

Negotiating Patrilineal Structures: A Feminist Reading of Ahmed Yerima's *Akuabata* and *Odenigbo*

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Abstract

The construction of gender in African literature has been the subject of many scholarly debates, with findings that socially determined roles rather than biological factors distinguish males from females. These findings also claim as inaccurate, pre-colonial depictions of women as confined to the domestic space. These two points drive contemporary investigations of femininity in African literature. Contemporary African writers too, are righting these inaccuracies. This present study investigates two selected play texts by Ahmed Yerima: *Akuabata* (2008) and *Odenigbo* (2017b). It explores how Yerima depicts women in an age of conscious portraiture of femininity. The plays were chosen because of their similar focus on the Igbo cultural setting and the centralisation of women characters. The similarity in cultural setting enables a comparative reading of roles. The current paper argues that culturally assigned roles condition the actions and capabilities of women. It also found that Yerima employs other culturally acceptable concepts, such as the *Ndi-inyom* and *Umuada* institutions to provide alternative means for the female characters to achieve worthy goals in the plays' texts. The study concludes that the construction of women in the selected texts depicts them as worthy members of society, who navigate cultural restrictions and become saviours of their communities.

Keywords: Yerima, gender construction, Igbo culture, *Akuabata*, *Odenigbo*

The overarching assumption by Western feminist critics that all cultures are patriarchal has inexplicably impacted culturally specific explications of gender, especially in Africa. Up until the emergence of African feminist theorists such as Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Mary Kolawole, Catherine Acholonu, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Oyeronke Oyewumi and Ifi Amadiume, among several others, the dominant reading of African women in African society and literature had been against the backdrop of an overtly patriarchal social order. This order stifles women under the authority of men. However, culturally sensitive theorising has revealed the inaccuracy of this position, especially when we examine the crucial interplay of other forms of identities in understanding the social construct of gender.

Chiweshe (2018), for instance, posits that class, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, nationality, and status play critical roles in the nuanced understanding of gender identity. Amadiume's *Male daughters, female husbands* (1987) and Oyewumi's *The invention of women* (1997) are seminal in the ways they engage with the interplay of different forms of identity markers in the broad encapsulation of the female gender in the Igbo and Yoruba societies, respectively. For Amadiume (1987), she identifies a crucial fluidity in the cultural connotation of maleness and femaleness in Igbo society. This is a fluidity which allows and recognises as valid, a woman taking on roles and responsibilities of a man and vice versa as circumstances demand. As such, a woman can be a husband and father children culturally, to solve the challenge of continuity of lineage, for instance.

This culturally permissible fluidity is especially important in reading how Yerima in *Akuabata* (2008) and *Odenigbo* (2017b) creates purpose-driven female characters who explore established cultural institutions. These explorations permit them to go beyond the bounds of their femininity to not just confront challenges associated with continuity of lineage and the tyranny of priests and gods, but also to depict their abilities in farming and decision-making, which benefits the community. In the selected plays, for instance, female characters emerge as saviours of their families and communities.

Social standing and ethnicity also play important roles in activating this fluidity of gender roles as found in the *Ndi-inyom* and *Umuada* institutions of the Igbo culture. Significant here is that there is a rupturing of the assumption that biological difference is the major indexical for the binary presentation of the sexes.

There is also an implication that arises from other assumptions about patriarchy in this culture which can be extended to the African continent. Taking her position from traditional Yoruba culture in Nigeria, Oyewumi (1997) posits that there is a flexibility of identity in Yoruba culture which is based on age rather than biological factors, that is, individuals are identified as senior/older and junior/younger. The absence of gender signifiers in the Yoruba lexicon for senior/older and junior/younger further lends credence to Oyewumi's argument that mere biological features do not fully account for roles assigned to individuals. Fundamentally, Oyewumi prioritises age and social standing in terms of economic power and contribution to society as indices conferring superiority upon persons in Yoruba society rather than mere biological assignments.

