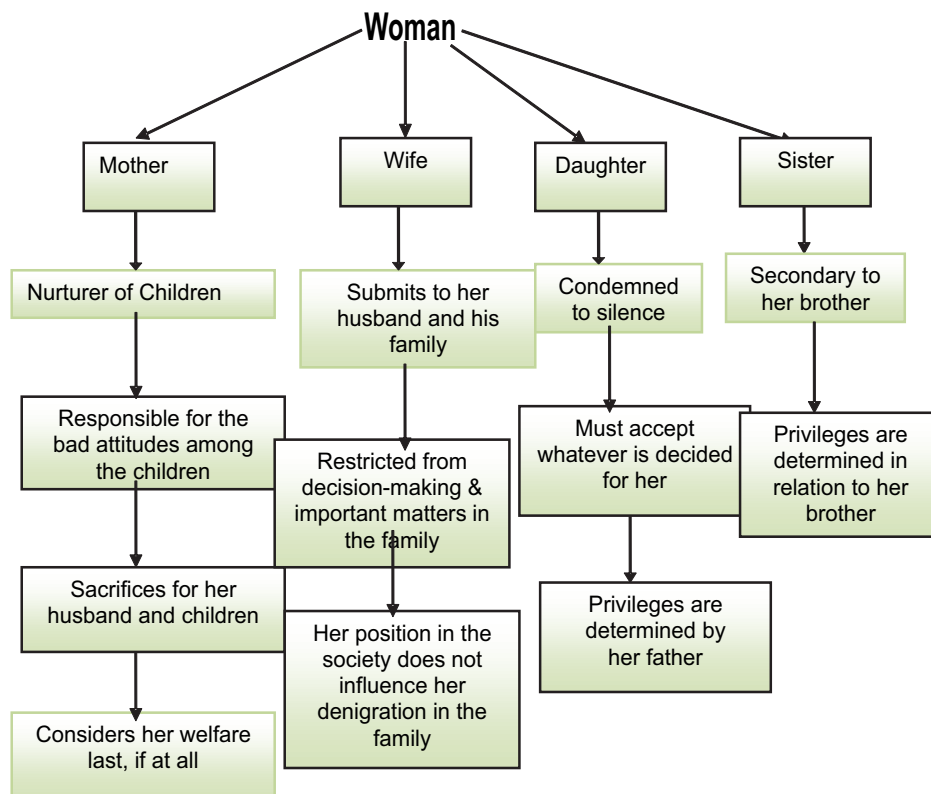
The concept of femininity derives from the reality of the woman as a biological entity that refers to the human female, and that is antithetical to man. Femininity involves behaving in ways considered typical of women. Hale Martin and Stephen Finn define femininity as a set of attributes, behaviours, tendencies and roles that are generally associated with girls and women. It is a socially-constructed concept but constitutes both socially-defined and biologically-created factors (187). Though there may exist variations among different cultures, femininity in Africa is generally perceived as an identity and as a role. Iniobong Uko in "Femininity in Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*" explains that as an identity, femininity entails the woman's private recognition and experience of herself as female. This self-concept is *evolved* early in life and is almost always resistant to change (380).

The negative female identity has caused the woman to be often regarded as the plotter of evil against the man and the society. Iniobong Uko in *Gender and Identity in the Works of Osonye Tess Onwueme* contends that “the unresolved contradiction about this myth [of femininity] is its simultaneous reference to this bitch as weak – morally, metaphysically and physically. Yet in her uncanniness, she bewitches, hypnotizes and drags the *good* man to fall through her whoring scheming” (5). The conventional connection of femininity with effeminacy, gentleness (or more directly, softness and beauty), empathy, passivity, tenderness and sensitivity is an attempt to categorise women as incapable of handling certain issues and fitting into certain structures of the family and society. However, different cultural and social contexts bear specific implications on these feminine features and make them more complex or otherwise. This notion constitutes the core of femininity as an identity.

As a role, femininity implies that the woman is viewed through the prism of her biological functions in the family and the society. It can also be traced to traditional societies when women participated actively in socio-political activities in their societies (Uko, “Femininity in Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*” 391). And M. Schipper argues that femininity can be identified positively and negatively: “as the life-giving mother figure and as the frightening, dangerous witch who has to be dominated or at least restricted by codes and norms...” (37). The catalogue of African femininity identifies womanhood within the contexts of mother, wife, daughter and sister. The

classification below reveals the characteristics of each category, and each category also has implications on the identity, personality and role of the woman.

### Taxonomy of African Womanhood



The above taxonomy shows that regardless of educational status, achievements, social acclaim, etc., the woman has to fit into the specified societal or familial category, and that identification determines her roles. The major common features among these categories of femininity are subservience, docility, acquiescence, (sometimes) invisibility, muteness, etc. Essentially, these categories of femininity are always present during very epoch of human development, especially in Africa. To fully delineate the notion of femininity in Africa, it is vital to trace the stages of the evolution and development of femininity in Africa. Four major phases of the development of femininity in Africa are easily identifiable, viz, the pre-colonial or traditional, the colonial, the post-colonial and the contemporary or modern phases.

### **2.1 Women in Pre-Colonial Africa**

The pre-colonial or traditional woman in Africa lived in a society that was largely egalitarian, a society that clearly assigned roles to both genders without biases, a society that accepted and appreciated diversities in what the two genders could do and how they behaved. That implied that if one gender performed a role and the other gender performed another, it was not due to any incapacitation or inadequacy, but because the functions of both man and woman sought to complement each other for the enhancement of the family or society. For instance, the woman keeps the home, nurtures the children, engages in (often petty) trading and farming to augment the family's income, while the man hunts, harvests farm products like palm fruits, taps wine, undertakes major repairs of the house, and engages in (often

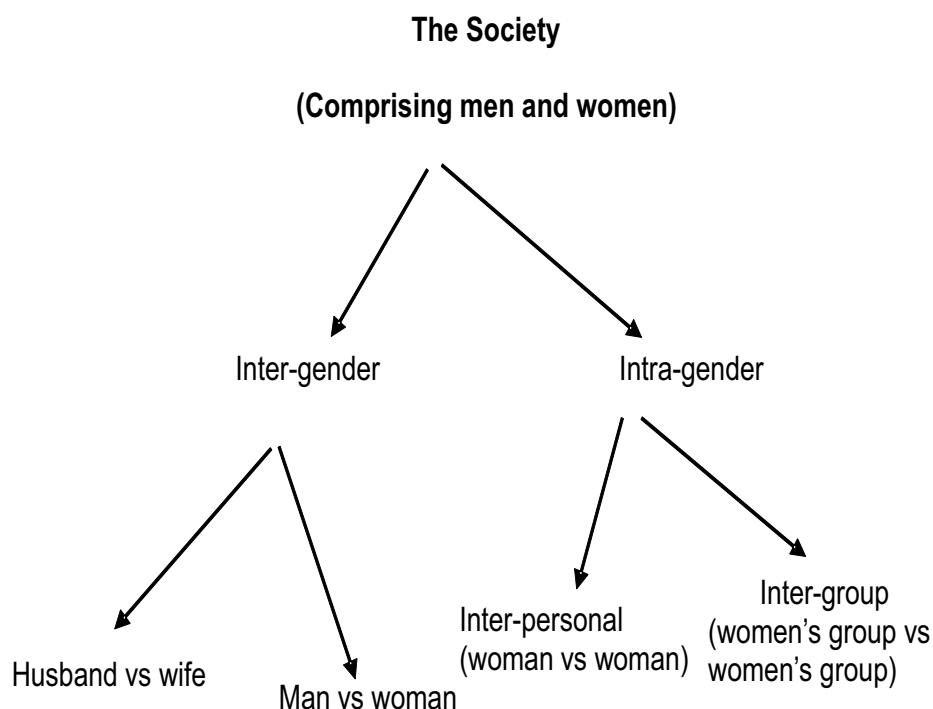
large scale) trading and farming. This trend, described as **role differentiation**, was an effective strategy that ensured that both man and woman contributed to the welfare of the family and the society. Thus, none regarded the other as inferior or a mere consumer or an irrelevant party, and none sought to take over and perform the roles of the other. Even within the polygynous family, roles were clearly demarcated such that without a roster, each wife knew her turn to cook for the man of the house, her turn to be his sleep-partner, her turn to entertain the guests of the family, etc.

Within that society, the potentialities of both men and women were recognized and encouraged. There were also distinctive socio-cultural and pressure groups that served the interests of men, women and the youths. For instance, the *umuada*, *iban isɔŋ* , *iban ebre*, *iban atɔŋ* , etc. were some of the women's groups, which bore different names in different cultures, but performed similar roles. Their roles were socio-political and economic, to evolve and uphold the values of true African womanhood, which itself involves hard work, tenacity, cooperation, group solidarity, motherhood, wifhood, selflessness, self-sufficiency, accountability and innovativeness. The women were not in any way taking over male roles in the community; rather, they were concerned with relationships and the affairs of women; and were also committed to creating a harmonious atmosphere for healthy living and interactions among men, women and the youths in the society. In an earlier study on the dynamics of women in relationships, we established that the steadily declining female influence in modern society may be largely caused by the socio-



political, cultural as well as religious imperatives that have become defective and that often times get women to lose their sense of and commitment to social responsibility. This concept is apparent on two broad bases of relationship: between the sexes and between individual women and women groups, and may be deconstructed as follows:

### **Categorisation of Basic Gender Relationships in Pre-Colonial Africa**



The classification above which presents women in relationships with men and with fellow women, demonstrates the nature of the manifestation of power, but more significantly, it highlights that femininity is implied at all levels of relationship.

The socio-political and cultural groups which functioned in traditional Africa as pressure groups in several pre-colonial African cultures sought as Catherine Acholonu observes, to create a balance that ensured the mutual distribution of power and roles between the sexes (18). This balance is an essential factor that should characterize the triad of African femininity, African reality and African ideals. The African concept of role delineation/differentiation implies that pre-colonial African women never desired to dominate even though they may have been assertive, militant and strong. Such women included Queen Ann Nzingha of the Ndongo, Angola (1583-1663), Queen Yaa Asantewa (1840-1921), the *ehe* female battalions of the Yoruba Kingdom of Dahomey in the present day Republic of Benin, Queen Amina of Zazzau (1533-1610), Emotan of Benin Kingdom (1380-1400) as well as Muhumusa and Kaigirwa who were feared leaders of the East African Nyabingi rebel priestesses that intimidated the German colonialists in Rwanda and Uganda from 1850 to 1950. These militant women, among others, participated in the process of situating gender relations within the context of social groupings and extended family systems. More significantly, they sought to liberate their land and people from colonial/enemy domination, and mobilized their people accordingly.

Femininity in religious practices across the world has been apparent in the different spiritual/supernatural roles that women perform in their families and communities. Oral traditional accounts in many parts of the world, especially Africa, present women as invokers, healers, herbalists, oracle servers and priestesses of the ancestors and different shrines.

Shamanic practices were common in Mali and parts of Southern Africa which include Eastern Free State and Lesotho. Archeological records disclose that shamanism was practised in Asia in pre-historic period, predating all organised religions ([www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleolithic\\_religion](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleolithic_religion)). Shamanism is an ancient healing tradition as well as a way of life. It is a way to connect with nature and all of creation (Karl J. Narr). According to Barbara Tedlock, the early shamans were female, and contemporary shamanic roles continue to be performed primarily by women. They were variously described as sorcerers, witch-doctors, etc. who used their healing spirits to achieve extensive feats in their communities ([www.shamanportal.org/shamanism\\_Africa.php](http://www.shamanportal.org/shamanism_Africa.php)).

There are also such personalities in Nigeria. Chielo, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* serves as the priestess of Agbala. Once in a while, she is possessed by the spirit of her god, Agbala, and she begins to prophesy. Everyone, including Okonkwo in Umuofia reveres her for her spiritual endowments. She defies the pleas by Okonkwo and Ekwefi, his youngest wife and mother of Ezinma, and takes Ezinma at night to Agbala in his shrine in the Oracle of the Hills and Caves (100-104).

Significantly, although some feminist scholars criticize some of the trends of the pre-colonial African societies as oppressive on women, some others argue that the men never really intended or set out to oppress, dominate or denigrate women. In fact, women still enjoyed significant privileges in the society. These issues are portrayed by Chinua Achebe in his early novels, first, to demonstrate that Africa had its virtues and infelicities prior to

colonialism; and second, to protest that the people did not require Western civilisation that was thrust on them, after which everything fell apart. In Achebe's words:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them (“The Novelist As Teacher” 45).

Indeed, women in pre-colonial Africa related with men in complementary rather than subordinate contexts. Power was based on seniority, rather than on gender. The absence of a terminology for gender and the interchangeability of several first names in many African languages among females and males attest to the reality of gender equality in pre-colonial Africa (Maria Rojas, “Women in Pre-Colonial Nigeria”).

## **2.2 Women in Colonial Africa**

The colonization of Africa by European powers including Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium and Portugal brought Africa into the world economic system as a major target for exploitation. The story of African colonization often has a parallel story of the oppression of African women. Maria Rojas asserts that “Africa not only provided Europeans with a source of raw materials but it also provided them with what they viewed as raw, uncivilized people – if Europeans considered Africans people at all – on whom they could impose their views

and whom they could exploit at the same time they exploited the land” (“Women in Colonial Nigeria”). Prominently, with the advent of colonization, new patriarchal conceptions arose about the appropriate roles of women as the colonial administrators and missionaries changed the position of women in economic and social endeavours. Colonialism directly disrupted the traditional system of production and reproduction among the indigenous peoples, and introduced social inequality and oppressive forms of social stratifications throughout the levels of gender relations and interactions.

The colonizers expected African societies to consider women as subordinate to men because Europeans – through the Christian-cum-Victorian ideologies – considered women subordinate to men. The colonial idea of the appropriate social role for women differed greatly from the traditional role of women in indigenous African societies. It involved the patriarchal European assumption that women belonged in the home, engaged in child rearing – an exclusively female responsibility – and other domestic chores. African men were engaged in the colonial administration as messengers, interpreters, clerks, guards, etc., while the women were irrelevant and unrecognized. As a result, the complementarity of the sexes waned; the men developed a new sense of superiority to the women; women got relegated to insignificant positions and degrading forms of treatment. This notion is described as masculinization of the political, economic and social systems that dominated the communities. Ifi Amadiume states that during the colonial period, those who wielded power – such as warrant chiefs, court clerks and court messengers – in the local communities, were all men (*Male*

*Daughters, Female Husbands*, 136). These trends laid the foundation for many of the oppressive, exploitative, discriminatory and subjugate dynamics that women suffer in various contexts till date.

