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Motherhood in African Literature and Culture

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Abstract: In her article "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture" Remi Akujobi analyzes the place and the role of women in African Religion and tradition and also interrogates the place of Motherhood in the production, circulation and consumption of items in African tradition. Akujobi examines Motherhood as a sacred as well as a powerful spiritual component of the woman's life. Emphasis is put on literary discourse where motherhood is a recurrent theme, where motherhood is also a lifelong commitment. The article particularly explores motherhood as a discourse in African women creative efforts. A key intention of the article is to explore their perceptions regarding themselves as mothers and the sense they make of their experiences of motherhood. The purpose is to interpret these from a feminist perspective and see whether or not the institution of "motherhood" can ultimately empower women to be visible in vital areas of human endeavours. The study appraises motherhood as both a concept and an institution.

Remi AKUJOBI

Motherhood in African Literature and Culture

Motherhood is often defined as an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby. It is an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture. Motherhood is also seen as a moral transformation whereby a woman comes to terms with being different in that she ceases to be an autonomous individual because she is one way or the other attached to another-her baby. In many societies, motherhood is wrapped in many cultural and religious meanings — cultural as in what the society thinks a mother should be, that is, some elements associated with a mother, and religiously, it what the practiced faith of a particular society attaches to motherhood. Motherhood assumes different names and shapes depending on the society that is practicing it. The word procreation or giving birth and nurturing new life whether physically or otherwise has led to a different definitions of the words "feminine," "maternal," and "feminine spirituality" in many cultures and religious traditions. Motherhood in some quarters is seen as a sacred and powerful spiritual path for a woman to take. In literature and in other discourses alike, motherhood is a recurrent theme across cultures. It is one striking term in women's discourse that is given prominence. Motherhood has been viewed by many in different lights and presented in diverse ways. Motherhood as an experience and as an institution has and is still receiving different definitions from different writers both men and women today.

Religions all over the world whether Christian, Judaic, Hindu and Islam accord very important place to motherhood, it is widely an exalted realm for the woman hence religious imagery sentimentalizes and idealizes motherhood. The image of Madonna characterizes Christianity; there is the Devi-Ma in Hindu tradition. Africans talk about the creation goddess often depicted as a mermaid or a beautiful woman and associated with the moon and ocean. Although Buddhism does not give motherhood such overwhelming spiritual status and significance, maternal imagery and symbolism are present in the concept of the archetypal female Bodhisattvas, these are seen as supreme mothers. Motherhood as experienced and practiced in Africa is influenced by religious mythologies and local lore and it is coloured with examples of self-sacrifice/giving and much more in the name of motherhood. While mothers are revered as creators, as providers, cradle rockers, nurturers, and goddesses, they also inspire awe because they are known to wedge huge powers in their children's lives. The idea of self-sacrifice emphasizes the centrality of motherhood in African society.

The way and manner societies conceptualize motherhood in a way, has come to command popular appeal because it is seen as a symbol of the nation-state. So nationalists these days deploy the nation-as-mother symbolism to mobilize patriotic sentiments, Camara Laye and Senghor express their love for African in terms of the love for mother, and Roscoe echoes this idea in his book *Mother is Gold*. Diop glories mother in his poems and Okigbo recognizes the power of his mother "Idoto." In most texts written in Africa both by male and female, writers refer to the mother Africa trope and it has remained a prominent subject in African discourse. Love of mother and love of nation have been taken as one and the same. The symbolism of the enslaved and exploited motherland was at the heart of the anti-colonial nationalist struggles in Africa in the 1950s and early 1960s up to the point of independence. It was much more evidenced in South Africa especially after Mandela went to prison and in the 1980s and 1990s until the all inclusive election that brought Nelson Mandela to power in 1994. There are also patriotic songs and monuments in many countries that celebrate the nation-as-mother, these patriotic songs often invoke sentiments of loyalty toward the land of birth. Motherhood is a major theme in contemporary women's literature so much so that it features prominently in most texts written by women. The experience of motherhood according to Barbara Christian is an "unwritten story" and she contends that the story is just beginning to be told and this story to Christian interrogates women's struggles to become "all that they can be" (212). The role of a mother and all that goes with it as far as Christian goes is "universally imposed" and it is the only role that everyone agrees should be the domain of the woman. John S. Mbiti recognizes the concept of mother when he says that it is central to African philosophy and spirituality. Motherhood is a joyful and privileged state for the woman because in pregnancy, the woman is said to "glow and shine" and she receives special treatment especially from her husband and her mother-in-law. No matter the skills, the desires and the talents of a woman, her primary function is that of motherhood, at least in Africa. We know that in the West, reproduction is subject to agreement between couples — whether or not to have children is well spelt out before marriage, but this is not so in Africa where every woman aspires to be a mother some day. Motherhood in Africa is seen as a God-giving role and for this reason it is sacred. So