Given the acknowledgement of fluidity in gender roles, especially in traditional African societies, and the emphasis on complementarity rather than binary opposites, which African feminist theorists have and are promoting, how are contemporary African writers depicting women in their works? Admittedly, a considerable number of literary artists are conscious of the shift in gender positions regarding the worth and role of women in the society, as evidenced in the plethora of works exploring this concern. It is, however, important to investigate how this shift is achieved and recorded in literary productions. Moreover, there is a need to examine how contemporary African male writers are contributing to the discourse. This is especially important given the fact that the early male writers were criticised for depicting female characters as being at the margins of society and culture and confined to the domestic space. Therefore, this work investigates two plays written by a prominent Nigerian male playwright for the ways femaleness is constructed. This is achieved through an analysis of character development,

dialogue, and actions of both male and female characters, especially in the ways they respond to developments in the plays. Through this, an explication of how the playwright challenges earlier positions that relegate the Igbo, and indeed African woman, to the fringe of society becomes achievable. It equally affirms the position of African feminist theorists on the essential and complementary roles of the African woman.

The selected playwright, Ahmed Yerima, has several creative works to his credit. He can be described as a consummate writer, whose plays show the influence of the socio-political and economic realities of the Nigerian environment on literary productions. As such, his works transcend a fixed thematic engagement and reflect the diverse and vibrant socio-cultural setting of Nigeria. These factors confer on his works the status of important contributions to Nigeria's body of creative writings, particularly as they depict political, social, cultural, and African aesthetic consciousness, features that Achebe identifies as imperative for African writers who desire to be relevant.

Importantly, Yerima's plays, like Nyamndi (2006) postulates for African writers, also proffer alternatives that chart the right course for society. *Akuabata* (2008) and *Odenigbo* (2017b) are works with a similar socio-cultural setting (Igbo), and they both depict lead female characters, whose presence and roles in the plays provide vistas into the ways Yerima conceptualises and depicts women as invaluable to society. This exemplifies a shift away from earlier depictions of women as victimized and as stereotyped in contemporary African literature.

Acceptedly, not all the female characters in Yerima's other plays exhibit strength of character or even selflessness like we find in *Akuabata* (2008) and *Odenigbo* (2017b). Yerima has been careful not to replicate depictions of a victimized and hapless female character as a strategy to foreground gender inequality. Instead, he has depicted in some of his plays that women can be both victim and victimizer. *The Sisters* (Yerima, 2001) is an example where the female characters become immersed in personal challenges arising from the effects of infidelities stemming from their father and husbands. In *The Wives* (Yerima, 2007b), on the other hand, late Chief Theophilus Gbadegeshin Olowookere's

three wives and legitimate children are deprived of their inheritance by Chief's scheming sister, Auntimi, who had a son out of an incestuous relationship with her brother, Chief Olowookere.

What is, however, quite dominant in Yerima's character depiction of females is that women can be strong forces who save their societies. This is portrayed in *Akuabata* (2008), *Odenigbo* (2017b), *Aetu* (2007a), and *Jakadiya* (2017a) among others, where Yerima creates female characters who confront gods, royalty, and tyrants in the quest to navigate, and sometimes outrightly suppress, socio-cultural dictates constituting existential threats to not just them as women, but to all within the community. Yerima, in an interview with Oloruntoba (2021), accedes to the oppression of the Nigerian woman as follows:

the Nigerian culture traps them. It predetermines their destiny and controls the space which they can go. That is why you find that in *The Sisters* and *The Wives*, even though empowered, the women still find themselves trapped one way or another. The society curtails the dreams and aspirations of women.... even when they open the gate, they tell the women where specifically to go. They have created a path for her to follow. If she goes beyond that, they create new strategies that will make her fall. (p. 15)

This accounts for Yerima's undoubtable devotion to confronting, through his writings, the limiting socio-cultural practices of girl-child marriage, wife inheritance, polygyny, and property inheritance among others. The significance of Yerima's literary aesthetic of seeking solutions to gender inequality within the very culture that created the inequalities, ensures that his writings are contributing to the advancement of gender discourse as it relates to addressing a major societal challenge.