Beyond the mundane matrix, the Christian religion, which came with colonialism, introduced a male deity, as against the female deity that dominated pre-colonial/traditional religious practices. The new religion taught about one male God, His Son, His bishops and His priests. While the women formed the great majority of the congregation – the body of the church – a few men, the clergy, constituted the leadership of the church.

These new gender relations and realities were also generated through the early patterns of Western education (Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 134). The new challenges that confronted women in the new colonial civilization got women to react by revamping and reinvigorating the different pre-colonial women's groups in the communities. In Nigeria, the reactions manifested as rebellious activities by several women's groups in different locations:

- Akpan and Ekpo disclose that in the 1910s, the women of the old Calabar province, from places such as Abak, Opobo (now Ikot Abasi) and Utu Etim Ekpo, Ikot Ekpene, Ika, Itu and Uyo gallantly picked up pestles and leaves to ward off the encroaching colonial enslavement (*The Women's War of 1929*, 1).

- In 1929, the women of the areas listed above as well as those in Aba rose in overt protests against the oppressive female taxation and other policies by the colonial government that had extensive negative impact on the people: unemployment, inflation, increased prices of imported products, closure of small enterprises, increased school fees, etc. The people grew steadily dissatisfied with the colonial government and burnt down government buildings, courts, and houses of the government's local agents. They were confronted by government troops that shot at them within close range. There was a high record of the dead and wounded (Iniobong Uko, "The Unacclaimed Heroines and Contemporary Annang Women", 62).
- In 1946, there was the Egba market women's riot in Abeokuta in the present Ogun State, Nigeria, led by late Mrs. Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti, to protest the harsh effects of the enforcement of British Food Trade Regulations by the Alake who was invested with sweeping powers as the "sole native Authority under the British". By 1948, the women's uprising resulted in the temporary exile of the Alake, Ladipo Ademola, by the British' Residence who deported him to Oshogbo in the interest of peace (Akande Jadesola, 102).

Those were some of women's responses to the rape of justice by colonial administrators in some parts of Nigeria, thus clearly indicating that women's struggles against all forms of marginalization and oppression are as dated as women's history in Africa.

Ifi Amadiume in "Women and Development" asserts that the

colonial experience that ushered in Western perceptions and practices affected the traditional involvement of African women in the development of their societies, leading to women's marginalization and economic and political disempowerment. Obviously, colonialism introduced to African people strange codes of conduct, eating habits, modes of dressing, types and trends of relationships, manners of worship, etc., which challenged and called into question the people's established systems of values and ideals. The European colonial officers, with their Victorian notion of womanhood, approached Africa with an anomalous sense of womanhood: as mentally frail, physically weak, generally inefficacious and unable to take decisions without the man. Such European women as well as the weakening of the African male personality by colonialism are captured in African literature, and a few samples will suffice.

In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Mrs. Meers, the wife of the colonial master, Dr. Meers, who works at the Forensic Science Laboratory in Yaba, Lagos, does next to nothing all day, and it is Nnaife, the house-keeper cum cook, that undertakes all the domestic chores including washing Mrs. Meers' under-wears. This symbolizes his acquiescing to being emasculated, and it is consistent that Nnu Ego feels nauseated, as she explains:

You [Nnaife] behave like a slave! Do you go to her [Mrs. Meers] and say, Please, madam crawcraw-skin, can I sleep with my wife today?' Do you make sure the stinking underpants she wears are well washed and pressed before you come and touch me ... I



want to live with a man, not a woman-made man (50). However, Nnu Ego engages in petty trading to supplement Nnaife's efforts; and then after Nnaife is conscripted to fight in the Second World War, she makes bold to buy wares from sailors to sell, thus taking part in the risky illegitimate trade of the war period. That was the strength of the African female character, as opposed to the weakness of the typical European woman. Emecheta depicts the emasculation of the African man through Ubani's wife, Cordelia in *The Joys of Motherhood*:

You want a husband who has time to ask you if you wish to eat rice, or drink corn pap with honey? Forget it. Men here are too busy being white men's servants to be men. We women mind the home. Not our husbands. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is the money, shining white man's money (51).

Also, Toundi, in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*, is the Commandant's *Houseboy* in the French colony of Dangan. He recounts his experience at the arrival of the Commandant's wife in Dangan from Europe:

She arrived at last. How pretty she is.... My master got out of the car. I ran over to open the door for Madame. She smiled at me. I saw her teeth.... The Commandant's strong arm was around her wasp-like waist. He told her, 'This is Toundi, my houseboy.' She offered me her hand. It was soft, tiny and limp in my big hand that

swallowed it up like a precious jewel...(46-47).

Of course, Madame does nothing all day; the houseboy, Toundi, does all the work in and around the house. These depictions are repugnant in the African reality, because African women are typically strong, resilient and enduring, and they strive to survive and ensure that their families survive also.

In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, Anowa demonstrates her desire for a real man since her husband, Kofi Ako is impotent, and she complains:

Kofi, are you dead? ... is your manhood gone? I mean, you are like a woman ... there is not hope any more, is there? Kofi ... is that why I must leave you? That you have exhausted your masculinity acquiring slaves and wealth? Now I know ... My husband is a woman now. He is a corpse. He is dead wood. But less than dead wood because at least, that sometimes grows mushrooms ... (61, 62).

Underlying the image of male relevance is a parallel image of male emasculation, soul betrayal and consistent loss of personhood, which the men went through in colonial Africa. But women had no place and served no roles in the colonial scheme of affairs. They were left at home and condemned to nurturing and domesticity. This unconscious inflation of the male ego and a corresponding deflation of the female ego by the colonial system marked the formal starting point of the male sense of self-importance and the

Even though both male and female children of Mother Africa were assailed by the invasion of the male-centered and male-dominated European and Arab cultures, the female suffered the greater damage. ... the new alien powers dislodged African men from their previous positions of power, those African men would in turn grab whatever was left of power by dislodging their female counterparts from their own positions of power. As a result, the male managed to carve out a niche in the new dispensation and within it managed to maintain a continuous link with his essence, thus ensuring a stronger sense of self. This demolition of African womanhood has produced the contemporary African women who are to a large extent disoriented, weakened, and rendered ineffective and irrelevant (52).

The relegation of and discrimination against women in Africa have continued till date, but women have struggled in various ways and have surmounted several of the oppressive structures and debilitating stereotypes.

### **2.3 Women in Post-Colonial Africa**

In the post-colonial period in Africa, women have been able to achieve inclusiveness and be identified with several activities that reveal that they are credible and strong personalities, with potentialities. They also make significant contributions to the development of the family and society, and challenge the

validity of many patriarchal structures that they find obnoxious in current realities. They are largely exposed to education and other self-developing endeavours so that they are eligible for recognition, and competent to make diverse impact. There is a subtle contradiction, though, in the ways that women are regarded and described in post-colonial Africa: first as victims, and second, as heroines, and at the centre of these images is the poverty index that marks women as different from men. In some African countries, the majority of small-scale farmers are women. They are principally involved in subsistence farming and petty trading, mainly to supplement the family's earnings. This notion is described as feminization of poverty in Africa, and is a dominant motif that has engaged several post-colonial literary writers.

The post-colonial period witnessed the efforts of women to be relevant to the newly evolved society and economy. A gender and development approach in post-colonial socio-political and cultural discourses seeks to reinstate the importance of women in development, while recognizing that the destructive effects of poverty and disease continue to afflict them and render them hapless and helpless (Amadiume "Women and Development in Africa"). Women sought to bring their potential and capacities to bear on the new system in the areas of commerce, politics, industry, public service, recreational activities, fashion, the professions, music, creative and performing arts etc. Unfortunately, they were challenged by their background which did not effectively prepare and equip them for the new realities – they were denied formal education which the men obtained; the society insisted that nurturing

and participation in socio-economic/socio-political activities were mutually exclusive; Moslem women were silenced, made invisible psychologically, and restricted physically.

According to Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam*, in ancient Middle East, the subordination of women became institutionalized with the rise of urban societies and with the rise of the archaic state in particular. Contrary to androcentric theories proposing that the inferior social status of women is based on biology and “nature”, and thus has existed as long as human beings have, archeological evidence suggests that women were held in esteem prior to the rise of urban societies and suffered a decline in status with the emergence of urban centers and city states (11). By implication, the ideal image of a good Muslim wife, as explained by Prophet Muhammed, and recorded in Wiebke Walther's *Women in Islam* is: “she who pleases him when he looks at her, obeys him when he commands, and does not oppose him in things which he rejects for her and for himself” (60). This means that the ideal Muslim woman should be pretty and submissive to her husband and the tradition/religion. However, evidence abounds to prove that intelligent women are often prepared to accept anything except this concept of unquestionable submissiveness to the will of a man.

Even though many families in the post-colonial period found it needful to allow their daughters to obtain formal education, those families did not encourage or allow the girl children into any challenging vocations and areas of study which were regarded as prestigious, perhaps so that the girls' effeminate

brains would not be badly tasked! The areas that the girl children were allowed to fit into included dress-making, home management and cooking, teaching, nursing and midwifery. The few women who sought to be involved in more challenging vocations and areas of study, which were described as male domains were despised and regarded as bizarre specimens. That is the category that Anowa belongs to Ama Ata Aidoo's play of the same title. Anowa's strength of character motivates her opinion, perceptions, expectations and expressions, which are opposed to the society's. Her strong inner rhythms embolden her to do the unusual: to apply herself to hardwork, to choose her husband herself, to defy every form of interference or imposition, and to seek self-fulfilment through procreation (Uko, "A Failed Sexual Rebellion", 134). Anowa questions Kofi's inability to get her pregnant, and her expectation not to work, but to use slaves, revealing that her ideals are at variance with Kofi's values.

#### **2.4 Women in the Contemporary or Modern Africa**

The post-colonial phase progressed nearly seamlessly into the contemporary or modern phase, which, in the epistemology of African femininity, has opened up new possibilities as well as new challenges to women in Africa. It has brought about effective strategies for female inclusion in socio-economic and socio-political trends. These strategies have generated, among mostly urban women, not just voice, but eloquence to negotiate with men for power, influence and positions in contemporary African societies. African women are adept in these negotiations, which may involve intrigue, diplomacy, double-talk, deceit and fraud, over and above natural

endowments, capacities, capabilities, talents and potentialities. The women realised since the mid twentieth century, and got to terms with the fact that for one woman to be successful, she must work thrice as hard as one man, or in non-systematic settings, she must fight the vicissitudes of the patriarchal society that operate antithetically against women. Consequently, there are women that are visible and active in all facets of African reality – as President, legislators, in top positions of the professions, in diplomatic circles, in governance, in commerce, in industry, in show-business, in the judiciary, as Vice Chancellors, Registrars and other top academic and administrative positions of universities and other tertiary institutions. The list is inexhaustible.

This is where we are as contemporary women in Africa. With the colonial and post-colonial legacies, with the challenge of modern trends as well as the albatross of modern life described as globalisation, African women have diverse issues to grapple with, to remain relevant and ensure inclusion into mainstream events. Herein lies the need to controvert the traditional perception of African femininity, which often portrays the woman as the children's mother, or the minister's wife or the chief's sister, etc., but never being herself.

In contemporary realities, the woman pursues an identity as a credible and effectual personality – married, unmarried, widowed, separated or divorced – to make impact and to be reckoned with. This modern concept of African femininity portrays the image of the descendants of who Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* describes as “The New Women

heroines”, who were yesterday's ideal housewives, who reflected their dreams and mirrored their yearning for identity, all of which they could not attain, but wanted their daughters to attain them. They desired for their daughters to be more than housewives and achieve what had eluded them. They dreamt that each of their daughters will be educated, be a career woman, do something, be somebody herself, and not just exist in and through others (40-41). The need for the modern woman to strive for more is called “feminine adjustment”. It implies evading the terror of early marriage, evolving a personal identity, seeking education, working hard, very hard indeed, and discovering the life of the mind, pursuing the truth, and taking a place in the world (*The Feminine Mystique*, 76). It also involves dismantling the familiar stereotype of the African female who walks behind her husband, which has variously been recreated by African male writers, who themselves regard women as being led by men, thus, justifying the secondary and subsidiary position of the African female. Iniobong Uko in “Transcending the Margins” opines that:

The depiction of the African woman as a nonentity, with neither ambition nor concrete abilities might not really have been the thrust of the force that motivated African writers to correct the atrociously misconstrued and misrepresented Africa, African landscape and values as well as African humanity, where humanity is contemplated as man, the male. It is not out of place, therefore that the first African literary work in English, the unbeatable classic of the 20<sup>th</sup>



century African literature, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, consciously recreated the authentic Africa, African landscape and African humanity, in its portrayal of men of honour and valour ... The obvious omission is in *Things Fall Apart* not consciously recreating a credible African woman who knows her own mind and even while married and performing nurturing roles, has her ambitions and contributes to the dynamics of economics in the micro and macro systems (84).

That omission by Achebe set the platform for subsequent African writers, especially the early ones who were obviously male, to depict the man as the “given”, while the woman is the “other”, the “incidental”, in fact, a misnomer. This notion of African womanhood has had tremendous negative implications on women through the ages, and has constituted the major concept that has engaged female writers in Africa.

In many cultures of the world, women are socialized to present themselves as “precious, ornamental and fragile, uninstructed in and ill-suited for anything requiring muscular exertion”; and they also project “shyness, reservedness, and a display of frailty, fear and incompetence” (Erving Goffman, 89). That was an aspect of what the French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, argued against in her 1949 treatise, *The Second Sex*, that “no biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society” and “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (187). Let us take a minute to analyse de Beauvoir's contention within the purview

of the psychological, physiological, behavioural, cultural, religious notions of femininity.

Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, called psychoanalysis, reveals the anima and animus as two basic anthropomorphic archetypes of the unconscious mind. They describe a realm of the unconscious that surpasses the personal consciousness. This school of thought conceives of anima as an expression of a feminine inner personality that prevails in the unconscious of the male; and the animus, being the masculine inner personality, which dominates the female unconscious.

These factors explain why men sometimes exhibit some traits that are commonly known to be feminine, and women also sometimes display some male characteristics. Therefore, the evolution of femininity underscores the centrality of the male essence, and appropriates analogous complexes that present the sexes as complementary, such that one gender is not totally in isolation of the other.