whether one sees African women as victims or actors (Christian 147), whether or not one depicts women's travails (Ojo-Ade 161). In this sense, Ngcobo believes that generally, Africans take motherhood to be all about children, as she puts it: "every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group." Motherhood is so critical in most traditional societies in Africa that there is no worse misfortune for a woman than being childless. A barren woman is seen as incomplete, she is what Mbiti calls the "dead end of human life, not only for genealogical level but also for herself" (144). Yes, motherhood is vital but it should not be all that the woman is made for. It should be a matter of choice as some women would rather not experience motherhood. If it a choice, it might save the woman some troubles in society.

Following women's experience, most scholars and critics dwell more on the oppression and victimization of the woman in all areas of human endeavours. Patricia Hill-Collins derides the woman's acceptance of victimization as part of her experience, Aduke Adebayo tells the woman to tear the veil of invisibility by breaking the barriers of patriarchy, the metaphor of the "veil" is vital especially in a predominantly patriarchal society, it is important the woman tears this veil because if she does not, it will mask her identity, it will muffle her voice and distort her vision (Adebayo 23). Remy Oriaku dwells on the anatomy of the woman as underlying the prejudices against her in society (Oriaku 75), Elizabeth Ogini wants the woman to throw away the yoke of discomfort and oppression and preoccupy herself with freedom, comfort, prosperity and dignity (18), Nana Wilson-Tagoe says that the woman must contest and revise misconceptions and narrow representations (12), Molara Ogundipe-Leslie recognizes the possible limitations and stereotyping the woman's biology can generate and with this in mind, O. Austen-Peters feels that it is time for the woman to reject negative images. Chinyere Grace Okafor recognizes the spiritual power of women especially as mothers (81, 160). With all his masculinist dissection of the anatomy of the woman, Onsucheka J. Chinweizu recognizes the power of the woman as he believes that the man suffers a form of oppression in the hands of the woman (121). To him, the woman has exploited her biological superiority and has consolidated her power by taking over the role of mother, cook and nurse in the household. He also sees marriage as a source of man's oppression. Of course one knows his stance – men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world. Deirdre L. Badejo does not share of all of these but recommends the mutual sharing of roles (94). Some critics of African literature believe that this idea of "mother Africa" often found in male literature is a ploy to silence the woman but most female writers are not silenced by this sentiment; rather, it encourages them to work hard hence some of them defy negative tags and present the female experience the way it occurs. In doing this, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie suggests that the first task is the demystification of certain male stereotypes of the African woman as goddess or as Supreme Mother, self-sacrificing and suffering willingly and silently. She says women should not completely embrace the image of the fertile mother of the nation, an image that African male writers have helped in disseminating. It is generally agreed that "Mother Africa" may have been declared free, but mothers of Africa remained manifestly oppressed.