Conceptualising Womanhood in Africa

Recent scholarship posits that the construction and understanding of gender in Africa is influenced by colonial borrowings that significantly distorted the roles women played in pre-colonial African societies. Omonubi-McDonnell (2003) posits that with the economic and social roles women played in their societies, the unfounded generalisation in

the depictions of African women by Western writers as largely subordinates are a misplacement. The Western ideology of subverting the roles of women is a transplant from the ideals of Victorian colonial education bequeathed to Africa at the turn of colonialism (Bohen, 1987; Gail & Elliot, 1982; Uchendu, 1979). The resultant skewed gender depiction has led to what Imam (1988) describes as four approaches to the historical presentation of women in Africa.

The first approach is the total absence of women in literary works, foregrounded by the dominance of male authors. Female historian, Awe (1999), notes the uncritical adoption of Western masculine bias in the historical documentations of human experiences in Africa by African writers. She cites the eight volumes of *General History of Africa* (1981) and *The Groundwork of Nigerian History* in her argument, both of which fail to document any female input to African and Nigerian history. Stratton (1994) also points out the absence of women writers in Eustace Palmer's second book, *The Growth of the African Novel* (1979) and Gerald Moore's *Twelve African Writers* (1980). Stratton describes the exclusion of women writers in the pantheon of canonical writers as using a Western parameter for African literature. This claim is hinged on the rich history of women's participation right from the age of the oral mode of literary endeavour.

The second approach that Imam identifies is the depiction of women as inferior to men—again a product of the overt dominance of male writers. The plays of the first generation of African playwrights exemplify the first two approaches. These writings depict female characters who are conditioned by traditional values that subordinate them to the extent that they are either absent, silent, barely seen, or stereotyped with negative attributes. These phallogentric depictions of women reflect the Lacanian argument that social arrangements are dominated by the phallus. The early writings of Soyinka show this tendency. For instance, the helpless young bride in *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka, 1975), and Rola in *A Dance of the Forests* (Soyinka, 1971), and Segi in *Kongi's Harvest* (Soyinka, 1967), who is the bane of man, sucking the vigour and vitality from them. There is

also Amope in Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*, whose outstanding characteristic is a quarrelsome nature. Likewise, consider the young girl in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, who consistently tempts the Prophet in his periods of prayer and meditation as she goes to take a swim in the sea. Yeseibo (2013) describes Soyinka's portraiture of women as agents of the propagation of cultural traditions rather than depicting their needs as women. Citing the character of Iyaloja in *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka, 1975), he points out that she, alongside the girls in the play, encourage Elesin-Oba to commit his assigned ritual suicide:

Soyinka's active women, however, help in perpetuating the culture that is supercilious and oppressive to them. They are portrayed as slaves to culture, they willy-nilly help in sustaining. This portrayal is against the feminist ideal that seeks to pulverize oppressive and repressive aspects of culture (p. 80).

Ebiere in J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* is a seducer who entices her husband's younger brother into a sexual relationship, and Oreami in *Ozidi*, who employs her supernatural powers to instil fear into her community, are other examples of writers assigning negative stereotypes to female characters. Such gender stereotypes affirm sexist values and facilitate the further subordination of woman by restricting them within a certain circumstance and determining their contribution to society.

The first published novel by an African woman, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* in 1966, trailed the distinctively established male-dominated written literary tradition in Africa. Going further, Stratton criticises Palmer's (1966) *An Introduction to the African Novel* (1972) for referring to only one female writer, Flora Nwapa, and describing her as "an inferior novelist" (Palmer, 1966, p. 61). The first two approaches have been widely countered by scholars and writers. The plethora of award-winning women writers have put to an end the critical exclusion of female voices in critical and creative endeavours.