Behaviourally, femininity is often considered within the framework of sexuality, which consequently reduces femininity largely to the value of biology. The Dutch psychologist, Geert Hofstede describes service, permissiveness and benevolence as feminine behaviours ([www.masculinity-and-femininity-geert-hofstede](http://www.masculinity-and-femininity-geert-hofstede)). This perception of femininity drives women to behave in ways that maintain and promote the patriarchal social system. The common patterns of women's attitudes may be considered as responsive to the notion of the female sexual objectification,

which compels many women to seek to be sexually appealing: through their dressing, body presentation and adornment, mannerisms, hairstyles, etc. While in Western cultures, the typical feminine presentations involve clear/smooth skin, minimal bust-line, narrow waist, near-flat bottom, straight legs as well as long, flowing hair, in other cultures, the evolution of the feminine principle is remarkably different, and sometimes a bit revolting. The expectations in Africa may include any or some of the following: properly-tended hair, robust bust-line, well-contoured waistline and bottom, rounded straight legs, etc.

I will not venture into the different ways that several of these have changed or have been influenced by foreign cultural ideals over the years.

In contemporary Muslim cultures, women are expected to cover their heads with the *hijab* (veil) or different types of headscarves. This is emblematic of high feminine morality and modesty. In an interview with Aditi Bhaduri in 2006, Nawal El Saadawi, the Egyptian feminist writer, activist, physician and psychiatrist, described the veil as:

... a tool for the oppression of women. In the Arab world, it is now often used as a fashion statement. In Egypt, the women work, run after men, use make-up ... chain-smoke, and still they cover their heads. And then this veil is being imported to other countries, the subcontinent and even to America! It is very fashionable for some feminists from the East now to trash Western feminism to defend the veil...

in the name of multi-culturalism.  
([www.newslinemagazine.com/2006/07/interview-dr-nawal-el-saadawi](http://www.newslinemagazine.com/2006/07/interview-dr-nawal-el-saadawi)).

El Saadawi highlights the falsehood among most users of the veil, and how the society is deceived to regard them as diligent Muslim women. Specifically, the veil can be traced to the ideology of Judaism, prior to the advent of Islam. It was derived from the Old Testament Christian philosophy in which women were abjured to cover their heads when praying to Jehovah, whereas men could remain bareheaded because “they were created in the image of God.” Thus arose the belief that women are defective, incomplete, a body without a head, a body completed only by the husband, who alone possesses a head (El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 5). By implication, even though the veil is not mentioned in the Holy Quran, it is actually Quranic in spirit (Phil Parshall & Julie Parshall *Lifting the Veil* 57). However, Annie Van Sommer and Samuel M. Zwemer recount that “in Arabia before the advent of Islam it was customary to bury female infants alive. [Prophet] Mohammed improved on the barbaric method and discovered a way by which all females could be buried alive and yet live on – namely, the veil” (6). The veil can be analysed as serving in the following contexts:

1. Religious – an act of obedience to the will of God as a consequence of a profound religious experience, which several adherents refer to as being 'born again';
2. Psychological – an affirmation of authenticity, a return to the roots, and a rejection of Western norms;

3. Political – a sign of disenchantment with the prevailing (oppressive) political order;
4. Revolutionary – an identification with the Islamic revolutionary forces that affirm the necessity of the Islamization of society as the only means of salvation;
5. Economic – a sign of affluence, of being a lady of leisure;
6. Cultural – a public affirmation of allegiance to chastity and modesty, of not being a sex object (especially among unmarried working women);
7. Demographic – a sign of being urbanized;
8. Practical – a means of reducing the amount to be spent on clothing;
9. Domestic – a way to keep the peace, since the males in the family insist on it (Zuhur, 105). The above reveals the concept of the veil as a realistic index of African (Muslim women's) femininity.

Generally, women also use many items of jewelry, hair decorations and body embellishments that have different implications and serve varied purposes at various times. These include beads and rings on the hair, round the neck, wrist, ankle, waist, finger(s), ears, lip and nose. They also use cosmetics, wear high-heel shoes, suggestive clothing to send specific messages in different situations. These diverse forms of titivation imply femininity. Sally Feldman holds that some second-wave feminists reject what they regard as constricting standards of female beauty, created for the subordination and objectification of women, and self-perpetuated suffering, competition and women's own aesthetics (“Heights of Madness”). These in themselves, are viable means for the

woman to feel good, have sexual allure, which is also a genuine form of empowering personal choices.

Unfortunately, the socialization processes consistently make the woman to feel that presenting herself in any particular way should be in the interest of the man: her husband, her male lover, her in-laws, the elders in her family, her male colleagues, etc. And women have also been conditioned to feel that they live, do many things not for their sakes, but for the sake of other people, specifically, men. This misnomer makes femininity to be misconstrued as always targeting male pleasure. Current events and trends reveal that the woman within the perspectives of decency and modesty ought to live first for herself, before thinking of pleasing anyone else.

Femininity has been prominent in religious practices across the world. It has been made manifest in the different roles that women perform. From the Bahai Faith, through Buddhism to Christianity, women have served very significant roles. George H. Gallup Jr. presents evidence to prove that women have more religiosity than men. He explains how women hold on to their faith more heartily, work harder for the church and in general practise with more consistency than men. Historically, differing social roles may have encouraged greater religious participation among women: for example, mothers have tended to spend more time than fathers in raising and nurturing their children, which has often included overseeing their involvement in church activities. Women usually take up more flexible daily work schedules than men, so as to make time for more church involvement during the week.

Generally, the following are essential:

- Women tend to be more open about sharing personal problems.
- Women are more relational than men. Gallup's research finds that a higher proportion of women than men say they have a “best friend” in their congregation.
- More so than men, women lean toward an empirical rather than a rational basis for faith ([www.gallup.com/Why-Women-Are-More-Religious](http://www.gallup.com/Why-Women-Are-More-Religious)).

Patriarchal nuances exist within the context of Christianity. They give impetus to traditional beliefs and practices, which make it easy for men to control women socially, politically, sexually, economically, etc. Starting from the creation story, it is clear that God created the woman, Eve, as an afterthought, because if He felt that man could stay alone, He may never have created Eve, implying that the woman would never have existed. And even when He created Eve, He did so from Adam's rib, the removal of which did not incapacitate Adam in any way (Genesis 2: 21-23). This Christian creation myth, which manifests in several other forms in other myths, has contributed largely to the subordinate position of women across many cultures of the world.

And when St. Paul in his letter recorded in Colossians 3:18 asserts that women should “submit to their husbands ... and husbands should love their wives...”, it is problematic because while love is much more indeterminate, submissiveness, which

synonyms are obedience, meekness, passivity, compliance, gentleness, is definite and easily measurable and calculable. The immeasurable nature or unquantifiable quality of love makes it easy and convenient for the man not to love his wife, but to expect his wife to submit to him. This principle underlies much of the tension that characterises the structure of many contemporary families.

Considering the above realities, and the fact that femininity is the sum total of all the attributes that express or are perceived to express the ideals of womanhood, it is a common practice in many cultures to often reward girls and women when they exhibit traits and behaviours that are regarded and accepted as appropriate for women. These are forms of blackmail that have been thrust on African women over the years, but which must now be checked, not at the level of communities (since men may hardly immediately support such initiatives) but on the bases of families.

### **3.0 Domains of Feminine Disempowerment**

In many African societies, there are some practices that are considered fundamental to femininity, many of which have become anathema to the realities of modern womanhood in Africa. Certain values that are evolved, implemented and sustained largely by men and some ignorant and brainwashed women are imposed on female children and women in the guise of traditional values. Many of the practices are now losing authenticity especially as there are no corresponding sets for male children authenticity and men. We will consider some of them below:



### **3.1 Femininity and Chastity**

Women undergo clitoridectomy or genital mutilation or circumcision as a means of ensuring untainted femininity. This practice is validated by the myth that the removal of the clitoris reduces the sexual desire of the girl, and therefore, helps to preserve her virginity prior to marriage, and chastity after marriage. Circumcision was known to be practised in Europe as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and it is still practiced in countries like Egypt, the Sudan, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Guinea and Nigeria. It was also practised in many Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and in parts of Latin America. It is recorded as going back far into the past under the Pharaonic Kingdoms of Ancient Egypt, and Herodotus mentioned the existence of female circumcision seven hundred years before Christ was born. This is why the operation as practised in the Sudan is called “Pharaonic Excision” (Desmond Morris, 76).

This is a very primitive procedure that involves excising the clitoris, the external labia and internal labia, and then closing the orifice of the genital organs with a flap of sheep's intestines leaving only a very small opening barely enough to let in the tip of the finger. That is solely for menstrual flows and the emission of urine. The opening is slit at the time of marriage and widened to allow the penetration of the male sexual organ. At the time of child birth, the opening is again widened, and then narrowed down once more after child birth. For a woman who is divorced, the aperture is completely shut, so that she can have no sexual intercourse except in the event of another marriage, when the

opening is restored (El Saadawi *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 39-40). These extreme stages are not present in some modern cultures where only the clitoris is excised, but there is no evidence that this practice curtails the libido, rather, the barbaric act has caused the fatality of young girls and women.

### **3.2 Femininity and Servitude**

Women are kept under servitude by the men, especially in marriage. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argues that “it is within marriage that the Nigerian woman suffers the most oppression...” (75). In many African cultures, the woman as daughter or sister wields tremendous authority in her birth lineage. At that level, she is considered as a potential source of wealth; thus, educated or not, the family expects that when she will be married, the family will be enriched. However, with marriage, she becomes an entity to be patronized and possessed. She loses her hitherto rights, privileges and freedom, she loses her voice and neither is she regarded, nor her opinion recognized. These notions are couched within the taxonomy of African femininity earlier presented.

In most situations, the woman as wife/mother enjoys some respect through her children, specifically, male children. Where the family is inclined to polygyny, then the wife may acquiesce to it as a way of shifting to the background, to obscurity and irrelevance, since the man will be occupied with the new wife. It is common among African men “to be less trusting of wives than they are of their own mothers and sisters, a situation which often alienates the wife throughout her marriage, making her a stranger in enemy territory all her life” (Ogundipe-

Leslie 75). The paradox of male power and authority is derived from the notion that men depend emotionally more on their mothers, sisters, aunts and other women in their own lineages than they do on their wives. These women in the lineage, in relishing the ambience of power, authority and recognition by their son, unavoidably oppress the wife, and make her feel as an outsider. They also support the man in consistently relegating his wife.

In contemporary/modern times, the subordination of women in marriage has been alleviated by the right to work outside the home. This reality has encumbered the female personality in several profound ways. Since most African men hardly undertake housework, the modern woman is saddled with the work at home, childcare, and work outside the home. The three imply and exact on her in very different ways, which include.

- She needs to work at home to show that she is meeting her obligations to her family;
- She does full childcare because that is her natural calling, and which the society endorses in full; and
- She should work outside the home to evolve for herself a sense of individuality, even though many women still have their income appropriated by their husbands.

### **3.3 Femininity and Invisibility**

Women are made to be unheard, and often also unseen. Of course, when a woman is disempowered and alienated by her husband and his family members, she is alone even in marriage in her home. This scenario explains why women do not often participate in serious matters in the family and society,

including the negotiation process for marriage in many African cultures and families: neither the girl concerned nor her mother is involved. In fact, the whole process is male business. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Obierika and his kinsmen handle the negotiation for the bride-price in respect of his daughter, Akueke. After the whole process, Obierika sends his son, Maduka to "go and tell Akueke's mother that we have finished ..." (73). The women are not visible in the process, and that is consistent with Femi Ojo-Ade's notion of the ideal woman in patriarchal societies that "... woman must keep quiet when men are talking. Woman is woman, child-bearer, supporter of man; if woman talks too much, it is considered uncouth, uncivilized, if she is educated, she is classified a weird specimen" ("Female Writer, Male Critics" 159). This implies as Uko explains that "the ideal woman within African cultural praxis is one who is only seen but not heard, who is not conscious that she is an independent and sensible person who should fully participate in moulding her destiny" ("The Role of the African Woman in Transcending Cultural Frontiers in Nigeria..." 123).

The concept of female invisibility is worse in Muslim cultures where the *hijab* (veil) covers the woman's mouth, signifying that she really should not talk. Cloaking herself entirely is emblematic of a ghost, an invisible entity that should at best be regarded as non-existent, and requires to be overlooked. The perpetuation of child marriage implies the perpetual weakening and silencing of the woman, so that in her voicelessness, she cannot address the issues that affect her, but she is in acquiescence of them to be considered and decided for

her by the male. To be married as a child, Islamic cultures designate the sexuality of the female victim (not wife) as the property of men: first of the victim's father, then of her husband, and the victim's purity (her virginity in particular) becomes a negotiable, economically valuable property.

As noted by Weibke Walther (179) and concurred by Judith Tucker (183), "Islam encourages the man to have more than one wife and to have concubines. In medieval Egypt, the upper class man was free to buy slaves and to have sexual relations with his female slaves ..." (61). The fact that Islam subscribes to the abuse of women is apparent in the marriage situation. Leila Ahmed observes that marriages in Islam are polygynous and the marriage of girls nine or ten years old are accepted (62). Thus, clearly, Islam places relations between the sexes on a strange pedestal, and sets the stage for the subsequent trends, which are "women's exclusion from social activities ... their physical exclusion, soon to become the norm; and the institution of internal mechanisms of control, such as instilling the notion of submission as a woman's duty..." (Ahmed 62). Nawal El Saadawi recounts that:

... Many veils fell from my mind as I grew up. Each time a veil fell, I would cry at night in sadness for the beautiful illusion, which was lost. But in the morning, I'd see my eyes shining, washed by tears as the dew washes the blossom, ... I would leave the mirror, trample the fallen veil underfoot and stamp on it with a new found strength, with more strength than I'd the previous day ("The Veil", 211).

In the above, El Saadawi highlights that veiling is an aspect of patriarchy, which Uko in “Re-Structuring Patriarchy ...” describes as a “ubiquitous phenomenon and the looming terror, manifesting in diverse forms and degrees in different cultures the world over, and dating as far back in history as gender relations themselves...” (94), and which pervades both the private (family) and public (societal) spheres of life.

The claustrophobic effect of the veil – whether physical or otherwise – ensures that the woman is silenced so as to be a virtuous wife; she is secluded from public view so as to be a faithful wife; and she is excluded from activities so as to be untroubled by the many vicissitudes of the society, so that she remains the pleasure-post of her husband. Unfortunately, these factors and more, combine in profound ways to plague the woman, render her helpless, vulnerable, unthinking, uncritical, malleable, and ultimately, destructible in the face of challenges. This idea constitutes the background to what befalls Binetou at the death of Modou Fall in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. After twenty-five years of marriage to Ramatoulaye, and with twelve children, Modou Fall takes as a second wife Binetou, the close friend and age-mate of their adolescent daughter, Daba. Binetou, who mortgages her youth and education for money from the old Modou Fall, loses everything at his death – money, living in affluence and her education. She is neither known by the sympathizers, nor given any sympathy gifts by the old relatives, old acquaintances, and others who go on condolence visits to the family at the death of Modou.

