

## Beyond Celebrating Womanhood and Breaking taboos: Navigating the Paradox of Gender Representation in Patrick Nwagbo Obi's *When Women Go Naked*

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### Abstract

This study examines the playwright's perspective on gender, culture, and empowerment. Moving beyond the surface celebration of womanhood, this study closely looks at the contradictions inherent in the portrayal of gender dynamics within the play text. The methodology employed, entails a thorough analysis of the play's text, utilizing qualitative methods to dissect characterizations, dialogue, and thematic elements. The theoretical framework draws on feminist literary criticism or postulations to clarify the contradictions in the representation of women. Findings show instances where the intended celebration of womanhood inadvertently reinforces patriarchal biases. The justification for this study lies in its emphasis on the need for male playwrights to adopt a sustainable position that genuinely empowers women. Therefore, this study recommends that it is imperative for Nigerian plays, most especially those written by male dramatists to adopt a more favourable style in the treatment of issues affecting women. Hence, the need for some of these Nigerian male playwrights to reassess their viewpoints regarding gender, culture, and empowerment. This study advocates for the adoption of a sustainable position capable of challenging and rectifying the existing gender imbalances in present-day Nigerian society.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Feminism, Gender roles, Patriarchy, Taboos and Womanhood

### Introduction

Remarkably, amidst the representation of gender differences in both films and literature, the male gender remains a formidable challenge. Meanwhile, Nigerian theatre is renowned for its examination and perspective on societal matters. It is a form of theatre that is attuned to the prevailing social conditions, serving as a platform where socio-political and cultural concerns are scrutinized and potentially critiqued to contribute to societal improvement. Nkiruka Akaenyi says that "Playwrights have harnessed the influential aspect of drama throughout history to offer insightful observations on societal events, leading to positive transformations in human lives and their surroundings" (Akaenyi, 2024, p.73). Playwrights in this context function as guardians of the society, actively observing and documenting the events in society. Nevertheless, one may question whether this vigilant observation and accurate documentation have been directed towards the desires and ambitions of the female gender in our society. According to Ezenwanebe "Many Nigerian playwrights (especially men) have created powerful female characters that have played the significant roles of social reformers; yet little or no attention is given to the plight of these women in the society they labour to reform" (Ezenwanebe, 2005, p.403).

Every Nigerian playwright is socially engaged, but the nature of their commitment and how it is expressed varies. Opting to entertain rather than address the prevalent injustices in society could be perceived as a disregard for humanity and a betrayal of the Nigerian people by a playwright targeting a local audience. According to Raymond Williams, writer begins by being aligned, "born into a social situation with all its specific perspectives ... " (Williams, 1989,

p.86). From the beginning, Nigerian theatre has been strongly dedicated to addressing pressing social concerns, ranging from cultural pollution and decline to issues of moral and social decay, including the unjust oppression of one social class by another. According to Bertolt Brecht, "theatre must keep up with the times and all the advances of the times and not lag several thousand miles behind" (Brecht, 1964, p. 57). It is a theatre committed to fostering social change by critically examining and reassessing societal practices, values, aspirations, as well as addressing various issues and problems.

However, some of the Nigerian male playwrights that address women issues in their works employ diverse literary styles affecting both the interpretation of the work and the audience's attitude toward the message, thereby, affecting the overall effectiveness of the literary piece. This form of gender representation prompts feminist scholars globally to engage in broader discussions on gender representation and the evolving landscape of African literature. In her essay, titled *Women, Economic Empowerment and Nigerian Drama*, Ezenwanebe stresses the need for some of these Nigerian male writers to reevaluate their perspectives on gender, culture, and empowerment when she says that "Though the women are victims, the playwright's style of comic farce undermines their painful and pitiable condition. Rather, the style allows the audience not to identify with their plight but to make merry of their pain" (Ezenwanebe, 2005, p. 192).