The third approach, the concerted depiction of the roles of women as complementary to those of men, is in reaction to the subversion

of female writers and female characters to the margins of culture and their confinement to the domestic space. It is a struggle against patriarchal structures, accomplices of patriarchy, and Eurocentric values. This approach is hinged on the position that both males and females can be beneficiaries and victims of oppressive structures (i.e., patriarchal, religious, racial, and economic ones). It thus sets the stage for the fourth approach through the foregrounding of the identity and role of women and other marginalised groups in the society.

The fourth approach, and one that is pushing the bounds of the third approach, is the active portraiture of women as agents of advancement in society. It is an approach which identifies patrilineal and other limiting set-ups in society and creates dominant women figures who engage cultural opportunities alongside their strength of character to overcome all delimiting boundaries. Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, *Red is the Freedom Road*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Once upon Four Robbers*, and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, Olu Obafemi's *Nights of a Mystical Beast*, Bode Sowande's *A Sanctus for Women*, Ahmed Yerima's *Jakadiya*, *Aetu*, *Yemoja*, *Orisa Ibeji* among other novels, writers, and critics have joined this crusade to depict the African woman in her rightful place.

While patriarchal influences still exist in African society, African literature and criticism are focusing on the contributions of females despite the limiting codes. These works creatively explore cultural provisions, provisions that give room for the genders to navigate a complex maze of social prescriptions which have created a dominant imbalance in the positioning of the genders. For instance, in the Igbo society, which is the cultural setting of the selected plays that are examined in this paper, there has been distortions to the cultural position of womanhood. For instance, there is the usurpation of the status of Ala, the supreme goddess of the earth by the male god, Chukwu. Quoting Echeruo (1979), Arazu (1982), Nwoga (1984), and Azuonye (1987), Azuonye (1995) claims that evidence from Igbo oral narratives indicate the supremacy of Ala in Igbo religion as going

against the contemporary imposition of the male god, Chukwu, as the supreme god:

... looking at various tales which refer to the earth-goddess, *Ala*, and the male sky-god, *Chukwu*, one can see a clear pattern in their respective recession and evolution as supreme deities. The primeval supremacy of *Ala* is suggested by two myths which are widespread throughout Igboland. One celebrates the triumph of the sky (*Igwe*) over the earth (*Ala*) while the other recounts the struggle over seniority which is believed to have prevailed before the triumph of the male principle over the pre-existent female principle. (p. 6)

The cultural evolution that resulted in the changing the gender of the supreme god also affected the hitherto matrilineal structure of the Igbo culture to the extent that contemporary scholars now describe Igbo society as overtly patrilineal (Anah & Okere, 2019; Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2015).

Given the evolution of gender structure, gender scholars are exploring other cultural nuances which are still in force in the Igbo culture. These nuances allow fluidity in the roles and responsibilities assigned to the genders, and they underscore the importance of the matrilineal line in Igbo society, as well as justifying the claim of an initial matrilineal society. Practices such as lineage daughters, male daughters, and female husbands in Igbo culture continue to blur the sharp lines between male and female genders. These are provisions contemporary writers such as Yerima are exploring in the creation of women who play crucial advancement roles in family and societal set ups.

The current paper, thus, engages with Aliyu's (2013) model of analysis named Location-Specific Feminist Principle, which lays emphasis on the location and period in which a text is located. This approach ensures a proper contextualization of issues raised in the analyses of the selected plays. This model also takes from the broader theoretical postulate of African Feminists in recognizing and responding to cultural dictates. This model critiques as inappropriate, Liberalism, Radicalism, and Black feminism/Womanism for the analyses of

African texts on the basis that they fail to capture contextualized readings of texts. The broader umbrella of African Feminisms under which Aliyu locates her model is described by Boyce-Davies (1986, cited in Guy-Sheftall, 2003) as a theory that addresses the realities of women's lives in African societies. Aliyu argues further that the marginalization of the African woman is not homogenous, which implies that the solution may also not be the same. This is what she maintains as the basis for the pluralization of the feminism coming out of Africa.