Through her mother and supported by the religion, Binetou offered herself as a willing sacrifice on the altar of greed, and she ultimately pays dearly for that. She is silenced while married to Modou because she has nothing to offer except her youth and naiveté, which he exploits maximally till death. This can be given a dual interpretation - self-sacrifice by Binetou, and oppression by Modou, and Simone de Beauvoir's contention is significant within this context. According to her, "the oppressed ... are mysteriously quiet. When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent so it is sometimes held not to exist" (29). Binetou's silence is noteworthy, though it is not the same as Firdaus' in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* or Zakeya's in El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*. While Binetou's silence and invisibility arise from ignorance, naiveté and greed, Firdaus' and Zekaya's mode of silence and invisibility is generated from intense suffering, isolation and resentment.

### **3.4 Femininity and Immobility**

Women's movements in some cultures are restricted, and sometimes, women are chaperoned by the male before they can leave the home. In many African cultures, the woman does not have the liberty of going where she selects at any time. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the configuration of Okonkwo's premises indicates that the huts for his three wives are strategically located behind his *obi*, thus suggesting that he keeps surveillance over his women:

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household.  
He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of

red earth. His own hut, or *obi*, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind his *obi* (14).

In Muslim cultures particularly, the woman is regarded as the man's property: if the woman is unmarried, she is owned by her father, if her father is deceased, she belongs to her uncle or brother; if the woman is married, she belongs to her husband, if she is widowed, she belongs to her deceased husband's male relative. Tracing Zaynab Alkali's role in demonstrating feminine self-fulfilment through the peregrination motif in the short story, "The Cobwebs", Uko explains how the Muslim culture stifles self-awareness in women through a socialization process which restricts female potential and an eventual self-fulfilment. A prominent aspect of the socialization is the physical restriction of women by confinement and or guarded movements beyond the home ("Self-Fulfilment Through the Peregrination Motif ...", 257). The implications of being owned are that she must not be seen by another man except her son and under-aged male relatives, and she must not go outside of the house or undertake a travel without the clear permission of her husband, who also designates a male escort for her.

### **3.5 Femininity and Self-Victimisation**

Women in many modern African cultures are encumbered by some modes of living that are both unnecessary and unbeneficial. They include dressing modes, hairstyles, make-up, etc., which they wear mainly to please the men. This is described in current gender discourses as self-victimisation. It



is common among modern middle-class African women to try to fit into the patriarchal image of womanhood, whether or not it suits them. Many modern women are unaware of Mariama Ba's postulation that:

Whereas a woman draws from the passing years the force of her devotion, despite the aging of her companion, a man, on the other hand, restricts his field of tenderness. His egoistic eye looks over his partner's shoulder. He compares what he had with what he no longer has, what he could have (*So Long a Letter*, 41).

By implication, it is untenable for women to feel bad about how they are or about the impact of aging.

In Cyprian Ekwensi's "Lokotown", Konni, a seamstress, in search of freedom and wealth, abandons her marriage and four children, and moves to live alone in Loko town. According to Ekwensi, she stands before the mirror, examines her once-beautiful face, which now shows signs of aging at the corners of the eyes, with marks on the brows and cheeks. However, "layers and layers of make-up were a great help, especially at night... Her biggest fight in life was ... to remain ever fresh and blooming. She wanted the young figure of the 18-year old girl just fresh from school" (6).

Also, Jagua Nana, in Ekwensi's novel by the same title is in love with young Freddie. While Freddie is a teacher at the Nigerian National College, Jagua is not intellectually inclined. Uko avers in "Female Portraiture in Cyprian Ekwensi's Fiction" that Jagua is conscious of her age and the competition she is likely to confront with younger girls in Lagos because of Freddie. She

works hard to ensure that she does not lose him to another woman, and Ekwensi states that when Jagua “painted her face and lifted her breasts and exposed what must be concealed and concealed what must be exposed, she could out-class any girl who did not know what to do with her God-given female talent” (6-7).

Kaine Agary in *Yellow-Yellow* demonstrates how the hostile realities of modern society, including the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, make some girls, specifically Zilayefa (Yellow-Yellow), to become vulnerable and slump to the status of pawns as a way of surmounting the vagaries of the oppression and exploitation that define their society. Sisi captures this notion as she states that “not many girls ... are able to fend for themselves these days. They are all waiting for men to take care of them...” (68). But she also informs Yellow-Yellow that “We are all *workaday* girls here, so you, too, have to pull your weight and learn how to be independent so that you can take care of yourself and maybe send some money to your mother [in the village]. Then the next thing is to get your degree... If you don't have your degree, it will be hard for you. You must be up and doing” (68-69). These forms of self-victimisation – living to please other people, while displeasing self are common among contemporary African women. Ojo-Ade clarifies that the basis for this seeming contradiction among women is because they are living with contradictions and enigmas in the form of husbands. If the woman is still a victim, it is to these confused minds that she remains so (“Still a Victim”, 74).

### **3.6 Femininity and Widowhood Rites**

Women are put through excruciating widowhood rites to prove that they are innocent of their husbands' death. But widowers

are neither subjected to any such practice at the death of their wives, nor are they ever suspected of contributing directly or indirectly to their wives' death. Uko in "African Widowhood and Visibility" explains that:

Widowhood in Africa often portends evil. Not only is the widow subjected to rigorous, oppressive and humiliating mourning rites as stipulated by tradition, but her husband's relatives often strip her of the family's properties. In many cases, the children she had with her deceased husband are taken from her and she is expected to get inherited by her deceased husband's male relative in the tradition of leviration (1).

In some African cultures, the widow is forced to sleep in a room with the corpse, or to drink the water used in washing the corpse, or to swear to an oath, etc. These are besides the ritual of scraping the hair on the head, wearing sackcloth for diverse durations of time, being isolated and deliberately being made unkempt.

Often times, the relatives of the widow's deceased husband strip her of the family's properties, which she and her late husband acquired, and at other times, they can decide to collect her children from her. These are the issues that Ifeoma Okoye espouses in *The Trial and Other Stories*. The puzzle that remains unresolved is that the culture prescribes no rites for the widower. This means that, the modern widow must fight for herself. Uko posits that "while she [the widow] weeps because of the death of her husband, she should keep her eyes

open to spot the intrigues that are planned against her, the exploitation and oppression that are targeted at her, and the perpetual poverty that she and her children may have to subsequently live in (“African Widowhood and Visibility”, 17).

### **3.7 Femininity and Leviration**

The society often forces on the widow the burden of being inherited, in the practice of leviration. The rationale is that she and her late husband's children need protection, which the family must provide. If there were no children (especially male children) prior to the husband's death, then his male relative should continue in his stead, so as to have children (especially male) to ensure the perpetuation of his lineage. Usually, the widow stays on in her late husband's house to preserve his homestead; or moves in with the family of her new husband, and becomes a co-wife to the man's wife/wives.

Buchi Emecheta captures this obnoxious practice in *The Joys of Motherhood* where Adaku, Nnaife's elder brother's widow moves from the rural Ibuza with her two daughters to Lagos to join Nnaife as his inherited wife. But Nnu Ego, Nnaife's embattled senior wife and mother of seven is struggling under the weight of harrowing poverty to provide for the jobless Nnaife and her children. Akachi T. Ezeigbo avers that Adaku “is Nnu Ego's foil and unlike Nnu Ego, understands the reality of their condition in the poverty-stricken home of a man who is unable to provide a secure haven for his large family. Her decision to leave Nnaife and fend for herself and her two daughters is a realistic one, for it would not be easy for her to live an independent and productive life in the stifling

environment where she and her daughters are devalued” (258).

Evidently, the above practices, among others, directly affect femininity in Africa. They are as repulsive as they are detestable, and their tenets and claims have lost credibility and plausibility in current sociological schema in Africa. even if in subordinate terms to the man in inter-gender relationships. In this connection, John Stuart Mill opines that:

All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be ... rebellious to the power of men. They are so far in a position different from all other subject classes, that their masters require something more from them than actual service. Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men, except he most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds (15).

Generally, the enslavement of women's minds by men, such as in the above configurations of femininity, eliminates the prospects of female rebellion, or at best, female questioning of the dysfunctional status quo. This phenomenon is significant in contemporary gender studies as it generates profound obligations among women to be conscious of the need to develop themselves and their minds to meet the challenges that confront them in their intra- and inter-gender

relationships. Within this framework, while the centrifugal force regulates relationships that marginalise and oppress one party (almost always the woman), the centripetal force strives to surmount the gender and class differences, and unify the people for the enhancement of the society. *Iban isong* in Ibibio cosmology finds relevance within the centripetal paradigm (Uko, “*Iban Isong* as a Tool for Female Empowerment in Akwa Ibom State”, 63) as it served in traditional societies to unify and sensitise women to protect their interests and those of their families. With the major patriarchal objectives being to disempower, intimidate and dominate women, and enslave their minds, the modern society has evolved a template that should facilitate female empowerment and assertion.

#### **4.0 The Power Matrix in African Femininity**

Many developments in successive epochs in Africa have portrayed women as powerless and dependent on men, implying that femininity is opposed to being assertive, empowered, independent and visible. According to Kamene Okonjo, the concept of dual-sex roles/organizations in pre-colonial Igbo societies in South-Eastern Nigeria contrasts sharply with the “single-sex” system which operates largely in the Western world. In the former, each sex manages its own affairs; women's interests are represented at all levels even though political status-bearing roles are predominantly the preserve of men. In the latter, women can achieve distinction and recognition only by taking on the roles of men in public life and performing them well ([www.questia.com/readwomen-in-africa-studies](http://www.questia.com/readwomen-in-africa-studies)). This premise indicates that African femininity and powerlessness are mutually inclusive.

Obviously, the modern concept of femininity strives to open up new domains that will help the woman to transcend the ambivalence of being female, yet living for male interests and pleasure. The psychology of oppressed and abused women in modern Africa recognizes Phaniel Egejuru's postulation that as a human entity and like other entities, animate or inanimate, the woman exists, she has a state of being, which equips her to challenge the notion that human being became synonymous with man, an entity or a word that supposedly subsumed woman (2-3). The emphasis here relates to René Descartes' philosophy of *cogito ergo sum*, meaning "I think, therefore, I am". Descartes argues that one's existence is authenticated by the person's *cogitatio* thought which is what happens in a person, such that he/she is immediately conscious of it ([www.RenéDescartes.wikipedia.the-free-encyclopedia](http://www.RenéDescartes.wikipedia.the-free-encyclopedia)). This thesis proposes that thinking generates power, but is it realistic to consider that there is power in modern African femininity?

Essentially, the feminine power in traditional Africa is captured by Chinweizu in his *Anatomy of Female Power* where he states the five pillars of female power that enable women to get what they want from men:

- women's control of the womb
- women's control of the kitchen
- women's control of the cradle
- the psychological immaturity of man relative to woman
- and man's tendency to be deranged by his own excited penis (14-15).

Despite Chinweizu's hyperbolic exposition above, female power in Africa was and is still visible in several esoteric ways. Ali Mazrui notes that "Africa has indeed expected its women... to be ready to *die* for their people. But Africa has very rarely expected women to *kill* for their people. The patriotic duty to kill is *gender-specific* – it is a man's duty. The patriotic duty to die is *gender-neutral* – it can apply to both men and women" (91), but more comfortably to women. To kill is really the extreme aspect of what women can do to assert or express self or power; but it can also be understood in a metaphorical context to mean that women who suffer oppression, deprivation, exclusion and isolation, really need ways and means to access selfhood and live meaningful lives. We will evaluate how these notions are captured in literature as well as their implications for contemporary/modern African women.

In Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus' experiences of oppression and exclusion at both micro and macro levels deprive her of parental love and care, make her initially vulnerable in relationships with men: her father hits her as she asks him for some money; then Sheikh Mahmoud batters her, Bayoumi slaps her severely, and brutally abuses her sexually because she attempts to declare that she will go out in search of a job with her high school certificate, Sherifa introduces her to prostitution, and then exploits her by extorting from her the money she makes. By the time Firdaus leaves Sherifa, she is hardened, fearless and bold. When Di'aa challenges her in his effort to be her manager, she declines the offer and dismisses him and his promises of police, medical, and legal protection. At this point, she has taken full charge of



her body, her choices, and her life, and expresses her sense of freedom in “I hope for nothing, I want nothing, I fear nothing, I am free” (87). But as Di'aa contests with her sense of self and its credibility, Firdaus murders him.

Similarly, in El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*, Zakeya's life entails grave suffering, asphyxiating marginalization on account of class, intense lack and disease, severe loneliness and steady diminution of her family. These experiences force her into the realization that Allah has been the unkind factor behind them all. She conceives Allah as both the huge iron gate of the Mayor's house and the Mayor himself, for if Allah is known to be all powerful and the Mayor is evidently all-powerful in Kafr El Teen, then the former translates as the latter. By striking down the Mayor with her hoe, she is responding to her need to free herself and other peasants from the wicked and oppressive entrapments of the all-powerful and wealthy members of the upper class in the community. That Zakeya kills the mayor with a hoe is significant because she has reduced him to the status of the peasants who he despises, exploits and extorts from (Uko, “The Politics of Exclusionism” 47-48).

In Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene Achike's brutality directly towards his wife, Beatrice, or indirectly through his high-handedness on their two children, and Beatrice's helplessness and silence generate in Beatrice the psychology of the oppressed that must wage vengeance. In reaction, Beatrice poisons Eugene and admits: “I started putting poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka” (290). Even though Beatrice's act is very strange and possibly unbelievable, it is also

symbolic of her effort to free herself and her children from the oppression and bondage that life with Eugene typifies. Thus, she does not mourn him, or dress in black, or cut her hair as expected of a widow, or attend the memorial masses in his honour.

Significantly, the women's acts of murder to surmount the paradigms of oppression represent a metaphoric act of purgation of years of accumulated fear and enslavement, the same way that Firdaus' act of bathing herself after sex with men is an act of purification. On the other hand, these women smash the myth of the binary distinction that depicts the society on class lines: suffering peasants versus affluent royalty; uneducated poor versus educated rich; frightened, intimidated, and vulnerable peasants versus fearless, outspoken and pious rich, an overbearingly strict and oppressive father versus a weakened, disempowered and physically abused mother.

