

## **PATRIARCHAL PREJUDICE IN ONYEKACHI PETER ONUOHA'S *MOONLIGHT LADY***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examined the patriarchal prejudice in Onyekachi Peter Onuoha's *Moonlight Lady*, expressing how stereotypical and patriarchal sentiments shape the experiences and ongoing struggles of women in the text. Using a Stylistics Analysis approach, the study investigates how the novelist's literary style fosters the reawakening and self-consciousness of women, advocating recognition and assertiveness for the girl-child and proposing equal treatment and opportunities for both genders in society. It also delves into the struggle, battle, and victory of the Protagonist, Ikukuoma (supported by her mother, Nneoma), who uses education and economic empowerment to liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchal ideology that confines women to a place and relevance 'in the kitchen'. This statement can be viewed as a tool of patriarchal prejudice that perpetuates the exploitation and subjugation of women, as represented by Mr. Chima (Ikukuoma's father) and Mr. Ugochukwu Orji (the Poet Ambassador). The findings revealed that this patriarchal prejudice has been a clog in the wheel of progress for many women and young literary artists, and has also continuously limited their opportunities and progress in society. Just as the visual image of the moonlight

shines amidst the darkness of the night, the Protagonist, Ikukuoma, does not relent despite the elements of darkness trying to pull her down, but eventually shines her way through to the top by becoming the best female writer of her time. The study concludes that Onyekachi Onuoha's *Moonlight Lady* offers a fundamental breakthrough and a wake-up call for the modern African woman; she is encouraged to be relentless in the face of daunting challenges of patriarchal prejudice, without being combative though forceful, in order to forge ahead and foster a harmonious relationship in society.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Prejudice, Feminism, Femalism, Stereotype.

### **Introduction**

Patriarchal prejudice is antithetical to women's development and advancement in both private and public domains. A patriarchal society gives more relevance and significance to the men-folk as against their female counterparts, especially in terms of educational and economic opportunities cum advancement. Notably, theories of patriarchy suggest that society is organized around the male or system of male authority, where men hold significant power and privilege in political, social, and economic spheres. The theories also argue that the structure is not a natural occurrence, but rather a historical, social, and cultural construct that subordinates women (Walby cited in Pierik 71). It is against this backdrop that the novel *Moonlight Lady*, is anchored. The writer, Onyekachi Peter Onuoha depicts the consciousness of the female gender towards the imbalance, and then strive to subvert those patriarchal tendencies in a subtle manner, in spite of all odds to an advantageous position, so as to foster peaceful coexistence across both genders, and paving way for an egalitarian society through the protagonist, Ikukuoma.

### **Concept of Patriarchy**

Patriarchy's literal meaning is "rule of the Father or male – dominated family". It is now used widely "to refer to male domination, to the relationships by which men dominate women and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (Bhasin cited in Sultana 2). Patriarchy as a concept has been defined by various scholars.

For instance, Mitchell, a Feminist Psychologist refers to it as “kinship systems in which men exchange women” (24). Whereas, Sylvia Walby a Sociologist, defines patriarchy as a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20). Walby goes further to identify six (6) substructures that maintain the system of patriarchy which include: paid work, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state. While radical feminism often view patriarchy as a discrete system of inequality, Marxist feminism believes that it is interwoven with capitalism, to enforce the subordination of women, which can also be used as a tool for the ruling class. Hence, patriarchy evinces a system of male domination and sovereignty over the female in a given society.

### **Patriarchal Prejudice and its Manifestations**

Prejudice is a preconceived opinion, whether positive or negative, about something. Patriarchal prejudice is therefore, concerned with the biased behavioural tendencies and belief system based on gender, especially those that put women or a girl child at a disadvantage, and encourage male dominance. It is considered to be a system in which men hold power or give orders that result to unequal social, economic and political structures that put women at a point of hindrance. This prejudice has various indexes such as: unequal access to education, resources, rights and privileges, employment, limited opportunities for women and even violence against women. Patriarchal prejudice can also be seen in certain societal norms that restrict women participation educationally, legally or otherwise, as well as in personal relationships, where men exert control which may have negative consequences for women’s personal, career growth, and leadership opportunities, leading to exploitation and ultimately, violence. According to Uchendu in his 2022 study, the social-cultural system that privileges maleness over femaleness, and stimulates masculine subjugation of women, operates in many societies across the globe, which is equally predominant and resilient in African cultures. However, using the imagery of the moon as part of female assertiveness in *Moonlight Lady*, the author tries to revert these negative inclinations in order to redeem the female gender, and the society at large.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by two theories, Patriarchy and Feminism. Feminism is a movement of various ideas and approaches that seek to solve the social, cultural and economic imbalance faced by women. It could be dated back to 1929 with Virginia Woolf's exposition in her book- *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which delved into the major principles of feminist criticism. According to Wolf, "it is the male who defines what it means to be female and who controls the political, economic, social and literary" (Wolf qtd. in Adenze 2).