Constructing Gender in the Selected Plays

Ahmed Yerima is a consummate playwright who negotiates the cultural, socio-economic, and political landscapes of Nigerian/African societies. He engages with the contemporary issue of the female roles not just in the limited space of the family setting, but the community. In his creation of strong female characters, he leverages established cultural allowances that enable the characters to negotiate the fine lines of social prescriptive roles. Olanma in *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008), for instance, is cast into a "male-daughter" role. This is a cultural prescription that allows a woman to play the role of a man in marital, social, political, and economic spheres. Olanma is the only child of her father, who is the family head. She becomes a male-daughter to bear sons who will belong to her natal family. This enables her to repopulate her father's lineage and family. She takes on this role even though she is an atonement-bride to the family deity, Iyieke. Olanma's symbolic marriage to the god is to assuage the god's fiery anger so he can stop the deaths of sons and other members of the family. Olanma is thus both female and male in her responsibilities; she is bride to a god yet cohabits with Isiugwu to repopulate her father's lineage.

To circumvent controversy over the claim of any offspring, her cohabitation with Isiugwu is not formalised through the mandatory payment of bride price by Isiugwu. This would have conferred legal rights on any children she bears to Isiugwu. More-so, Isiugwu lives with Olanma in her family home rather than moving to his home.

These allowances are cultural prescriptions without which Olanma's roles would be void and even incur castigation and wrath from the community. Olanma's position thus allows her to take roles and actions assigned to men, as her dialogue with Duruaku, the oldest man in the Anyadoro family, shows:

OLANMA: ...please I don't want to know. Let me leave here.
These are words for the ears of men.

DURUAKU: I cannot see a woman here.

OLANMA: Meaning I am not?

DURUAKU: Are you? Why do you think we invite you to every meeting of men in this household? Why do you think we allowed you to stay in your father's hut after his death? Why did you get a share in your late father's property? Why do all women, young and old, kneel down to greet you, and we also never allow you to sweep the compound? Why do we say that you can break kola or lead us in prayers? Why? (Yerima, 2008, p. 37)

Isiugwu, her human husband also assumes the domestic role around the homestead. He cooks, cleans, and panders to Olanma's instructions. He is also in awe of Olanma's achievements when he states,

ISIUGWU: Olanma, woman like man who tills the soil like a hungry lioness in search of rabbits in a hole. Her yam farm has remained the best in the land for two years now. Each one was like a thigh of the gods. All men hung their heads in shame, as the lioness ponced off with their prize ... I have finished all that she asked me to do. (Yerima, 2008, p. 13)

Similarly, Chisom in *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b) becomes a male daughter to help save her father's lineage from extinction and to retain the crown within that lineage. Okezie, with whom Chisom was enamoured and would have married, becomes the "wife" of the god Odenigbo. He attains this position when he is chosen to be the carrier of the god's mask. This is a position which requires him to be domesticated in all

affairs regarding the mask and the god for a period of seven years. Both Chisom and Okezie, for varied reasons, swap gender roles to fulfil needs that go beyond personal aggrandizement to that of protecting the larger family cause and, indeed, that of the society.

Anyalenkeya (2020), however, argues that the flexibility in role assignment as depicted in Yerima's *Akuabata* (2008) is a tool for the subjugation of Olanma. Engaging with the scapegoat archetype to describe Olanma as "serially abused", Anyalenkeya opines that Olanma is a tool used by her family to appease, in the first instance, the family god, Iyieke, at an age when she cannot make a choice. In the second instance, Anyalenkeya points out that Olanma is made into

a man, a king and a husband to whom young women were married. Finally, they request she returns to her place as Iyieke's bride, again for their selfish reasons, with no thoughts for her feelings or for those of her mortal husband, Isiugwu, and daughter, Obiageli. (p. 9)

It is instructive to note that interpreting the Igbo cultural prescription of male-daughters and female-husbands as marginalising or empowering depends on the view accorded to the broad patrilineal social order in traditional Igbo society. Interpreting as oppressive, cultural allowances that afford women the opportunity to transcend the limitations of being female, is doubly restrictive. This is especially so when the cultural allowances of being male daughters and female husbands confer on the women the full social, political, and economic benefits of being male. Importantly, too, the fluidity of roles is not limited to the female gender, even within the context of the plays under discussion. Okezie in *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b) and Isiugwu in *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008) are male characters who become domesticated, one at the demands of a god, and the other, at the demands of society. Their domestication does not attract derision, neither does it limit them from taking on masculine roles.