### **5.0 Interface of Feminine Ambivalence and Assertion**

This Lecture identifies that the peculiarities of the background as well as the location of women usually make unique demands of them, and compel them to act and/or react in specific ways to the different stimuli that confront them. The women may be educated/elitist and urban-based, uneducated/illiterate or fairly educated and urban-based, or uneducated/illiterate or fairly educated and rural-based. Each of these classes of women is equipped in special ways to confront the realities in the environment. The women all contribute variously to the society: specifically, the educated/elitist woman contributes

significantly to the society. She may be a career woman, and also enjoys considerable recognition in the society. She may or may not be a family woman as a wife and a mother. If the former applies, she has a dual status as a career woman and a family woman.

The uneducated (often rural-oriented) woman in the urban setting may contribute to the society, but her contribution may hardly be recognised because her name and status are shrouded in the gloom of ignorance and illiteracy. She is often a family woman as a wife, sometimes a co-wife and a mother. She knows little or nothing about career, and may support men in despising the career woman whose vision and actions they misunderstand. The fairly educated woman makes little impact on the social, economic, and political systems, even though she is employed into some unchallenging areas, which render her irrelevant and somewhat anonymous. She may or may not be a family woman. If the latter obtains, she naturally aspires to be the former, and remain one. This woman can occur in the urban or rural setting, can blend fairly well with the educated and influential women as well as the uneducated women.

The deconstruction of African womanhood below is to establish what constitutes femininity within the different contexts as delineated. Traversing these different categories of women are issues of assertion and empowerment such as:

- What factors does each of the women contend with in her efforts to assert self or make impact in her family and society?
- How is each of them regarded by family members or people in the society?

- Considering each woman's background, what are her peculiar experiences and challenges?
- In the women's efforts at assertion, how do their inner rhythms operate to contend with the repressing patriarchal structures?
- How do the women's aspirations get to conflict with the expectations of their families and or societies?

Indeed, this Lecture recognizes that education is a major means for self-reliance in modern societies; and in rural settings, economic independence gives the woman recognition and voice within the family and beyond.

### **5.1 Modern African Women in Urban Settings**

Contemporary realities have introduced new vistas for self-improvement and self-enhancement among women. The experiences of educated women in urban settings have empowered them to cast off their cloaks of ignorance, timidity and self-hate, and be self-conscious, ambitious and assertive. However, within the African context, for the woman to assert self, she must necessarily be self-reliant; and to be self-reliant, she must be productive, and I dare to caution that her being productive must not constitute an affront to the integrity of her husband, or rub off negatively on his ego or self-image. This caution is essential because the modern woman needs to be ready for all the encumbrances that plague her male (or female) counterpart that may not be as productive, or that may not support female economic independence, because she is not expected to present as an educated person if she is educated; or a thinking personality if she is clever. This is described by Chimamanda Adichie as “the weight of gender

expectations" (*We Should all be Feminists*", 14).

Ama Ata Aidoo is concerned with this theme in her celebrated novel, *Changes: A Love Story*. In the story, Esi Sekyi works in the Department of Urban Statistics, and has deep passion for her job and does not allow her femininity to be her set back. She competes ardently with her male counterparts at work. Her husband, Oko, is a Deputy Head at a secondary school. He is recently transferred to another school and promoted to a substantive School Head. The omniscient narrator explains that:

He knew she [Esi] was much respected by her colleagues and other people who knew the work she did. So she should not really be trying to impress. Leaving the house virtually at dawn; returning home at dusk; often bringing work home? Then there are those conferences. Geneva, Addis, Dakar one half of the year; Rome, Lusaka, Lagos the other half (8).

The above explains Esi's status in her marriage. She is a career lady who is highly committed to her job. To comfortably concentrate on her job, Esi employs a housekeeper/cook to serve the family. Esi has a car, and the bungalow that serves as their residence is her official residence as a Data Analyst. In their six years of marriage, Esi and Oko have one child, a daughter, named Ogyaanowa. While Oko wants more children, possibly male, Esi is on a birth control device. Her decision against having more children gets Oko and his family so worried that Oko's mother and sisters suggest to him to try to have

another child outside his marriage, but the idea is repugnant to Oko's sense of decency. He is deeply in love with his wife, even though she pays very little attention to him.

Uko in "Gender Relations and Domestic Power Politics" observes that "within the above framework, Esi gains in stature while Oko diminishes, though they are both of the same height physically. Correspondingly, the pendulum of domestic power tilts towards Esi, and this is visible not only to Oko, but his friends as well, who taunt him because they think he is not behaving like a man. His efforts to behave like a man and get Esi to recognise his authority over her result in what Esi describes as "marital rape" when Oko forcefully makes love to her while she is preparing for work (215). Her reaction to the rape experience gives credence to Morolake Omonubi-McDonnell's opinion that "rape is not a crime of lust. It is a crime of violence ... A rapist's motive is not sexual gratification. It is to degrade, control and/or humiliate [the victim]" (43). Indeed, Esi's situation fits into Betty Friedan's analysis: Esi has the "will to power", "self-assertion", "dominance," or "autonomy", yet it does not imply aggression or competitive striving in the usual sense. She is an individual affirming her existence and potentialities as a being in her own right. She displays the courage to be an individual (*The Feminine Mystique* 310), and resists being diminished in any relationship she finds herself in, and this affirms Chinweizu's assertion that:

Whereas male power is hard, aggressive and boastful, female power is soft, passive and self-effacing. Whereas male power is like an irresistible

force, female power is like an immovable object. Whereas male power acts like a storm, full of motion, sound and fury, female power is like the sun – steady, quiet and uncontested. Against resistance, male power barks, commands and pummels, whereas female power whispers, manipulates and erodes (22).

Oko's attempt to impose his power over his wife through sex becomes counterproductive. Esi's independent mind makes her ideas tangential to the fact that “sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Any time. And at his convenience” (*Changes*, 12). Esi proffers a significant paradigm for contemporary women to work hard, and to pursue economic empowerment as a prelude to the attainment of a total freedom of the mind (Uko, “Gender Relations” 218).

## **5.2 Modern African Women in Rural Settings**

African women in rural environments constitute a viable component among contemporary/modern African women. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), women represent the majority of rural populations and of the agricultural workforce in Africa. The dominance of women in rural areas is caused largely by male migration to urban areas, increasing cases of separation and divorce among married couples, war and HIV/AIDS, etc. Consequently, in sub-Saharan Africa, about 31% of rural households are headed by women. Rural women also produce at least 80% of the basic foodstuff consumed in the rural and

urban societies. They also provide about 70% of all the agricultural labour, and produce about 90% of the food ([www.en.org/wiki/United\\_Nations\\_Development\\_Fund\\_for\\_Women](http://www.en.org/wiki/United_Nations_Development_Fund_for_Women)).

In spite of the above, sub-Saharan women do not own up to 2% of land. In many African countries, the tradition forbids women from owning land. Women may own land, including family land for temporary agricultural purposes, through their male relatives, like fathers, brothers, uncles, sons, and others. They are also restricted from benefitting from funding agencies. When they are able to access loans, they often receive smaller amounts than men, even for the same activities ([www.unwomen.org.au/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx](http://www.unwomen.org.au/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx)). These and other similar issues encumber African femininity and female economic empowerment.

Generally, women's access to agricultural extension services as well as agricultural input is very low. Sub-Saharan women perform 80% of work associated with rural domestic tasks, including collecting water and firewood, preparing and cooking meals, processing and storing food, making household purchases and fully caring for the family. Specifically, rural women have limited access to market opportunities. They cultivate mainly traditional food crops for subsistence and small scale sales. Farms managed by women are often characterised by low levels of mechanisation and technological input, which often translate to low productivity. Essentially, rural women's conditions and status are very low and largely deplorable. They are marginalised in the leadership of farmers' organisations and



remain irrelevant and unrecognised in family and community decision-making processes.

The poor status of many rural women makes them easy victims of several forms of violent and harmful practices in the family and society. A survey of what obtains among rural women in different African cultures reveals extensive commonalities in the women's experiences. As Maria Golia posits in "Rural Women in Egypt: Can we Afford to Neglect Them?":

Various groups and minorities in Egypt are discriminated against and marginalised. With all the mobilisation and debate happening in this post-revolution phase, one group has got very little attention and spotlight. Which group in Egypt suffers from highest rates of illiteracy; bears the heavy burden of utmost poverty; lack [sic] essential healthcare greatly jeopardizing their lives; and is not represented in our parliament at all? The answer is rural women.

[www.rwac-egypt.blogspot.com/2012/03/rural-women-in-egypt-how-much-can-we.html](http://www.rwac-egypt.blogspot.com/2012/03/rural-women-in-egypt-how-much-can-we.html)).

Golia also highlights that rural women in Egypt make enormous contributions to agricultural and fishing activities in Egypt, yet their right to land is denied, mostly due to traditions enforced by family and community. The women also face diverse health hazards and suffer from malnutrition. This is ironic because even though the women produce much of the food and should

be in control of it, they usually give most of the food to their children, husbands and other members of their families, and deny themselves of it. This is visible in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* where Firdaus recounts:

My father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened. Sometimes when there was no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us.... He would sit eating alone while we watched him. One evening I dared to stretch out my hand to his plate, but he struck me a sharp blow... (18-19).

In Uganda, rural women account for a great proportion of the agricultural labour force. They produce the majority of food grown, especially in subsistence farming, and they perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas. Also, women are severely inhibited by gender disparities in land ownership and they almost solely bear the burden of providing water to the family all year round ([www.Africanbrains.net/2012/03/06/Africa-rural-women-are-leading-the-world-follow](http://www.Africanbrains.net/2012/03/06/Africa-rural-women-are-leading-the-world-follow)).

In Liberia, the law prohibits women from inheriting land, and in the face of rising rice prices, the women, most of who are rural, face the threat of hunger and disease. Rebecca Murray asserts in "Rural Women Confront Hunger Gap, Their Own Way" that 75% of Liberia's rural population practise subsistence farming. These are championed by the women who are heads of most of the families since the men may have been killed during the war,

or gone to the urban areas to seek employment. In consequence, the women work on the farms and also care for the children. Even though many of them are good in crafts, they have no access to funding to sustain the art. They are largely poor ([www.ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews-46859](http://www.ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews-46859)).

In Morocco, rural women represent 41% of the total female population, and there is a huge gap in relation to urban women in terms of access to basic services, health care and education. This results in the rural women living an average of 6.4 years fewer than urban women, at 73 years versus 79 years. The 2004 census in Morocco indicates that 89% of women in rural areas were illiterate and have no access to education, credit facilities, etc([www.moroccoworldnews.com2014/03/126124/moroccon-rural-women](http://www.moroccoworldnews.com2014/03/126124/moroccon-rural-women)).

Rural women in Malawi perform critical roles in the development and well-being of their communities by contributing to agriculture and other rural enterprises that propel local and international economies. Yet they are denied access to land, improved seedlings, fertilizer as well as tools and machinery that would have caused tremendous high productivity (“What Rural Women Can Do”).

These are common features in many African cultures. Also, male absence in households is a prominent phenomenon in modern societies in Africa that imposes specific challenges on the women, who pre-maturely assume headship along with care-giving. Therefore, it can be surmised that the deplorable status of many African women is caused largely by any of, or a combination of illiteracy, poverty and emigration. Evidently,

whether or not the woman is hard-working the society erects some ubiquitous structures to ensure that she is poor and remains poor. As she is denied educational opportunities, she is automatically condemned to agrarian activities for her survival and the survival of her children. This is the first death blow on the rural woman's potentialities, capacities, talents and empowerment prospects. While engaged in agrarian activities, the rural woman is restricted from those resources that would ensure large scale productivity. Even though there have now been some programmes and initiatives in modern societies that seek to wean women from decades of illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and exploitation, the impact of the programmes and initiatives on the rural women is very minimal or insignificant mainly because of the elitist approaches that are deployed in the processes of implementation. This fact underscores the notion of feminization of poverty, which the educated, urban women have to tackle with vigour across many African cultures to help their rural counterparts out of peasantry status.

## **6.0 Imperatives against Female Assertion & Empowerment in Africa**

Certain factors operate to controvert female assertion and empowerment at both private and public domains in Africa. These are varied and assume changing dimensions in different cultures over the years. They also generate varying responses from those they affect, and the responses account for many trends, developments and tensions that become manifest in societies and families.

Uko in "A Failed Sexual Rebellion" observes that one or

a combination of the following factors, among others often encumbers female assertion and empowerment:

**Tradition**

- the traditional secondary position of women in relation to her male counterpart
- the obnoxious traditional values that operate only on women

**Religions and Civilisations**

- different religions and civilisations have values that impede female empowerment
- the tenets of religions and civilisations operate against only the woman, not the man

**Men**

- the natural tendency among men is to lead women and keep them in total subservience
- other extraneous factors – such as the supernatural – designed by men to oppress women and perpetuate
- male dominance

**Women**

female complacency and acceptance of poor and sometimes inhuman treatment by society

- the high level of ignorance among women and their subsequent inability to understand male deceit
- represented as traditional values

These issues are responsible for the seeming synonymy of masculinity and power, and the strangeness which occasions the attempt by any woman to express self, realize her potential, and meaningfully contribute to the system (Uko, “A Failed Sexual Rebellion”, 131).

## 6.1 Tradition

Tradition in Africa is an eponymous concept that manifests largely as patriarchy. As an institution, patriarchy runs through all political, social, or economic structures. It establishes a relationship of dominance and subordination.

In “Re-Structuring Patriarchy”, Iniobong Uko contends that “underlying patriarchy is the configuration of the society to capture the quintessential rationality of gender roles and positions. There is a clear hierarchicized model which places man on top of and superior to the woman who is below” (94). This hierarchy is the major cause of enormous gender problems in modern African societies. Uko's opinion echoes Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that “... humanity is male and man defines the woman not in herself, but as relative to him ... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other” (16). Viewed largely as an error and an unproductive consumer, the woman is excluded from the processes of societal and family operations. This captures the status of traditional African women.

Kate Millett avers that “as women in patriarchy are for the most part marginal citizens when they are citizens at all, their situation is like that of other minorities, here defined not as dependent upon numerical size of the group, but on its status” (55). They are regarded as inferior to men, and are denied rights and privileges that men enjoy. Patriarchy places women in subservient positions in relation to men, and their sexuality is exploited for male advantage. These are portrayed by Chinua

Achebe who narrates how Okonkwo batters his wives in *Things Fall Apart*, thus:

First, he beats up Ojiugo, who goes to her friend's house to plait her hair and fails to make Okonkwo's meal when it is her turn to do so. His first two wives “ran out in great • alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week” (29), implying that everyone is expected to be at peace with one another. But by beating Ojiugo, Okonkwo violates the Week of Peace and that amounts to insulting the earth goddess, Ani. He pays the penalty for that – takes to the shrine of Ani one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries – as prescribed by the Ezeani, the Priest of Ani. Okonkwo's callousness is interpreted as a situation whereby good fortune has gone into his head. People “called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*” (31).