This is mainly because art involves not only the content but also the manner of expression. According to the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky, technique serves as the instrument for elucidating the meaning of a work of art. In his essay *Art as Technique*, he says that "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important" (Shklovsky, 1965, p.12). Shklovsky's contention emphasizes the precedence of an artist's stylistic approach over the content or explicit message within the work. While one could argue for the importance of the object itself, it is challenging to deny that the artist's style significantly affects the meaning of the work and shapes the audience's response to the message. Consequently, it plays a pivotal role in determining the overall impact of the work. This aspect is particularly crucial in dramatic presentations due to the immediacy of its impact on the audience.

Through the examination of Patrick Nwagbo Obi's play, this study goes beyond the surface, delving into the profound complexities that shape the evolving narrative of gender in our ever-changing world. *When Women Go Naked*, a thought-provoking play by Patrick Nwagbo Obi, stands as a testament to this nuanced approach, offering readers a compelling journey that extends beyond mere celebration of womanhood and the rupture of societal taboos. This literary masterpiece navigates the paradoxical landscape of gender representation, skillfully intertwining the liberation of female identity with the inherent challenges and contradictions that accompany such profound transformations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminism as a theoretical framework provides a lens through which one can examine power dynamics, gender roles, and societal structures that impact women. It encompasses a range of perspectives, but at its core, feminism seeks to address and rectify gender-based inequalities. Eva Figs in her book *Patriarchal Attitude: Women in Society* says that "women have been largely man-made" since the cultural meanings given to women are patriarchally determined (Figs, 1970, p.15).

The oppression of women is perceived as the imposition of a patriarchally defined concept of a "female essence" on women. This essence dictates that all biological traits and functions of

the female sex conform to certain expectations, with dissenters facing disdain and punishment. In her essay titled *Feminist, Female, Feminine*, Toril Moi argues that the "Feminine" (representing the female essence) is a "cultural construct" and is not exclusive to women, as emphasized by Belsey and Moore in 1989. Helene Keyssar says that "we are what we do and what we become and no one, neither woman nor man is restricted from becoming other." (Keyssar, 1984, p. XN).

Central to feminist theory, therefore is the critique of patriarchy, a social system that privileges men and oppresses women. Feminism seeks to understand and challenge the power structures that perpetuate gender inequality. For Judith Bardwick, feminism is "an explicit rejection of the lifestyle created by strongly conceived norms that define and restrict what women are and can do" (Bardwick, 1990, p.5).

To pursue the quest for women's liberation, numerous female-authored plays have been dedicated to documenting their challenges. Mary Wollstonecraft stands out as a pioneer in addressing women's rights through literature. In her work, she emphasizes the societal ignorance and indifference imposed on women, advocating for increased female participation in decision-making processes. Feminist theory challenges the idea that gender is biologically determined and highlights its construction as a social and cultural concept. It explores how societal norms and expectations shape gender roles and behaviors. Feminism advocates for the agency and empowerment of women, promoting their right to make choices regarding their bodies, careers, and lives. It seeks to challenge restrictive gender norms that limit women's opportunities.

Feminism, as a theoretical framework, is not a monolithic or homogenous ideology. There are various waves of feminism (such as first-wave, second-wave, and third-wave feminism) and a wide range of feminist perspectives, from liberal feminism to radical feminism and beyond. Each offers unique insights and approaches to understanding and addressing gender inequality. According to Sunday Edum and Dennis Obire "The common thread linking these different groups, irrespective of the environment, is the theory that men and women are created equal in all spheres of life" (Edum and Obire, 2010, p.11).

Feminist researchers have expressed dissatisfaction with the ways some male playwrights perceive women's quest for freedom as a trivial issue and depict it in a biased and comical manner, contrasting with the more serious treatment offered by feminist writers. The researcher advocates for a change in the approach of male playwrights, urging them to portray African women as catalysts for positive change who, through the power of Western education, contribute to sustainable human and economic development in African society. In light of the present discussion, this study will explore how the narrative in Patrick Nwagbo Obi's work reflects or challenges feminist ideas.