Feminist theory sees patriarchy not just as an individual ideology, but also as a system of power that cuts across societal structures, organizations and cultural norms. The core principles of feminism therefore, are gender equality, challenge or dismantling of patriarchy, women liberation and empowerment. Feminism negates patriarchy; it tries to challenge patriarchal ideology of women subjugation and oppression by advocating for equity where women could have opportunities just as the men in the society. Aside radical feminism and Marxist feminism mentioned earlier, Sultana's work in 2021 highlighted other types of feminism such as "Liberal Feminism", "Radical Feminism", "Socialist Feminism", "Intersectional Feminism" and "Postcolonial Feminism" (Sultana 3). The African Feminist theory also known as "Womanism" (an offshoot of feminism) as well as "Gynandrisms" and "Femalism" (a variant of African Feminism coined by Chioma Opara). We also have "STIWATISM" by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and "Nego-Feminism propounded by Obioma Nnaemeka. Also, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's "Snail-Sense Feminism" hinges on the principles of wisdom and determination, and not being radical while trying to achieve women emancipation. This opinion is viewed to be in conformity and very similar to Ogundipe's "Nego-Feminism", whose basic tenet is negotiation and women's support for one another (Albert cited in Deconstructing Boundaries 203-204); to which I humbly dare say, both variants played out in Onyekachi Onuoha's approach and style of feminism in *Moonlight Lady*. From the foregoing, it is obvious that the feminist theory is complex, diverse and continuously evolving, as it offers a critical framework for comprehending and addressing the imbalance and injustice encountered by women and other relegated groups in various societies.

## Synopses of the Text

Onuoha's *Moonlight Lady* published in 2015, is a novella with seventy-five (75) pages and eight (8) chapters. It contains a Foreword (page 9), an Author's note (page 6), and an Epilogue (page 75) with a well streamlined plot. The narrative voice is that of third-person omniscient narrator, who knows all about the characters' thoughts and actions throughout the story. The tone and style are that of a modern African feminist revolutionary conscious writer, who though confronts the patriarchal subjugation and stereotyping of the female gender, does it in a refined manner and without being aggressive like the so-called radical feminists. Regardless, it is a story of strive and victory over patriarchal stereotyping of the girl-child and women in general, through the characters of Ikukuoma and her mother-Nneoma, who both symbolize the voice of self-consciousness, collaboration and re-awakening of the female gender's aspiration of affirming her rightful place in a male-controlled society, aside being perceived as an appendage or property of a man.

"Moonlight" can be viewed as an imagery and a metaphor. It represents serenity, purity, nature's beauty, as well as transformation of events and the characters' journey throughout the narrative. Ikukuoma's father- Mr. Chima, epitomizes the patriarchal prejudice and obnoxious notion about the place of a woman and her entire being as always ending up as a man's property or succinctly put, "in the kitchen". When his daughter complains of the overwhelming chores and calls for assistance, he puts across the following questions in defiance: "Who do you want to assist you? Are you not a woman? Have you forgotten that the place of the woman is in the kitchen?" (10).

It is this form of humiliation that makes Ikukuoma resolve to deal with the struggle her own way, by first making sure that she asserts her worth through qualitative education (as she passes her JAMB resoundingly well). Her attitude later manifests through self-protest while carrying out her household tasks, since her brother-Okwudiri (who could not pass the same JAMB expectedly as his father's son), is not permitted to give a helping hand simply because he is a boy, aside the fact that their cousins are equally around. Thus, boys can joyfully and comfortably sit with their father and uncle (Mr. Chima), to watch the television while awaiting the meals, to be prepared and served thereafter, by the only girl, without even considering

her strength. As a result of her determination to confront this anomaly, Ikukuoma in an instance, cooks meals with excess salt, pepper or without meat and fish, as in the case of the pepper soup taken to the village. In all of these, her mother Nneoma has been an understanding and a supportive force, a voice of reasoning against the patriarchal prejudice and unfair treatment of the girl-child and by extension, the women. She therefore, makes a case for the women-folk when she addresses the youngsters around the home (to everyone's surprise and admiration):