Second, Okonkwo feels that a banana tree on his compound is killed because his second wife took few of its leaves to wrap up some food. In consequence, he • “gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping. Neither of the other wives dared to interfere beyond an occasional and tentative, 'It is enough, Okonkwo,' pleaded from a reasonable distance” (38).

Tradition obviously makes explicit demands on women, but does not on men. It requires women to get married and procreate. Marriage drives Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of*

*Motherhood* from one repulsive marriage to another. In disgrace, she leaves her marriage to Amatokuwu because she cannot bear him a child, and then her father sends her to Lagos to marry Nnaife who she has never seen.

According to her, Nnaife has a “stomach like a pregnant cow, wobbling first to this side and then to that. The belly, coupled with the fact that he was short, made him look like a barrel. His hair ... was not closely shaved; he left a lot on his head, like that of a woman mourning for her husband. His skin was pale, the skin of someone who had for a long time worked in the shade and not in the open air. His cheeks were puffy and looked as if he had pieces of hot yam inside them, and they seemed to have pushed his mouth into a smaller size above his weak jaw. And his clothes ... khaki shorts with holes and an old, loose, white singlet. If her husband-to-be was like this, she thought, she would go back to her father. Why, marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman! (42). Yet, Nnu Ego accepts him because through him, she bears children, and her sense of womanhood becomes tangible and absolute.

Tradition makes it abhorrent for an African family to be childless; where family in this case refers to the woman, and where the reference to children means male children. This is because tradition also expects that by procreation, the lineage and patriarchy are perpetuated. Any marriage liaison in most African cultures that does not have children, especially male children, experiences turbulence, and the woman is the direct victim of that turmoil. This is the situation in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, in which Obiora and Amaka have no children, and



Obiora's mother and sisters pressurize him to take a second wife or have children outside his marriage. He succumbs to that and has male children by another woman, all who eventually move into the home. Amaka is agitated because as Adrienne Rich postulates, "... to discover that one has been lied to in a personal relationship leads one to feel a little crazy" (*On the Lies, Secrets, Silence*, 186). His new tendency of battering Amaka, generates tremendous tension that makes her to leave the marriage and relocate to the city. She has an affair with a Catholic Priest, Rev. Fr. Izu McLaid, which produces a set of twin boys. Though Amaka refuses to marry Izu, she is fulfilled through motherhood.

We also encounter Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* who is decrepit by childcare and the burden of providing for an unemployed husband and seven children in a very challenging modern society that makes provision for neither the uneducated nor the unskilled. This generates tremendous tension in the family. As Nnaife returns from Burma, he is full of excitement, he visits Ibuza, gets Adankwo, his deceased brother's senior wife, pregnant, and then marries Okpo, a sixteen-year old girl to serve as Nnu Ego's help. But Nnu Ego finds that both repugnant and revolting as she openly disapproves of his action, she refuses to have the new girl share the one room that she occupies with all her children, especially as she is expecting a set of twins shortly. She realizes soon afterwards that her having so many children in a marriage, and sacrificing everything to cater for them, symbolise her gradual self-destruction.

The newly born twins are girls, and that outcome has a

subduing effect on Nnu Ego, and she queries: "... but did not a woman have to bear the woman-child who would later bear the sons? God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" (186). Also, at solemn moments of deep thought, many women are able to review their lives and attempt a justification of their realities. Amaka wonders if having children is really what makes a woman's life worthwhile... (Uko, "Affirming the Humanity of Oppressed Women" 180). She queries "... was she [the woman] useless to the society if she were not a mother? Was she useless to the world if she were unmarried? Surely not..." (Nwapa, *One is Enough*, 20). These constitute a bogey that haunts the modern African woman.

In Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Adigwu dies shortly after his marriage to Ogwuoma. They have no children. The marriage was imposed on Ogwuoma by her parents because Adigwu, who she did not love, had the money to pay her bride wealth, and her family needed it for the treatment of her brother who was deadly ill. But her lover, Uloko was unable to afford the money. As Adigwu dies, shortly afterwards, Ogwuoma defies tradition by refusing to perform the mourning rites in his honour, but resumes her love affair with Uloko. She gets pregnant by him, but her natal family, Uloko's family and the whole community despise her, and then Adigwu's mother kills her and Uloko to save Adigwu's family from shame, and accord peace to his spirit. The contradictions in traditional precepts here are obvious: while Ogwuoma seeks to fulfil self through motherhood, she violates other traditional values:

She refuses to mourn her late husband

- She receives a man while she should be mourning her
- late husband
- She personally selects the man to love
- Adigwu's bride wealth is not returned, etc.

These intricate issues and the loss of the peace of the families are what Ogwuoma pays for with her life. The issues combine to destroy her accordingly, and Uloko, by extension.

Patriarchy generates an intricate connection of woman, sex and sin, such that the woman is often regarded as a sex object, and then she is also stigmatized, indicted, rejected, and even ostracized as evil. This is the case of Jagua Nana in Cyprian Ekwensi's novel by the same title. Uko explains in “Female Portrayal in Cyprian Ekwensi's Fiction” that Ekwensi's skilful portrayal of the forty-year old Lagos-based prostitute, Jagua, is a demonstration of his compulsive drive to prurient fantasy and erotica. Jagua is in love with young Freddie.

Conscious of her age and the rivalry she faces with younger girls in Lagos, Jagua Nana devises various strategies to sustain her good looks and keep Freddie to herself. She is proud of her body and deploys her endowments and dexterity to trap men. For best results, she knows how to paint her face, and make herself seductive to be the focus of men. She works hard to maintain her amorous capacities and remain relevant especially in her favourite night spot, the *Tropicana*, which, with its dim lights, serves as a pedestal for her to display her vain potentialities (107). Correspondingly, Ekwensi affirms Jagua's devilish and sinful nature as Freddie, who associates

with her suffers “the torture of being held in sexual bondage by a woman very much older than he was, more cunning and ambitious, and definitely more possessive” (*Jagua Nana*, 55).

It is evident that the enormous guilt attached to sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the woman, who is, culturally speaking, held to be the culpable or more culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison, whatever the extenuating circumstances. A tendency toward the reification of the female makes her more often a sexual object than a person (Kate Millet, 54). Ekwensi captures *Jagua Nana* in this mould in the description:

Her [*Jagua's*] complexion glowed livelier than the twinkling lights of the *Tropicana*, her ever-smiling teeth, the ripeness of her lips, charged Freddie with a boundless thirst for her. This to him was a discovery. It was the tearing away of a veil from his eyes (16).

Sexuality assumes both biological and social dimensions. While the former accounts for one's responses to inherent and intrinsic drives, the latter explains the stereotypes in society that represent maleness and femaleness. From this premise, femininity finds significance as a phenomenon whose characteristics are globally recognized but whose definition is culturally bound and location-specific (Iniobong Uko “Womanhood, Sexuality and Work”, 1). Hazel Carby contends that the prime objective of a woman's life was to obtain a husband and then keep him pleased; and perform duties focused entirely on the bearing and rearing of heirs and caring for the household. In order for the woman to qualify as a

paragon of virtue it was necessary to repress all overt sexuality (26).

Patriarchy presents sexuality and cruelty as mutually inclusive. Sexuality in this perspective is perceived as not only evil, but it is also linked with power. In the patriarchal template, the masculine role is always superior to the feminine role. The former is described in terms of dominance and (sometimes) sadism, while the latter is regarded within the framework of victimization and servitude. It is the status of victimhood that makes the society to accept or respond with ambivalence to incidents of female oppression, relegation and exclusion. Many factors – social, economic, political and natural – combine to make women unlikely to rebel against male power. Ada Azodo and Maureen Eke state that:

... the male is positioned at the centre, he is supreme, he is the norm, while the female is in the periphery, is subordinate and different. Women are controlled by being told to behave like women, cry like women, walk like women, sit like women and that means do things differently from a man, less conspicuously or spontaneously (3).

Clearly, the traditional norms and practices through the long and oppressive history of women sustain the stark contrast between the incalculable advantages of being born male and the all-consuming burden of being born female in Africa.

## **6.2 Religions and Civilizations**

Religion relates with patriarchy to impede female assertion and empowerment in Africa. Unlike the African traditional/pre-

colonial forms of religion in which women served diverse pivotal roles, subsequent forms of religion, with some patriarchal undertones, have no significant roles and positions for women. In fact, the newer trends also influenced the vestiges of the traditional religion because the practitioners are almost all male.

The Old Testament of the Holy Bible is replete with depictions of the woman as secondary and inferior to or dependent on the man. Genesis 1:27 to Genesis 3:24 describes the first creation story. There is an undertone of gender equality in Genesis 1:27, which states that “... **God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them**”. But in the second creation story in Genesis 2:7, God made only the man: “... **the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.**” However, Genesis 2:18-20 notes that God realized that man needed a helper, and he marched all of the animals past Adam so he could select a helper, but finding none suitable, God decided to create Eve out of one of Adam's ribs. That has variously been interpreted to mean that the woman came as an afterthought!

In Genesis 3:16, God declares that Adam should be Eve's master; and to Eve, God implores her “... **thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee...**” This is suggestive of inequality, and an imbalance that has been accentuated by cultural norms in different cultures of the world.

The Holy Bible does not seem to frown at the practice of polygyny. Genesis 4:19 records Lamech was the first polygynist

as he married two wives. Subsequently, Esau took three wives, Jacob took two, Elkanah took two, Gideon and David took many, Abijah took fourteen, Solomon made the classic history of taking seven hundred wives of royal birth, and three hundred concubines. These are demonstrations of the low status of women. Some more Biblical instances of the portrayal of women in derogatory terms are:

- In Leviticus 12:1-5, God declares that a woman who gives birth to a boy is ritually unclean for seven (7) days, but if a woman gives birth to a girl, the mother is ritually unclean for fourteen (14) days. This implies that the woman is contaminated at becoming a mother, better when she bears a male child, but worse when she bears a female.
- The estimations for the making of vows unto God by the children of Israel in Leviticus 27:1-7 are proposed in discriminatory terms against the woman. The estimations for the male are consistently higher than those for the woman.
- The discriminatory status of inheritance in Israel is espoused in Numbers 27:8-11 as Moses explains that if a man dies, only his sons can inherit his property. But if the deceased had no sons, only then can his daughters inherit his properties. If he had no children, then his kinsmen can inherit his properties.
- Divorce is examined in Deuteronomy 24:1 as a process that can be considered and implemented only by the man if he finds his wife “unclean” or engaged in adultery. He should “...write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.” Sadly, the

woman does not have the privilege of indicting the man if she finds him guilty of the same offence.

- Widowhood and the levirate marriage are discussed in Deuteronomy 25: 5-11. A widow is expected to be re-married by her deceased husband's brother. If the deceased had no child, then the first male child in the succeeding marriage will be named after the deceased, to ensure that his name is not obliterated. No provision is made for the woman who may not desire this option.

These derogatory representations of femininity, have unfortunately, influenced the regard for and treatment of women in many cultures of the world.

The portraits of women in other civilizations and religions are not far removed from the basic Biblical perspectives. In Hindu scriptures, the description of a good wife is “a woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and in the next...” (Jamai Badawi “The Status of Women in Islam”). Hinduism stipulates that the duties of women include “being of a good disposition, endowed with sweet speech, sweet conduct, and sweet features. For a woman, her husband is her god, her husband is her friend, and her husband is her high refuge. A woman's duties include physical and emotional nourishment, reverence and fulfillment of her husband and her children. Their happiness is her happiness ... her duty is to be cheerful even when her husband or her children are angry, she should be there for them in adversity or sickness, and should be truly righteous in her conduct. Beyond her husband and family, her duty is to be



cheerful of heart and humble with friends and relatives, do the best she can for family, her duty is to be cheerful of heart and humble with friends and guests. Her family life and her home should be her heaven ... ” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\_in\_Hinduism).

The practice of Buddhism in some African communities encouraged the derogatory regard for and treatment of women. Women were regarded as inferior to men, their freedom was limited. According to Bernard Faure, "Like most clerical discourses, Buddhism is indeed relentlessly misogynist" (3). The Buddha doctrine implored wives to be obedient to their husbands, please them, and not make them angry through their own desires. Diana Paul and Francis Wilson note that Buddhism advocates a view of women whereby if women are not represented as mothers then they are portrayed as either lustful temptresses or evil incarnate. Since the men were generally responsible for the family and for caring for the women, women were often regarded as a burden on the family, especially as they were also incapable (not allowed) to perform religious rites ("Buddhism and Women").

In Islam, a man is allowed to have more than one wife at a time, and as Leila Ahmed asserts, since women's sexuality was regarded as the property of men – the woman's father, or her husband – her chastity assumed premium value. That led in part to the emergence of prostitution, and to the enforcement of a rigid demarcation between "respectable" women (wives), whose sexuality and reproductive capabilities belonged to one man, and women who were sexually available to any man

(*Women and Gender in Islam*, 12). James Arlandson outlines some rules in the Holy Quran that oppress women to include:

1. A man may be polygamous (polygynous) with up to four wives.
2. Mature men are allowed to marry prepubescent girls. This justifies the fact that Aisha was betrothed to Prophet Mohammed when she was six years old, though the marriage was consummated when she turned nine when the Prophet was in his fifties.
3. Slave-girls are sexual properties of their male owners.
4. A husband may simply get rid of one of his undesirable wives.
5. Husbands may hit their wives even if the husbands merely fear highhandedness in their wives. The Quran in Sura 4:34 states "If you fear highhandedness from your wives, remind them [of the teaching of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them.
6. A woman's testimony counts half of a man's testimony.
7. The man gets a double share of the inheritance over that of a female.
8. Husbands are a degree above their wives.
9. A husband has sex with his wife as a plow goes into a field: "Your women are your fields, so go into your fields whichever way you like..." (MAS Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, Chapter 2:223).
10. A wife may remarry her ex-husband if and only if she marries another man, they have sex, and then the second

man divorces her ([www.americanthinker.com](http://www.americanthinker.com)).

The above survey of religions and civilizations reveals that women, their roles and place in both the family and the society are precarious in relation to those of their male counterparts. These constitute a significant impediment in the process of female empowerment and assertion in modern society.