**The image of the Empowered woman in Patrick Nwagbo Obi's *When Women Go Naked***  
The play *When Women Go Naked* by Nwagbo Patrick Obi, won the SONTA-Olu Obafemi award for an unpublished play in 2015. The play unfolds in the post-colonial Eastern Nigeria, specifically within the Umundiagu community, a traditional Igbo society grappling with the influence of Western values.

The play revolves around Oganigwe, the most affluent individual in Umundiagu. He lures the king with his wealth, aspiring to ascend to the throne. Oganigwe goes to extreme lengths,

encouraging the demise of his wife and daughters, believing that his sons will inherit his riches. Yet, this tragic event sets off a chain of fatalities within his family.

The play delves into the various facets of gender discrimination, which include male child preference, women's right to inherit property and all forms of subjugation against women prevalent in Nigerian culture. According to Ifeoma Nnamah and Tracie Ezeajugh "The preference for male children is so pervasive that the birth of female children are not welcomed with the required enthusiasm as expected because of the belief that a female child as regarded by the society is a transient human, who will eventually leave the family of origin to live with another family by marriage" (Nnamah and Ezeajugh, 2021, p. 61). Going beyond the superficial portrayal of women's plight and the celebration of womanhood, this investigation thoroughly explores the inconsistencies present in the depiction of gender dynamics within the play's text.

The play commences with a vibrant and captivating child dedication ceremony, accompanied by dances, and rituals, providing a vivid portrayal of Igbo culture. During this celebration, Ogana, a wealthy man is introduced to us as a frustrated man whose wives cannot bear him a son. Ogana, the protagonist of the play is obviously not happy with the fact that he is having another baby girl and opens fire on the women who have come to celebrate the arrival of the child. His violent attitude on this special occasion infuriates Ugoli who demands an explanation for his action. In an attempt to capture Ogana's lack of contentment, Ugoli says "yes, Lizard whose wife gave birth and his folks were rejoicing; instead of rejoicing with them, he climbed an iroko tree and threatened to fall. (p. 12) .

Ogana's response as seen above emphasizes how in Igbo traditional society, the male child is preferred over females. Normally, when a child is born, he/she is welcomed with festive music and dance. Oganaigwe breaks away from this tradition of his people by refusing to celebrate the arrival of his daughter. It is shocking as he threatens to deal with Onwuka, the *dibia* or diviner who assured him that his next child will be a boy after having seven daughters. The conversation between Ogana and Ugoli illustrates Ogana's desire for a son:

UGOLI: What did Onwuka, an elderly *dibia* without teeth do

OGANA: He lacks teeth, but has the tongue to forecast what is impossible. (*Mimics*) "Ogana, what is coming this time unlike others before is a male child, a chip of the old block". He has always predicted wrongly for me and I have always relied on him.

UGOLI: You do not rely on human beings for the gift of children

OGANA: That is what I am saying that Onwuka has deceived me for a very long time

UGOLI: I have been telling you that it is only *Chiokike*, the God of creation, we can rely on for the gift and the sex of the children. He knows why he is giving you the one he is giving you

OGANA: *Chiokike* knows that I am wealth and as such will need a man to inherit my wealth; unless he has created me to live forever. Even if Onwuka has entered an ant's hole, I must trace

him and show him what fire does to the ear of a rat (p.19).