Feminists in Africa, while conceding that motherhood may at times operate in an oppressive manner, have tried to read other meanings to motherhood, meanings that are empowering for women. Within these meanings, they agree that giving birth bestows a certain status on women – even mystical powers. Yoruba traditions point to this fact. Among the Yoruba people, motherhood is said to confer privileges that give credence to the very foundations of society and women's presumed roles in it and thus symbolize fertility, fecundity, and fruitfulness. The Yoruba saying, "Iya ni wura, baba ni jigi" ("mother is gold, father is a mirror") goes a long way in showing the importance of motherhood in African society. Mother is gold: strong, valuable, true, central to a child's existence, wise is also very important. Motherhood is not always as smooth as it seems in that it is also self-denying. The Yoruba also believe that *ikunle abiyamo* — the kneeling position assumed at the moment of birth — confers special spiritual privileges on a mother. Thus there are powers, privileges, and entitlements that come with motherhood even in the act of giving birth. Adrienne Rich posits that although the reality of motherhood is experienced by women, the institution is ably controlled by men, because the experience is being interpreted by men and the structure they control (45-49). Buchi Emecheta dwells on the concept of motherhood in most of her books, especially in *Joys of Motherhood* and *Second Class Citizen* and Flora Nwapa mirrors this concept in her *Efuru*, where childlessness and failed marriages mandate a literary criticism that mirrors the importance of children in the African family.

Although maternal ideals are entrenched and valorized in all cultures, patriarchal societies present a woman's central purpose to be her reproductive function and so motherhood and mothering become intertwined with issues of a woman's identity. Most theories postulated whether by men or women define women in terms of fertility and this is particularly reinvented in real life through many female

archetypes, it is common to hear such terms as the Virgin, Venus, and Mother Earth and these are tied to women's functions as mothers in society. After all, Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. These myths about the woman have been in existence since primordial times and they authenticate the belief that motherhood is an essential part of being a woman, outside which the woman is empty. It is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and the "halo of maternity" shines over her. This holds true for most women in Africa where the index of motherhood is used to define "real" women or responsible woman. This is so in the sense that motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance, many non-mothering women experience feelings of rejection and low self-esteem. Examples abound in African literature, especially that written by women. For example, Nnuego in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* never considers herself a woman until she started giving birth, Efuru in Nwapa's *Efuru* is frustrated by her inability to procreate and as such becomes a priestess. In life as in literature, motherhood is the only thing in which a woman's worth is measured. A woman without a child is viewed as a waste to herself, to her husband and to her society. So in cultural/traditional sense, one finds out that patriarchies can easily deploy notions of motherhood to foster traditions no matter how obsolete these may be, and in especially these traditions motherhood also becomes a means of female control.

In most cultures, expectations of mothering roles intensifies social pressure to conform to what the culture says or what the tradition decrees, this seems to be driven by levels of modernity or urbanization than by the status accorded to norms of society and community. For instance, one will expect that with urbanization and modernity, people will begin to adjust to trends of times, but Iyuku in Estakor (west of Edo State) continues to perpetuate highly prescriptive notions of motherhood. In this community of farmers, women are made to pass through some unhealthy practices in the name of motherhood. Women are expected to undergo certain rituals during pregnancy, especially first pregnancy. The woman must go through circumcision when she is seven months into the pregnancy; for this reason, the practice of circumcision and clitoredectomy, now seen in many quarters as a violation of human rights, is vitally placed in Iyuku. Mbiti recognizes the power in the blood which he says binds the individual to the land and consequently to the departed of the society. In this case, the circumcision blood is like making a covenant, or a solemn agreement, between the individual and her people and until the individual has gone through the operation, she is an outsider. In Iyuku, the woman is to stay for seven days in a secluded room without taking her bath. After seven days, the circumcision takes place and it usually performed on her by an elderly woman in her clan. After the circumcision, she is also to remain in the secluded room without bathing for extra seven days; she is to drink herbs for seven days and the number seven is important. Apart from this, the woman is also expected to go for what is known as "stakor," which is the presumed source of the name for the local government area, "Estakor" (in this case entails that the woman goes for what is termed a sign of commitment to motherhood — it is done in a way that as soon as the woman opens her mouth, everyone must see that she has gone through the ritual of "stakor"). This act is a situation whereby one side of the woman's tooth is chopped off with a local hammer and it is to show the world that the woman is married and that she is successfully experiencing motherhood. Despite differences in economic status and levels of development, every woman from this community is expected to pass through these rituals when she is pregnant with her first baby to prove that she is worthy to be called a mother. It is a sign of acceptance and because the society has very strong beliefs about the importance of family and community linkages, for a woman to disregard these things means that she is excluding herself from very important secular and spiritual commitment. The Estakor woman actually enjoys this experience. She does not in the least consider this harrowing, rather she sees it as a privilege. A woman who has not experienced this often envies those who have and motherhood in this community is a sign of the woman's vitality and worthiness, it is seen as an induction into the hall of fame so to say, because through the woman, reproduction has taken place and her cod with that of her new born merging is a sign of a higher bonding – that of the community at large.