It is also noteworthy that as much as Olanma in *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008) is allowed to take on some male roles and qualities, she retains her femininity as captured in Isiugwu's description of her

as a “lioness”, and in her being referred to as “mother” by the extended family members. Isiugwu’s use of lioness to describe Olanma is indicative of how she combines both female and male roles. The lioness is known for both mothering/feminine and hunting/masculine roles in lion packs. As Olanma straddles both genders in the roles she plays and responsibilities which she takes on, she wholesomely contributes to the continued existence of her people. Importantly too, even though Isiugwu assumes the domestic role in the homestead, Olanma acknowledges his maleness and superior position. Isiugwu’s masculinity and domineering personality emerges when he confronts his kinsmen who attempt to malign Olanma, as shown in the following extract:

ISIUGWU: Watch your mouth, Akandu, or else you step on the tail of the Gabon Viper. A mere woman, heh?... My heart is firm on what I want. I shall not be lured into the clutches of the rules and laws of the people. Olanma is my wife, and shall remain that till death... Even the gods will understand. (Yerima, 2008, pp. 20–21)

The characters of Olanma and Isiugwu in *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008) and Chisom and Okezie in *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b) capture the fluidity of gender roles in the Igbo culture that is depicted in the selected plays. This fluidity is context-determined. Olanma and Isiugwu react in accordance with the immediate situation. As much as Isiugwu panders to Olanma’s will, as though he were the female, he is quick to display his masculine strength and ego when she calls him a fool. Similarly, for Olanma, despite her socially determined maleness, she always refers to Isiugwu as “Husband”, even when they are in the company of the family elders where she is expected to act as a male.

In the cases of Chisom and Okezie in *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b), while Chisom becomes a male-daughter to save her father’s lineage, Okezie is a pawn in the hands of Ubanta, the priest of Odenigbo. Okezie sacrifices his love for Chisom to serve Odenigbo in the belief that he is rendering service to the community. Chisom employs a devious

means of taking Okezie back from the god, but this costs him his life. As a male-daughter, Chisom is a carrier just like Okezie. She forces herself on him with the aid of some guards and she conceives of a son through the act. Okezie takes his life from the shame of having committed an abomination and because he is no longer fit to carry the mask of Odenigbo. As abominable as Chisom's actions are, she justifies her action thus:

CHISOM: I am with child ... your child. One who will carry your blood through life. One who will sit on the throne of my father's if you let him live. What I did was not done with hatred in my heart. I had to do it. I never knew you will take your life. Now our child will be fatherless ... But if you let us live, then your mother shall be our mother. My son ... our son shall grow up taught to wipe her tears ... (Yerima, 2017b, pp. 58–59)

The concept of *Umuada* is a cultural institution that allows fluidity of roles among certain Igbo females. Nzegwu (2004) asserts that such females do not have one gender identity but navigate the genders depending on the roles they are playing at a particular time:

meaningful social ascription takes place at the level of the lineage and that *umuada* (lineage daughters) occupy a dominant position and are ever present forces in their natal families. They assume juridical and peacekeeping roles and regularly perform purification duties, as well as funeral rites for deceased members of the lineage. (p. 563)

Ene (2007) describes lineage daughters as “the society of native daughters” (pp. 1–2), an organisation made up of all daughters of a particular village or town, regardless of age and marital status. The Umuada engage in the minimization of conflict and enthronement of peace in the family and community. Many times, when men fail in conflict management, the Umuada comes in, often uninvited, and their decision is final (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015).