The widespread favoritism towards male offspring is so ingrained that the arrival of female children is not greeted with the anticipated enthusiasm. This is due to the societal belief that a female child is perceived as a temporary member of the family, destined to eventually depart through marriage to another family. Ezebunwa in his book titled *Male Child-Syndrome and the*

*Agony of Motherhood* says that “Male-child preference has remained one of the most lasting cultural values of the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria (Ezebunwa, 2010, p.220). The preference for male children is prevalent in cultures where male children are duly recognized and valued compared to their female counterparts. Oganaiwe embodies the mindset shared by numerous Igbo men, asserting that without male offspring, their family lineage would cease to exist. This belief stems from the notion that only male children are deemed capable of perpetuating the family line. This is seen in his speech when he says ‘listen to yourself, perhaps you say, meaning you are not sure. I can tell you that the wife of the Lizard must have treated him to dozens of female lizards. (p.18). Here, Oganaiwe is saying that a man who has only daughters may want to commit suicide. This agrees with Akpan's opinion when he says that:

A man who died without a son lived a worthless life; he is inherited by his brother, and is soon forgotten since his branch of the family tree has ended...also, in traditional Igbo society, the status of a man is assessed in part by the number of his sons, a man with many sons is viewed as a wealthy or an accomplished man, his neighbors cautiously avoid confrontation or litigation with him and he is assured of a befitting burial at death. For a woman, the birth of a male child is of paramount importance as well, because it establishes her firmly in the family She is said to have “taken root” or established a solid foundation when the first son arrives since the birth of a son ensures marital security, given prevailing high childhood mortality, just a son is not enough. The desire to ensure that at least one survives his father encourages prolific childbearing (p.6).

In the play, Oganaiwe, a prosperous man who doubts that his daughters can inherit his position or uphold the family name in terms of sustenance, proclaims “Chiokike knows that I am wealthy and as such will need a man to inherit my wealth, unless he has created me to live forever” (19). Even though Oganaiwe has seven children, he remains concerned about the heir to his wealth. This clearly indicates a preference for a single male heir over his seven daughters in his family. This inclination is likely rooted in the patriarchal nature of the society, with little effort made to address this systemic bias. Ifemeje and Umejiaku also argue that:

The Igbo customary law is basically patriarchal in nature, and therefore the cardinal inheritance is by primogeniture. Land and landed property, devolve under this system on the males, to the exclusion of daughters and wives. Igbo customary law denies the female genders the right to inherit their deceased husband or father’s landed property, thus their inheritance rights are grossly marginalized and jeopardized. (Ifemeje and Umejiaku, 2014, p. 21)

This bone of contention pervades the entire play, despite the fact that characters like Ofodile advocates for the equal importance of female and male children. However, Oganaiwe rejects this perspective, asserting that a father's worth is measured through his male offspring. He expresses distrust in entrusting inheritance or wealth to his daughters.

On another account, Oganaiwe compares his situation to that of a hyena nursing a wound in its mouth. He says “A hyena with a wound in his mouth does not laugh like other hyenas” (p.21). The reason behind this analogy is as a result of Oganaiwe's frustration with his wives, who are consistently giving birth to girls without a male heir to carry on his name. He is angry and does not see any need for celebration. It is widely acknowledged that in Africa, there is a clear preference for male children over females.

Various explanations have been put forth to justify this gender bias. According to Offiong “Patriarchal inheritance which is evident in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa...results in the status of women being unequal to that of men and gives the power of succession and leadership to the boy child. This endows the boy child with power and authority that makes him preferred to the female child” (Offiong, 2014, p. 50). Even Methuselah Jeremiah avers that “the issue of male child preference is not limited to the continent of Africa alone” (Methuselah, 2020, p.192). The representation of male-child preference is not peculiar to Patrick Nwagbo Obi’s play. In Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: an African Doll’s House*, akin to numerous other African literary works addressing similar themes, Ikenna holds his wife, Nneora, responsible for not giving him with a son after having four daughters. Despite being a knowledgeable lawyer, Ikenna rejects the established genetic science that clearly indicates it is the man who determines the baby's sex due to possessing the 'Y' chromosome.