Going further in this discourse, we see that most African communities have their own idea of motherhood and how a woman should experience it. In literature, different patterns and methods of motherhood are portrayed, for example, most of Emecheta's works deal with the portrayal of the African woman. Her main characters often show what it feels like to be a woman, an African woman and a mother in society. Emecheta looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children may sometimes be the only way by which femininity and womanhood are defined. Adah in *Second Class Citizen* has to work and support her family because the so-called bread winner can not provide any bread for the family, so she is forced to support the family and at the same time be responsible for the children. Adah is faced with numerous battles in a foreign land and she must do whatever she can to preserve her womanhood; not only that, she must also be a good mother to her children. In *Joys of Mother-*

hood, Emecheta's central character defines validity of her womanhood solely by the success of her children; she sees her success as a woman in her success as a mother. Without motherhood, Nnuego sees herself as empty and so fought very hard to be a mother even if it entails marrying a man she does not really love. The chapter titles, "The Mother," "The Mother's Mother," "The Mother's Early Life," "First Shock of Motherhood," etc., follow the highs and lows of the heroine, Nnu Ego's, destiny. Nnu Ego's whole destiny is centred on her as a mother. Her hope for happiness and prosperity are viewed through her ability to bear children and the success of her children, but her expectations are never met by these same children she is giving up so much for as she is constantly disappointed. As a result, Nnu Ego finds no joy in her grown children.

The role of religion in African culture is vital in the discussion of the spiritual woman, so it is pertinent to ask certain questions as we journey through the spiritual aspect of a woman and in this vein, we ask: What does it mean to be a spiritually powerful being? More specifically, what does it mean to walk in spiritual strength on a consistent basis, as a woman or mother? These questions are very important in determining the inner strength, the energy that lies within the woman which the woman may not be aware of. It is known that in life as in literature, the woman has been known to carry a lot of power within her, from personal explorations of the world of women's history, it is discovered that there is an emerging field of intense research and publication looking at women's participation and influence on the early Christian movement as well as in traditional communities around the globe. For example, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Chielo becomes a priestess and a healer whose roles allow her control of spaces that the fearless Okonkwo can not even venture into. She is so sure of her power that she runs through the town with a sick Ezimma on her back and as she races, she calls out greetings to notable community personages and agbala. With the confidence displayed by Chielo, one can not say that she is in any way oppressed as other women in the novel. The fact that Ezimma is restored after the encounter with Chielo says a lot about Chielo's spiritual power in agbala.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa expounds on the spiritual powers of the woman especially mothers as she makes woman-as-mother the primary upholder of the native culture. The mother teaches the child about the society's ways of knowing and doing things. In this way, the woman-as-mother becomes significant to the essential development and maintenance of the community. Most African writers have often posited that there is no male equivalent to the role of the priestess in African life; we see a woman as priestess in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a woman as priestess in Nwapa's *Efuru*, Nwapa's presentation of Efuru in her various roles and functions model the spirituality of women and by extension the spiritual powers embedded in motherhood. The question is what happens when the woman is without a child? Do women without children share in the power that motherhood confers on mothers in the society? In African society, having children confers a lot on the woman, but Nwapa thinks otherwise in her presentation of Efuru in that at the end of the novel it is Efuru's wealth that substitute for motherhood. Even in life motherhood confers so much power on the woman, a woman without a child can not even see herself as a member of her husband's family. In Iyuku, a community in Estakor west of Edo state, some women carry so much power so much so that whatever they decree must be taken seriously. The reference here is on the "Istogwa" women. This is a group of elderly women, they are well above birthing and nurturing; they are reverenced and feared at the same time. They are said to posses certain powers, that when they utter any word it must come to pass. These women are rarely seen as they only come out when there is an important event and when there is crisis in the community. The Istogwa women come out in the night when there is a problem to make some pronouncements: their outing is heralded by the town crier who goes round the town to admonish everyone to stay indoors that night because anyone who sees the Istogwa in action is often said not to live to tell the story. It is said that the women always come out naked, hence the warning, because it is an abomination for a child to see his ground mother's nakedness.