Please young men when you marry you should try and assist your wives in the kitchen and occasionally prepare food for the family, it doesn't reduce you from your role as family heads but it helps to strengthen the bond of the family.... (11)

Through Nneoma's personality, the young generation of men are challenged and encouraged to be wary of the misplaced perception of the place of the girl-child in our society. Hence, Ikukuoma's feminist revolutionary instinct against patriarchal prejudice begins from here, and spans throughout the narrative, especially when she is confronted with the choice of not being considered to further her education up to the university level, even after passing JAMB creditably well, in preference to her brother's educational advancement. This is because, Mr. Chima disapproves of it since he does not believe in the education of the girl-child. And so, he confronts his wife who believes otherwise, saying: "... I need the money for my son's education, for he is the one that will bear my name and continue my homestead when I am no more" (16).

The above statement clearly confirms the patriarchal prejudice and notion on the perceived economic value of a girl-child with the attendant unequal opportunities between both sexes, especially in terms of educational development, as adding values to her husband alone, but not her family. This later becomes serious as the story unfolds when Nneoma's pleas on her daughter's behalf on the right to be educated just as the brother, falls on the father's deaf ears. Consequently, she determines to shoulder the responsibility and emancipates herself economically, in a gradual but consistent manner. This, she achieves successfully. Nneoma equally addresses amicably, the near-sour situation between Okwudiri and his father's idea concerning learning a trade and furthering his education. Like a gentle iconoclast, Nneoma suggests a way forward for her son's

development through dialogue and encouragement, which eventually pays off, devoid of violence.

Ikukuoma's second phase into her refutation of the patriarchal prejudice regarding exploitation is seen during her encounter with the character of Mr. Ugochukwu Orji as an undergraduate, featuring her hard work and doggedness in the genre of Poetry. The Poet Ambassador thrives in usurping young people's potentials, while he dumps them afterwards. He symbolizes the patriarchal prejudice of subjugation in the public domain. These are considered as hurdles and oppressive tendencies in the literary scene that needs to be contended with by the upcoming male and female literary artists, to which Ikukuoma systematically attests. When her male counterpart (Joseph) becomes intimidated by the threat and position of the Poet Ambassador concerning her poetic license, she confidently states:

Joseph, sometimes the youth have to legally fight for their right rather than die in silence. Do you know how many youths that man has exploited in his journey to the top? We all must not be the same, even if he likes let him be connected to the top, this is a cause of justice, I am not afraid of him. (50)

Ikukuoma's third phase of emergent assertiveness and unwavering hunger for social and economic advancement is captured after her marriage to Dr. Nwandu with a child (Adaorah); herself a PhD holder, and a lecturer in a Nigerian university. She aspires to carve a niche for herself in the literary world as a Poet Laureate, which she eventually achieves. The events that follow catapult her transformation into a complete and fulfilled being with her husband's and father's change in patriarchal mannerisms at the end of the story. This exemplifies a happy and harmonious society devoid of condemnation, oppression and subjugation of the female psyche. It is actually at this developmental stage of Ikukuoma's self-realization, especially after feeling humiliated through the muddy water splashed on her by a moving motorist, that she decides to open up on her agenda to seek professional studies overseas, so as to attain social and economic security. The development is met with serious hitches from her husband, extending to her father and senior colleague (Professor Ekpenyong- the Dean of Faculty of arts, who serves as a mediator). This is as though; she needs a total validation from her husband before she can get her full rights due to her, at work. Again, Onuoha through the heroine-Ikukuoma,

queries this patriarchal prejudice, by systematically subverting the patriarchal character of Mr. Chima to seek the way of dialogue, while Dr. Nwandu embodies love and understanding in return, with the support of the Professor. This is a clear case of role-reversal at the climax of the story.

### **Analysis**

Linguistically, the language and diction of *Moonlight Lady* is the Standard English with sentence structures such as simple, compound and complex sentences as well as present, past, present continuous and perfect tenses, which all contribute to the interpretation, flow and comprehension of the text. For example: “Will you tell me what happened to my son? (interrogative; future and simple past tense). “The people she called out to ignored her and continued watching the home movie...” (simple past and past continuous tenses-10).