The significance of lineage daughters is captured in *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b). Yerima notes in the play that, despite their femaleness

which prevents them from inheritance and marriage which may have taken them to other communities, their patrilineal land is always theirs (*Odenigbo*). The import of this is that these daughters remain in touch with their natal homes and contribute to the stability of the community. They take upon themselves roles that challenge unusual occurrences and that ensure their natal community thrives. Eze concedes that “no one can stop them” (p. 18). Ade-Ezi who leads the *umuada* tells Eze that they have given the message of the *umuada* to Odenigbo’s priest to stop his excesses; a frontal challenging of a powerful character, an action which the chiefs had not been able to do:

ADA-EZI: The *umuada* met ... We want peace in the land. The excesses of Ubanta must stop. I have been mandated by the other daughters of Obodoije who live outside the village to remain in the village until this matter is resolved, and both the god and the people are together again. (Yerima, 2017b, p. 19)

It is noteworthy how Yerima constructs the gender of the gods in both texts. In *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008), Iyieke is cast as a male god. This god is shorn of all femininity and emotion that would make him kind or benevolent. Tales of Iyieke that are told by the elders depict scenes of supplicants pleading and negotiating with the god to spare the lives of the people. His belligerence is to the extent of causing Olanma to suffer a torn uterus during childbirth, which prevents her from having any more children.

Iyieke’s dominant character is like Odenigbo, another male god in the play, *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b), who refuses to heed the pleas of the people (see, for example, pages 12–13). Ukatu describes the god as loving too much worship. This is the same angst Iyieke has against the Anyaduro family in *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008), wherein he believes that he has not been worshiped enough or even as frequently as he would like. Both gods are stubborn and unyielding, and their belligerent nature is contrary to depictions of female Igbo gods such as Ala, the god of the land. Yerima compounds the negative depiction

of Odenigbo as a male god by giving the god a corrupt, egomaniacal, power-hungry chief priest, a chief whose desire to be crowned Eze blinds him to his primary role of being just the mouthpiece of a god. It takes the willpower of female characters in both texts to subdue these gods for the benefit of the larger family/community.

In *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008), Olanma's daughter, Obiageli sacrifices herself for her people by taking the position of Akuabata and wife of the god, Iyieke. In *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b), Chisom assumes the role of a male daughter to repopulate her father's compound. Her pregnancy for Okezie, the carrier of the mask of Odenigbo, both secures her life from the rampaging spirit of Okezie and gives a vista of hope in the form of a male child to take over from Eze. Ukatu, who holds the title of "Mother of the Land", takes the initiative to carve a new masquerade for the community and to destroy the masquerade of Odenigbo—it is to be burnt and along with a willing sacrifice. Ukatu alludes to her being the sacrificial human when she informs the carver of the new masquerade that "we have put more money than is required in the bag. We may never meet again, but please, do not fail my people" (Yerima, 2017b, p. 71). Olanma and Obiageli in *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008) and Chisom and Ukatu in *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b) are thus depicted as saviours who sacrifice for their families and communities. They represent the other female characters in the play who jointly work to eradicate tyranny for both humans and gods for the continued existence of their people.

It is important to state that these female characters take on these tasks willingly. At no point do they speak of, or act against the responsibilities as oppressive or coerced. Yerima concedes this in an interview with Oloruntoba:

The society is changing, and women are also becoming heroes within my contemporary society. As a playwright and public intellectual, I must react to that. I must react to the fact that we have not allowed them to rise to the status they could have ... as my daughter started growing up, I began to appreciate the position of young women in the society. (Oloruntoba, 2021, p. 16)

Negotiating Patriarchal Structures in the Selected Plays

Yerima employs the concepts of *Ndi-inyom* (mothers of the land) and *Umuada* (daughters of the land) to advance the functionality of women in Igbo society. These cultural institutions create windows for women to go beyond the cultural limitations of their gender. Okoro (2023) notes that the Igbo society accorded profound respect to elderly women, and they played mediatory roles in traditional society. In *Odenigbo* (Yerima, 2017b), for instance, Ukatu leads the *Ndi-inyom* (mothers of the land) to the shrine of Odenigbo to give the god an ultimatum:

UKATU: We promise you, if you refuse to care for us as we have
asked, as mothers, we shall bite the fingers that feed us.
Let our ancestors stand by us. (Yerima, 2017b, p. 7)

Ikedi, Ubanta's accomplice, describes Ukatu with reverence, claiming that, "I think that even the gods fear her" (Yerima, 2017b, p. 9), and that Ubanta should be wary of taking on the *Ndi-inyom* who "are a sacred part of this community. Caution, great priest of Odenigbo" (Yerima, 2017b, p. 9). The reverence accorded to women in this category gives them the leeway to challenge a god and his priest because of their domineering actions. The collective nature of their decision-making and actions taken equally, allows them to exert more impact in the society. The *Ndi-inyom* (mothers of the land) in *Akuabata* (Yerima, 2008) similarly play a mediatory role to save the lives of their children. This is the move which convinces Obiageli, Olanma's daughter, to take the sacrificial place of her mother (see Yerima, 2008, pp. 72–74). In both plays, these groups of women play significant roles in curbing the excesses of patriarchal gods and priests who threaten the existence of their people (see Yerima, 2008, p. 72; Yerima, 2017b, pp. 7, 19, 20).

The culturally accepted practice of "male daughters and female husbands" is another way the female characters negotiate gender limitations. Olanma and Chisom in the selected texts become male daughters to perform the duties of male children. Olanma gets the privileges of a male member of the family when she inherits her father's

property and sits in the meetings of elders. The *Ndi-inyom* and *Umuada* cultural institutions accord women elevated political and social relevance in their natal communities once they get married. These institutions also favourably position women for the acquisition of wealth and authority.

Conclusion

Yerima, in the selected plays, constructs formidable female characters who take on roles and responsibilities that transcend the personal, despite the predominantly patrilineal makeup of the Igbo society. These characters are not just mothers, wives, or daughters performing only domestic roles, rather they are formidable women who perform multiple roles, including juridical and peacekeeping ones. Their ability to explore the fluidity in gender assignment aids Yerima's appropriation of cultural provisions in his depiction of functional women. For instance, the flexibility of Igbo gender construction, which allows women to be "male daughters" and "female husbands" (Amadiume, 1987, pp. 15–16), is appropriated in both texts (see Yerima, 2008, pp. 36–37; Yerima, 2017b, p. 31). The *Ndi-inyom* (mothers of the land) and *Umuada* (daughters of the land) are used in both texts as means to negotiate patriarchy-induced limitations and to advance the functionality of women in Igbo society. In both plays, these groups of women play significant roles in curbing the excesses of gods and priests who threaten the existence of their people (Yerima, 2008, p. 50; Yerima, 2017b, pp. 7, 19, 20). Yerima's application of these cultural prescriptions in navigating limitations of the female characters' femininity attest to the existence of a vibrant and dynamic cultural prescription. These prescriptions ensured that the Igbo society overcome internal and sometimes external challenges.

Yerima's deliberate depiction of women as saviours of society is a deliberate reaction to the dominance of the male gender and the stereotypes in African literature concerning the roles and abilities of female characters. In both texts, women are the ones who end the deaths decimating their families and communities. They also stand as forces

protecting structures that represent the continuity of the people. The depiction of women as the ones who “save” the society foregrounds them as the integral gender and complements the roles of men. Yerima’s recourse to specific traditional Igbo cultural institutions is an aesthetic which does more than validate women’s roles in society, it emphasises the value inherent in indigenous systems in the organisation and maintenance of societies. Despite the patrilineal social setup of indigenous Igbo society, women in the selected plays of Ahmed Yerima are portrayed as significant members of the society. Plays of this nature and by a male author set the stage for more nuanced depictions of women in ways that would encourage adequate recognition in societal development.

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