In this community also, when a mother tells a child that "I will bring out my breast," it means a lot as this is enough to caution any erring child. The power in the breast is so significant in the sense that everyone is considered to have suckled the mother's breast. No child will be so stubborn to the extent that he/she will not dread the mother's breast. Given all of these about motherhood, mothers command so much respect and at the same time awe, perhaps the reason why African societies view birthing with great significance. The importance of these cultural and religious symbols of motherhood is borne out by the fact that they are repeatedly alluded to in life and literature. Literary and artistic works through the ages dwell on the attributes of motherhood. Depictions of self-sacrificing mothers, mothers as creators who must bear pain with patience and nurture selflessly leave no space for mothers as women who feel pain, anger, frustration, or women drained by the responsibilities that accompany their roles as mothers.

Mbiti is a theologian, an author, a teacher, and a pastor. He is often referred to as the father of contemporary African theology and African philosophy. He was born on 30 November 1931 in Mulango, Kenya. He has researched extensively on African religion and philosophy. His book on African religion and philosophy is a ground breaking manifesto on how Africans live and what they believe in. His book as stated before dwells on practically every subject about life, particularly as it relates to Africans: he talks about what we believe in, how we relate with the supreme being and ourselves, a lot of issues raised but our concern rests on his chapters nine and ten, where he discusses birth and youth (82-97) and marriage and family life (98-109). Here Mbiti tries to convey the importance and joy of birth, how the mother nurses her infant, and he talks about celebrations and rituals that heralds and welcome the birth of a baby. And he dwells on family life beginning with marriage. Marriage to Mbiti is the meeting-point for the three layers of human life according to African religion. These are the departed, the living and those to be born. The departed come into the picture because they are the roots on whom the living stands. The living is the link between death and life. Those to be born are the buds in the loins of the living, and marriage makes it possible for them to germinate and sprout (98). Mbiti mentions that he has written a book called *Love and Marriage in Africa*. He hints at the fact that parents get involved in the selection of marriage partners, they visits, present gifts, they dictate customs concerning the bride's change of residence, marriage ceremonies and celebrations. Mbiti also states the importance of children to the African family and he says that a childless couple may take steps to ensure offspring, such as an additional wife or another bed partner for the first wife. Children are very important in that, apart from continuing the linage, they run errands when young and help out in the work. When the parents become old and weak it is the duty of the children, especially the heirs or sons, to look after the parents and the affairs of the family. When the parents die, the children give them befitting burial, survive and remember them.

In conclusion, the mystification of African mothers Ogundipe-Leslie refers to is due to the importance of motherhood in Africa. This theme is of extreme relevance to African societies and for this reason; it is widely documented in most of the works by African women. There are other issues now that are of utmost importance to women in Africa, but the issue of motherhood is still very important and this is largely due to the imposition of mothering in Africa. The concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the traditions of people of Africa and it has been presented by many even the so-called feminists. Writers both men and women have always encouraged every woman to bear children and women without children are seen as evil. With motherhood, a woman is considered blessed, she acquires a higher status in society, she is respected and mythologized.

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