Some proverbs typical of the African society and showcasing the text’s cultural milieu (the Igbo society in Nigeria), are equally explored through Mr. Chima, to justify his position and action such as: “An elder will not be in the house while the she-goat delivers on the stake.... It is also said that a good child takes after his father while a bad one takes after the mother” (67). This statement though supports the patriarchal prejudice and female gender stereotyping concerning parenting, it also foregrounds with suspense, the deviation from the norm of an oppressive patriarchal stance by some men who coerce or give orders to their wives, rather than engage in dialogue on crucial family matters. This is depicted through Mr. Ebuka’s advice to Mr. Chima as follows:

Your position as the head is not being challenged when you have to discuss issues with your spouse before a decision is being taken. Remember that while you are the head, your wife is the neck and without the neck the head cannot turn because the head directly rest on the neck. But if both agree, then there is always peace and unity in the home. (19)

The above statement obviously pinpoints the writer’s style of feminism through a consistent but peaceful approach in fostering unity, fairness, and peaceful coexistence in the society, which is the crux of the narrative. The text also uses the flashback technique, and configured when Ikukuoma reminiscences about her ordeal in the hands of men before marriage due

to her status then, with particular reference to Nonso- her former suitor, who feels inadequate and biased as a result of his friend's bitter experience in marriage with a similar tribe of Ikukuoma's, and then concludes that she will not also stay in marriage (tribal stereotyping). Another situation is where a young lady is blamed for not being in her husband's house at a particular phase of her life, even though it is no fault of hers. To this, an explanation is offered through Nneoma, as she assures her daughter about the need to move on with optimism:

You have to be strong you know men don't need a rival in the home. The reason why they accept to marry you and later change is because when they understand that you are not only a lecturer but a business woman with a big supermarket and investments in landed properties, they become intimidated by your achievements and they fear to marry you because they feel that you are economically independent and might deal with them if they maltreat you. So, they look for women who they can defeat and not women who will defeat them in marriage. Nne, stop weeping, when it is time you will get married. (70)

In addition, code mixing of English with some Igbo words like "efulefu" (10), "Tufiakwa" (12) and "Nne" (69,70) equally contribute to the character development, cohesion, interpretation, style, thematic focus and understanding of the story. Onuoha's literary prowess is also recognized in the composition of Ikukuoma's poem titled, "Great Ozoma River" thus:

BEHOLD

She lodges in her deep.  
She never overflows her banks  
She is prettiest at dawn  
Ozoma River  
Lovers seek refuge in you.... (28)

As seen from the one stanza poem above, the River (Ozoma) is given a female persona (personification), with repetitions of the personal pronoun 'she' thrice, for whose attributes of beauty and calmness are eulogized, to symbolize peace and goodness to all that come in contact with her. By this, Onuoha's feminist literary instinct becomes acceptable and passionately expressed as a conscious voice in the emancipation and struggle against

the powers that uphold patriarchal prejudice in all ramifications. Onuoha's other works include: *Idara, My Father Lied*, "The Drops of Fascination and other Poems", *The Heresy of Gossip, Aluta Struggles*, and "The Bleeding Passion"- a Poetry collection.

### **Conclusion**

Several foremost African Feminist writers such as Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Nawal El Sadaawi, Buchi Emecheta, Helen Chukwuma, Chikwenye Onkonjo Ogunyemi, Zaynab Alkali, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chioma Opara, Grace Okereke, Emelia Oko, Ebele Eko, and Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie, try to capture the incessant struggle of the female gender against patriarchal, ideological forces of suppression and dominance in their respective works. From the foregoing, Onyekachi Peter Onuoha has towed the line of these feminists through some of his works like *Moonlight Lady* particularly, in order to stimulate the female consciousness and also proffer solutions to the negative manifestations of the patriarchal prejudice, especially with obnoxious cultural belief system, that promote total control and gender imbalance in our society. Rather than go the way of radical feminists, Onuoha's style of feminist creativity is exceptionally subtle, and can be likened to Chioma Opara's style, termed "Femalism", which favours negotiation and cooperation with the patriarchy, rather than confrontation (Azumurana 33). Onuoha's literary elegance is therefore a kind of deviation from the norm and a discerning voice that challenges the status quo relating to patriarchal prejudice in all aspects; culturally, educationally, economically, politically, and otherwise. This aims to subvert, as well as restructure the mindset of Africans and Nigerians specifically, about the negative tendencies of patriarchal prejudice, through the characters in the story.

Lastly, Onuoha has succeeded in using the resources of language to capture gender roles and power relations of patriarchal prejudice with an intendent positive change of fostering female identity, assertiveness, advancement, mutual respect, understanding, equal opportunity, fairness, and dialogue ultimately, to envision the peaceful coexistence of both genders in our society.

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