### **6.3 Men**

The poor and dependency status of women in Africa have been engendered largely by men, who, as the self-acclaimed custodians of tradition, control all aspects of life in the family and the society. To ensure and sustain full control of women, men consciously and/or unconsciously exclude women from trends in the family and the society, and/or oppress them to maintain male superiority. The sexist tendencies in men come alive and get active as a means of displaying power and control over the women. Sexism as a conceptual cognate connotes ideologies and behaviour patterns that are negative by definition and deleterious by design; and Niara Sudarkasa affirms that sexism has intrinsically or inherently negative or destructive connotation (206)

In Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*, Jeremiah, Tambudzai's (Tambu's) father and Babamukuru's brother, is vehemently opposed to female education. While he permits Tambu's younger brother, Nhamo, to go to the mission school, he implores Tambu to curb her unnatural penchants, prominent among which is her desire for formal education. He stresses that it is natural for her to stay home and join her

mother to cook and keep the home. He fears that if Tambu should be educated, she would be exposed to things that would fill her mind with impractical ideas, rendering her useless for the tasks of feminine living (33-34). The male attempts to stunt the woman and ensure that she is incomparable with her male counterpart, constitute a common motif in modern society, and is reflected in African literature.

Eugene Achike in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* adorns in the garb of a pious Catholic to impose tyranny on his wife, Beatrice, and his daughter Kambili and his son, Jaja. Grace Okereke explains that “he sado-masochistically punishes his wife and children when they fail to meet his expectations or disobey him” (197). And when Oko in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* rapes Esi, his wife, he is apparently attempting to establish his manhood, and to live up to the expectations of his friends who taunt him over his seeming emasculation by his assertive and career-oriented wife.

Often times, men who feel that they cannot be men unless they are in charge tend to be highly threatened by assertive women, especially those in their households. In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi argues that:

All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults or blows (86-87).

The victimhood portrait of women is evolved and perpetuated

by men in their efforts to keep women under domination and control. That substantiates the looming patriarchy that operates against women, with no corresponding values for men. It is almost always the woman who is barren in a childless marriage, and she becomes the target of scorn in the family and society. These are major issues that pervade African Literature.

In much of literature and in reality, the man feel intimidated by the woman's search for or efforts at articulation and vocality since these seem to challenge and attempt to replace phallogentrism. Chikwenye Ogunyemi (83) contends that the gap between men's veneration of their old mothers and the resentment and distrust with which the same adoring men treat their wives and the mothers of their children causes rifts in gender and marital relationships. Misogyny has become so alarmingly pervasive that the modern woman has countered by becoming tough. She expects little fulfillment in marriage, which has become an enervating war front with the wife treated as an intimate outsider or the enemy within.

#### **6.4 Women**

Women impede female assertiveness and empowerment by their nature of docility, complacence and acquiescence. They are also influenced by their stereotyped minds which are conditioned by decades of patriarchal oppression, sexism, deprivation and relegation.

Women are often incapacitated by their own poor self-perception as well as the age-long internalizing of the inferior female image. Many women lack the skills to deal with and

surmount the debilitating self-image imposed on them by the sexist society, which also forces them to display weakness and acquiescence where strength and pragmatic decisiveness are required. Many women are class-conscious and discriminate against fellow women. This also manifests in the dehumanising and retrogressive practices that women experience.

Osonye Tess Onwueme x-rays the intra-gender tensions and discriminations that exist between and among women in *Shakara Dance-Hall Queen* and *Tell It To Women*. In the former, the illiterate Omesiete, a single mother, lives a life of penury, endless striving and hopelessness and requires the assistance of her employer, the educated Madam Kofo, who is also a single mother, and wealthy through extensive deals in hard drugs. But Madam Kofo does not only deny Omesiete any help, she regards her also as her slave who she employs to tend her weed plantations. The money she realizes from the illegal business gets her incensed, and she uses threats and intimidation towards Omesiete to instill fear in her and curry total allegiance from her, even if grudgingly.

While the delineation of intra-gender discriminations in *Shakara Dance-Hall Queen* is on a bipartite level as it involves two women, each representing an opposing set of values and attitudes, Onwueme's *Tell It To Women*, deals largely with intra-gender discrimination that involves groups of women. Yemoja is selected by the rural women of Idu to liaise between them and the modern women (representing the government) in the city towards actualizing the concept of Better Life for Rural Women. She defies all the pleas and threats by Ajaka, her

mother-in-law, Koko, her husband, Okeke, her father and Ajie, her mother, leaves with the highly educated and sophisticated modern women, Daisy and Ruth, for the city, the metaphorical new world. The Better Life for Rural Women programme is aimed at unifying all women, but this soon becomes a farce because: Ruth's persistent use of difficult vocabulary causes a breakdown in communication, symbolizing a corresponding incompatibility between the ideals of the rural women and those of the modern women in contemporary society. Regarding the rural women as ignorant, shallow-minded and simplistic, the modern women are concerned about the material gains from the Better Life programme.

Evidently, the rural women are receptive of female education and its prospects, and insist on sustaining the use of the hoe as well, a combination that the modern women find obnoxious. The rural women in *Tell It To Women* disagree with the notion of women replacing men and vice versa. They argue that each has a respective place and role in the society. According to Adaku:

... this thing about taking power from men and giving it to women is where I have a problem. If you concentrate power in one part, male or female, think of the problem that will cause ... what becomes of the family? Will it not make worse the problem we are trying to solve? (36)

This is the core of the travesty that underlies any monolithic pursuit by rural and modern women, and which causes the schisms in the bond that should bind both sets of women

together and justify the concept of sisterhood, which is a cardinal value of femininity.

Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial and Other Stories* reveals how women strive to inflict pain on the widow through widow-cleansing and debilitating mourning rites. In her "From Wife to Concubine", Fred, Arit's husband dies and Arit is subjected to diverse dehumanizing widowhood rites by the *Umuada*, Fred's patrilineal female relatives. She narrates:

I was forced to sit on a mat on the hard floor throughout the burial ceremony. I was not allowed to take part in the planning for the burial, although I was asked to provide the money needed. ... I had every strand of my long beautiful hair completely cut off as soon as the burial was over (68).

In another story, "The Trial" in Okoye's collection, the widow, Anayo is subjected to trial by the *umu-okpo* or Daughters of the Lineage, for allegedly killing her husband. Anayo is expected to prove her innocence by drinking the water with which her husband's corpse was washed.

Tambudzai (Tambu) in Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* is deprived of the opportunity to obtain formal education, in favour of her younger brother Nhamo. She kneels to serve water for guests to wash their hands – first to the male and then to the female – strictly in that order, regardless of age. Tambu and her sister dish out "in the kitchen ... what was left in the pots..." for themselves and the children" (40-41). Uko in "*Nervous Conditions*" holds that "the relegation that Tambu



suffers in her youth is largely due to her femaleness: she and her sister Netsi grow to see their mother, lips pressed tight with the baby secured on her back, continue silently with her labours. The ferocious swings of her arms as she grabs and strips a maize stalk restrained her two daughters from making the slightest murmur of rebellion..." (*Nervous Conditions*, 180).

The ease and readiness with which women claim responsibility for childlessness constitutes a bogey that continues to haunt many African women in childless marriages. Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* states "I am sure the fault is on my side. You [Amatokwu, her first husband] do everything right ..., After a while, Nnu Ego could not voice her doubts and worries to her husband any more. It had become her problem and hers alone. She went from dibia to dibia in secret" (31).

The woman's undue silence and invisibility are obnoxious patterns that have become obsolete in contemporary realities. Julie Okoh's *The Dawn of a New Day* examines the roles of women in sustaining the practice of female genital mutilation, which is euphemized as female initiation rites, an indication of the girl-victim's readiness for marriage. In "The Dawn of a New Day", Uko proposes that contemporary women should become conscious of the need to surmount "female ignorance, inferiority complex, suffering, fear, cowardice, helplessness and hopelessness" and attain "strength, wisdom, tenacity, determination, courage and hope" (10). The advocates of female genital mutilation (commonly called female circumcision) argue that the practice reduces women's libido so as to guarantee the women's fidelity to their husbands.

This fact is invalidated by Julie Okoh who demonstrates through Eriala (Mama Nurse) that:

... God created man and woman in his own image.  
If the image of God is one  
Then man and woman were created equals.  
But society made one master and the other slave.  
Circumcision is a form of slavery  
Imposed on woman to dominate her.  
I am aware that the custodians of our customs and  
traditions claim that your peanut is the source of  
confusion and impurity.  
So, they carve it out of its pod to prevent you from  
having impure thoughts. But women!...  
Do you think with your brain or bottom?  
Do you see with your eyes or bottom?  
Do you desire with your heart or bottom? (39)

The rhetorical questions above compel the women to confront the truth about the practice of female genital mutilation, and to decide to rebel against it.

The issues above present an interface of dilemma, empowerment and assertion, implying that while some women may desire or sometimes attempt to be empowered and to assert themselves, they are plagued by ambivalence:

ambivalence about realising the motive of their empowerment and assertion, about being accepted as empowered and assertive women, about fitting into the family or society should their efforts at being assertive fail partially or completely, about

facing life if they are rejected, about making choices, whether good or bad, etc. Obioma Nnaemeka's stresses that African women can and should "choose and speak for themselves", and render unnecessary "the intervention of those who have arrogated to themselves right to speak and choose for African women"(167).

This ambivalence is the force that often robs women of the fibre required to aspire. Generally, the dilemmas manifest in different ways for different women, considering the women's educational background, socio-economic status, economic context, family background and connections, the woman's perspective of herself, her vision, etc. Some modern African women strive to confront and rise above these dilemmas.

### **7.0 Paradigms for Transcendence**

Transcendence is contemplated here from the premise that there is a hurdle or a barrier that confronts the woman in her efforts to attain self-assertion, empowerment and a credible life. More specifically, that notion can be described as a burden, which each woman must devise her means of bearing, or of surmounting. Tsitsi Dangarembga highlights in *Nervous Conditions* that:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden...  
Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like  
that you can't just decide today I want to do this,  
tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be  
educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you  
(the woman) are the one who has to make them. ...  
And these things are not easy; you have to start

learning them early, from a very early age ... And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other (16).

Various women have adopted different models to transcend the oppression of patriarchy and sexism. Women should necessarily become conscious of their common problem(s), and then strive to check the diverse forms of pervasion on womanhood so as to restore the dignity in femininity. Emma Chukwu notes that consciousness-raising is critically required by women as the best way out of the problem of patriarchal blindfolding. They must wake up and attain the awareness of oppression in order to muster the will to struggle against it (562). They should recant female complacency and advocate pro-active responses to patriarchal oppression and cruelty (Uko "Femininity in Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*" 395). We will examine transcendence on two broad levels – the micro level and the macro level.

At the micro level, we consider the daughter and the wife. Except in strict backward Muslim or typically rural families, many girl children in modern societies have the privilege of at least the basic or elementary education. Contemporary women must strive to be in employment or trade or production so as to be able to cater for significant personal and family needs. Betty Friedan makes the point in *The Feminine Mystique* as she argues that career means more than a job. It means doing something, being somebody yourself, not just existing in and through others (40). It is retrogressive to be a housewife. It

is untenable to recapture the Victorian English culture (1840-1900) in twenty-first century Africa. Indeed, housewifery is not only tantamount to an affront to the integrity of modern African womanhood, it is also a grave insult on the concept of modern African womanhood, regardless of the affluent status of the family. Women at the micro level would be taken seriously if they could make reasonable contributions to the system.

At the macro level, female networking, solidarity and sisterhood must be pursued and carefully sustained. Women themselves have to annul the notion that women are incapable, even when they are qualified. This fact should not be misconstrued to mean that women are taking over or competing with men. In fact, this thesis rebels against the Nigerian slogan that “What a man can do, a woman can do better.” The comparison is unnecessary and baseless. This notion calls on women to work hard to surmount self-pity and self-hate, to network with other women and groups, as well as men to break the yoke of class-consciousness, to seek to be relevant and recognised to make their impact on the society, etc.

Generally, modern African women should rise above the strapping of tradition, religion, patriarchy, etc, by reversing the disparaging and debilitating stereotypes that have over the years restricted women and limited what women can/should do. It is evident that men have often deployed the stereotypes to continue to place women at the intersection of diverse forms of oppression and exclusion. Thus, modern women have to surmount self-inferiorisation and self-defeat; they should

strive to be visible in and vibrant contributors to the socio-political and economic activities prevalent in their communities.

For the modern rural women, transcendence is a more complex process because much of what they require is not controlled by them. They are also not empowered to represent themselves. As a result, they are significantly helpless through their vulnerability. They are susceptible to domestic violence and denial of rights – rights to opportunities and privileges that their male counterparts enjoy, as well as rights to resources that would enhance their agricultural activities or vocations or trades, and help them to fit into the heavily cash-oriented economies. Consequently, domestic violence and denial of rights are mutually reinforcing pandemics that rural African women contend with, and which steadily impede their prospects of transcendence.

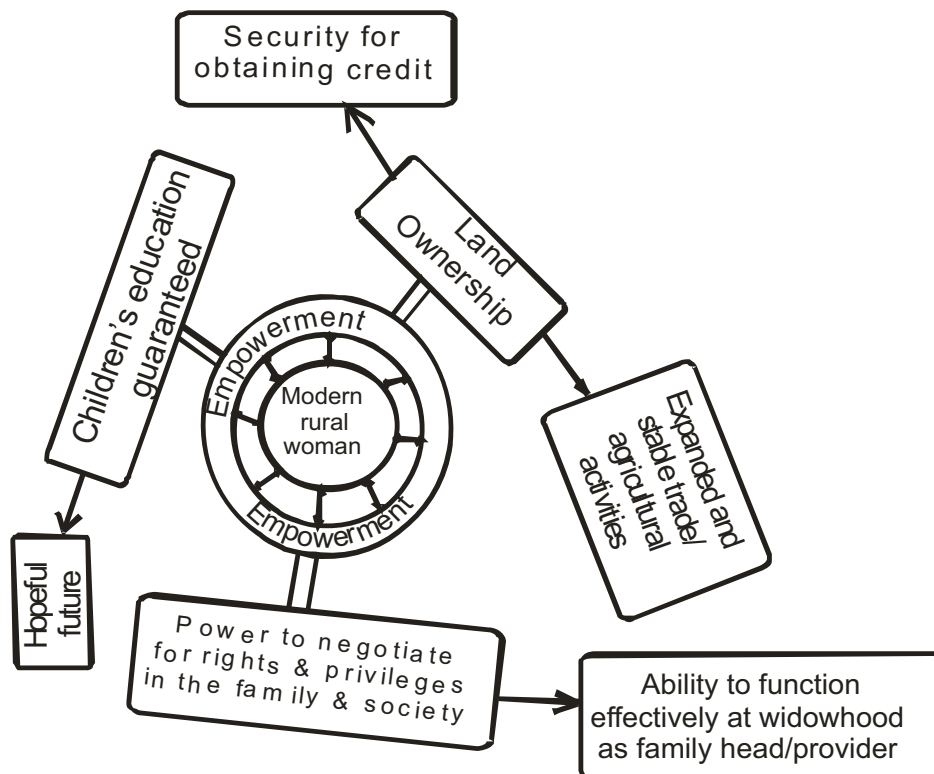
In “Rural Women and the Rights to Food”, The Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) reports as follows:

In many societies, tradition dictates that men eat first and receive the best food. When food is scarce, this often means that women and children go without. Thus, women ... are more likely to be undernourished than men. Closely spaced pregnancies also take their toll, leading in many cases to anaemia, a major cause of maternal mortality ([www.fao.org/docrep.html](http://www.fao.org/docrep.html)).

These traditional values, along with rural women's restriction from facilities and resources that would ensure high

productivity, continue to encumber and Pauperise rural women. Below is a deconstruction of the process of the rural woman's efforts at transcendence, which implies also her efforts at becoming empowered:

### A Semiotic Deconstruction of the Modern Rural Woman's Empowerment Process



The above highlights that the premise for all the aspirations of the rural woman in contemporary Africa is empowerment, yet many profound impediments restrain her in her efforts. She must be empowered to ensure her children's education, which translates as a hopeful future. She needs empowerment to be able to acquire land, which would guarantee credit facilities for her and enable her to expand her agricultural activities, vocation or trade. The modern rural woman also requires empowerment to be recognized and granted rights and privileges in the family and society, and by extension, if widowed, be an efficient family head/provider and be respected within the family and beyond.

Prominent strategies for the modern woman's transcendence find relevance within the National Gender Policy of Nigeria, which holds that the efficacy of implementation is contingent on a functional gender management system that recognises the following elements and actions:

1. Political Will
2. Gender as a Core Value for Transforming the Nigerian Society
3. Confronting Patriarchy
4. Coordination, Networking, and Monitoring
5. Resource Mobilization

([www.aacoalition.org/national\\_gender\\_policy\\_women.htm](http://www.aacoalition.org/national_gender_policy_women.htm)). Within the matrix of the Gender Policy in Nigeria, Part 2, Objective 3 is relevant and urgent to this discourse. It involves adopting gender mainstreaming as a core value and practice in social transformation, organisational cultures and in the



general polity in Nigeria. Consequently, it advocates the elimination of all harmful cultural, religious and social gender-biased practices, which reproduce gender inequalities ([www.aacoalition.org/national\\_gender\\_policy\\_women.htm](http://www.aacoalition.org/national_gender_policy_women.htm)). These give credence to the new order that this discourse proposes below.

### **8.0 The New Order**

Given all the above, and the reality that modern urban women in Africa have attained considerable visibility in the society, and have deployed their educational attainments to change the image of womanhood, a lot still remains to be achieved by rural women. Considering that about 60% of African women reside in rural areas, the questions that confront us as educated, modern, urban, possibly career women include:

1. How empowered are our rural counterparts?
2. What are the relationships between modern urban women and modern rural women in Africa?
3. How often, if at all, do women in authority plan sincerely for the rural women?
4. Other than use them as machinery for propaganda, especially for political purposes, how much do the urban women in authority involve the rural women in their work plans?
5. What are the prospects for the economic independence of our rural counterparts?
6. How often do educated and empowered urban women not misappropriate funds provided for rural women by government and non-governmental organisations?

7. Which non-governmental organisations have programmes that target rural women especially those that have no connections with the powerful and influential?
8. What is the degree of sustainability of programmes that are targeted at rural women?
9. Which pet programme has out-lived the specific administration?
10. To what extent would educated women avoid being class-conscious and work earnestly with the uneducated rural women?

The questions are inexhaustible. They seek to challenge our consciousness about giving a wholesome and an earnest attention to African womanhood and modern femininity. They strive to establish that rural women constitute a formidable frontier that the educated, urban, independent and powerful women now have to approach.

By describing this initiative as a new order does not imply that efforts were not made in the past, or currently at recognising rural women, and mobilising them to viable activities. Of course, we can list:

1. **Better Life for Rural Women** by Her Excellency, Mrs. Maryam Babangida
2. **Family Support Programme** by Her Excellency, Mrs. Mariam Abacha
3. **Child Care Trust** by Her Excellency, Mrs. Stella Obasanjo
4. **Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation** by Her Excellency, Mrs. Turai Yar'dua

5. **Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF)** by Her Excellency, Mrs. Titi Atiku
6. **Women for Change and Development Initiative** by Her Excellency, Dame Patience Jonathan
7. **Project Future Assured** by Her Excellency, Mrs. Aisha Buhari

In Akwa Ibom State, the wife of the State Governor, Her Excellency, Mrs. Martha Udom Emmanuel, is making tremendous impact through her pet project, **Family Empowerment and Youth Reorientation Programme (FEYReP)**, which synchronises with the **Project Future Assured** by Her Excellency, Mrs. Aisha Buhari, wife of the President, Muhammadu Buhari. While both initiatives address contemporary problems to guarantee a better future, they also seem to be setting up templates for youths to be equipped to truly be future leaders. Generally, the pet projects are aimed at providing the people, especially women and children, with better forms of life, better health status, better living conditions and a credible future, through economic empowerment as well as socio-cultural and political independence particularly, within the framework of globalization.

An obvious feature that navigates through the different initiatives and pet projects above and more is the effort to address the problems of rural women, widows and indigent children and youth.

For urban and rural women to work together, it has become imperative for government agencies and non-governmental organisations to evolve schemes that will involve both

categories of women in active participation. That way, one will identify with, motivate and enamour the other. Such a trend would also inspire ethical co-operation between and among the women. It is within this context of pursuing corporate identities and welfare of femininity that this thesis may derive its description as new – new order, new strategy, new horizon, new work plan, new challenge, new vision, etc. It is in dismantling all forms of patriarchal barriers, self-interest, social class, educational, socio-political attainment and economic acclaim that pitch women against each other, that the claim of educated urban women of being independent can be meaningful and authentic. This is because it a shame for one woman to claim to be independent, while another woman is still oppressed and has no hope of liberation. We are aware of the negative impact of the trends that Ogunyemi describes in:

The harsh facts of vestigial colonialism, neocolonialism, mismanaged independence, failed democracy, the civil war, the oil boom, military misrule, acquisition of instant wealth without accountability, and the debt culture, with its inevitable economic depression have taken their toll on women (84).

All African women should work together and be conscious of, and vehemently rebel against the divisive structures that patriarchy and other factors erect among them to ensure that they remain divided.

The new order, therefore, promises to make the diversities among women to become a tool for women's unity and power,

rather than for jealousy, envy and divisiveness that comprise the current/contemporary order. The new order is essentially a process that may span decades for considerable impact to be visible, but which starting point is now, and the people to do so are you and I as women, with our men supporting us. Through the women's honesty and persistence on this cause, men are bound to be influenced to identify with this vision. Thus, as the society evolves and new issues arise and new trends unfold, especially due to globalization (and now recession in Nigeria), rural women in Africa have the prospects of getting re-positioned as credible and effectual personalities.

Essentially, the new order engenders the phenomenon of negotiating gender relations, which Marion Pape espouses in *Gender Palava*. The principle of negotiating gender relations allows a view on men and women which abhors a dichotomous comparison, but which displays the dynamic and procedural nature of each gender. Within the context of literary representation, this means that precisely because literature confirms or questions images of gender and gender roles, a kind of gender-specific consciousness (or unconsciousness) arises in it while “masculinity” and “femininity” are redefined, and notions of gender difference re-negotiated (8-9).

This means that modern African women require the skills of negotiation/re-negotiation. They would necessarily adopt whatever technique – plain/linear talking, double-talking, intrigue, cunning, deceit, plea – but ensure that the case is legitimate and credible.

The new order recognises many women have to fend for their

families, especially their children, they bear the brunt of cruel governments, notorious for institutionalising pervasive corruption and mismanagement. With the Nigerian economy in disarray, many husbands have abandoned their families physically and/or emotionally. This partly accounts for the preponderance of women as clients to the native doctor, described as *abia-ibok*, *dibia* or *babalawo* or any other preferred label. It also partly explains women's soaring membership of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches (Ogunyemi 83).

Consequent upon these apparent issues, the new order challenges African feminists to develop an agenda that goes beyond theorising in conference and seminar papers, at symposia, workshops, campaigns and rallies. It should be an agenda that is pragmatic, implementable and sustainable.

The feminist agenda has to bring up issues for the future:

- issues that will affect and make profound demands on the family and the larger society
- issues that will make early/forced marriage unfashionable
- issues that will encourage or compel families to insist on girl-child education or acquisition of skills
- issues that will make wife-servitude, wife-battery and wife-relegation unacceptable
- issues that will make families and in-laws not to suspect and victimise the woman as the sole cause of childlessness in marriage
- issues that will burden the man as a responsible partner in a childless marriage
- issues that will enable the rural woman to be in control of

- her reproductive and sexual rights  
issues that will get the society to admit that it is wrong for
- some men to abuse their wives  
issues that will make African men to realize that to engender peace and harmony in the family is the corporate
- responsibility of the husband and wife  
issues that will prove female genital mutilation or female
- circumcision an aberration that must be eliminated  
issues that will generate among all women demeanor power, which Kiesling Scott describes as the power of solidarity by which one is regarded as a person with whom
- people would like to be associated (55)  
issues that will break the bond of motherhood and
- victimhood  
issues that recognize, as Uko stresses that even though “education may not necessarily lead women to the attainment of leadership positions, it does play a prominent role in building women's capacity to become leaders in society” (“Stiwanism and the Challenge of Mainstreaming Women in Nigeria” 61).

The list is endless. These issues, and very many more, should be aspects of the African feminist agenda to reconceptualise, redefine and rename the spirit of modern African femininity, and generate a new paradigm to guide the operations of women and women groups in Africa.

## **9.0 Call to Action**

After all the propaganda by politicians, all the rhetorics by scholars, all the theorising by philosophers, it has become

pertinent to act. We recognise and applaud the roles of the Ministries of Women Affairs in Nigeria at the national and state levels, the different programmes of the wives of leaders of African States, particularly the projects of wives of Nigeria's Heads of State/Presidents, State governors, non-governmental organisations, churches, and individuals who are inclined to the welfare and empowerment of youth and rural women across Africa. Specifically, I wish to identify with FEYrep, the initiative of the wife of the Akwa Ibom State Governor, Her Excellency, Mrs. Martha Udom Emmanuel, FEYReP, which is targeted at the youth, and envisions the youth as tomorrow's leaders. By empowering the youth, the project sets a pedestal for a more credible adult who will transcend the traditional historiography that has been the bane of contemporary Akwa Ibom person – male or female.

However, in the course of taking action, we reflect on the different efforts by individuals, groups, corporate bodies, and others, which have over the years sought better deals for women. These constitute a major aspect of the framework for the thesis of this Lecture, which articulates the need for the economically productive African woman as the twenty-first century progresses. This action is not supposed to be in isolation, but in collaboration among women of all classes and between educated and uneducated women. It is not supposed to be antithetical to male actions, but in complementarity with them. Significantly, the gains of this action – the new consciousness among women of all classes and social categories to work together to be productive – are likely to be



obtained in the future, but the process must begin today. Indeed, women have to be fully responsive to the cultural, historical and psychological impulses that function against the interests and welfare of women of all classes and leanings.

The process of consciousness-raising among contemporary women demands a high sense of gender sensitivity and gender pride. Women must realize and be cautious of andocentrism that tends to stunt femininity. They should strive to ensure that they demand for and obtain their due: obtain education, or get trained on skills, or be engaged in trade or agricultural activities, and have access to credit facilities or any resources that may guarantee optimum results, high productivity and economic empowerment. These are tasks for educated and well placed women in contemporary African societies, which are bound to save women from what Uko describes as the “paradigm of intersecting oppression of gender, class, race, sexuality and culture,” which works towards ensuring female dispossession of power (“Echoes of Black Female Empowerment... 1).

The call to action is for women's unity, women's solidarity, women's self-pride and most essentially, women's hard-work. Female writers also have to redesign “the entire architecture of African male writings – novel, drama, poetry and the short story ... [that] is couched around the immanent, impregnable and invincible tradition, which, dressed in patriarchal garb, cannot help but emphasize and project the male principle over and above the female” (Uko “The Concept of Modern

Womanhood..." 67). Female writers should infuse in their works true and realistic depictions from their world of experiences, declaring their commitment as Langston Hughes does in his famous speech:

We ... who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.... We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs .... We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves (2).

While Langston Hughes, the popular Harlem Renaissance poet in America professed the pride in being black in the racist American society of the early twentieth century, modern African women adopt the poem to express the pride in African women's solidarity and impactful collaboration, and with men to build a credible future for all African people.

The new order has the prospect of ensuring that women's rights are respected within the family and in the larger society. It will make good the various global efforts by women and women's groups to make women's rights to be considered as human rights. Tracing these efforts, Uko in "Women's Rights as Human Rights..." asserts that women's rights, which refer to "entitlements and freedoms claimed for women and girls of all ages in various societies ... are in some cultures institutionalized or supported by law, tradition and religion, in others, they are ignored or suppressed" (50-51).

However, the objectives of these different movements and

initiatives are hardly realisable if the unity and consistent collaboration of women are not guaranteed. That is the thrust and dominant *raison d'être* of this Lecture today.

Mr. Chairman, we will conclude by identifying with the UNIFEM slogan of “ Together We Must ! ” ([www.actionaidusa.org.together-we-must](http://www.actionaidusa.org.together-we-must)). Together we must fight poverty, together we must pursue women's education, empowerment and economic independence, together we must make positive marks at the micro and macro settings, together we must reverse the stereotypes that limit women's potentialities, together we must free women from patriarchal serfdom and all debilitating practices in our societies. Together we must ...! Together we must...! Let this slogan reconfigure our consciousness as educated urban women, let it re-shape the perception of women in top positions in government, in the legislature, in the judiciary, in entrepreneurship, in politics, in commerce, in industry, in the academics and other facets of the economy.

Let this slogan facilitate healthy relationships between and among women, and women's groups; let the slogan animate rural women to new and realistic aspirations and present to them a new image of their urban counterparts as partners, not rivals or plunderers. Let the ambers of this new animation glow among African men and condition them to see women as co-developers, so that in working with them, the age-long defective equation of **+man/-woman** (plus man/minus woman) can be corrected for an egalitarian African society that can fit into credible global trends. Let “together we must!” be

sung like the controlling tones in a musical symphony. Let it be sung and re-sung in various pitches, harmonies, melodies, and rhythms because of its strategic relevance to our evolving contemporary society. On this note, may I request all who are persuaded that together we can, and together we must, rise and affirm the fact that together we must!

Thank you very much for your attention.

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