The visitation of Ofodile and Nnadozie to celebrate with Ogana on the arrival of his new born child heightens the extent of Ogana’s depressed state of mind. Ogana refuses to offer them kolanuts as it is culturally acceptable and he is not willing to offer his visitors seat. Ofodile therefore deems it necessary to instill some morals into Ogana; to remind him that drinks is a symbols of fraternity and expression of love. However, Ogana’s refusal symbolizes that the visitors are not welcomed. Instead of finding joy like Ofodile and Nnadozie, who have sons to inherit their legacies, Ogana is irritated and sees no cause for celebration. Despite Ugoli advising him to stop disgracing himself and their family in front of guests, Ogana remains unmoved by the attempts of Ofodile and Nnadozie to cheer him up. His evident distress over the absence of a male child makes it clear that he cannot find any reason to be amused.

Ogana symbolizes oppressive cultural traditions that marginalize women, evident in his adherence to the belief in the superiority of male offspring, as it is being demonstrated in his conversation with Ugoli. Echoing Osita Ezenwanebe's observation on the significance of male descendants in patriarchal societies, his adherence to outdated cultural norms is responsible for his utter disregard to the plight of women, especially those of his wives and daughters. In fact, in the play, Ogana expressly makes the statement, "I do not have the time to talk about women" (p.15).

In the play, Obi delves into the impact of patriarchal cultural traditions on women's pursuit of freedom, weaving a narrative rich in Igbo cultural elements. Closely related to the theme of male child preference, Obi treats the challenges women face in gaining ownership of property within the traditional Igbo society. The following conversation between Anagwanti, Oganaigwe's trusted aide, and Ugoli, a truth-telling individual regardless of the person involved, illustrates this point:

Ogana: Our custom does not permit women to own land.

Anagwanti: Yes! The Igwe has spoken.

Ugoli: Spoken what?

Anagwanti: That our custom does not permit women own land.

Ogana: Now tell me, when a father is sharing his

land to his children, does he give any to his daughters? Is it not only the sons?

Ugoli: Inheritance is different from buying. But in a family where they don’t have enough land if a woman is wealthy, she can buy land for her children (p. 60).

Again, Oganaigwe’s sexism is opulently dramatized when he says “Yes! Male children, not female children, and where are the male children of Udenkwo to whom she’s buying land?

(p.60) The debate continues, suggesting that women are restricted from purchasing or possessing land, especially if they lack a male child. Property ownership is largely shaped by the prevailing customs and norms of the community.

As evident in the above discussion, customary law often denies women the inheritance of land and generally prohibits them from acquiring ownership rights. This aligns with Oganaiwe's declaration as the king, representing the sentiments of the people, and reflects the prevalent reality for women in Igbo land. Moreover, in the play, marriage is employed as a tool for the oppression of women.

It is evident that Oganaiwe insists on determining the spouses for his daughters, as illustrated by the character, Nwamma:

**NWAMMA:** Every couple prays to bless their children's marriage. But my husband's lot is to curse. That was what caused Akunnaya, my first daughter's death. All her age mates got married. In her own case, it was not as if suitors were not coming; but her father walked out on them. she was heartbroken. One night, she slept and did not wake up again. The predicament of her other sister was worse. He was forcing her to marry a man he wanted, but she stood her ground. When the man she wanted came, he told the suitor and his people to wait so that he would bring his cup to drink their wine. He left through the back door and did not come back till the next day. When he returned, he told her (Mimics) you disobeyed me and I have to pay back. One day Akuzulum went to the village river to fetch water and drowned (p.47).

Marriages are typically driven by personal interests, but Oganaiwe takes control of the selection of spouses for his daughters. He rejects Udunna, who seeks to marry Udenkwo, possibly as a form of retribution to his daughters for not being sons. Oganaiwe holds the belief that the gender of his daughters' offspring will be the same as that of his wife who gave birth to them. The character Udenkwo remarks on Oganaiwe's behavior towards his wife when she says "So what do you want me to see reason for? Was she not incessantly accused of being a plantain tree and producing same? She eventually died because her heart was always troubled". (p. 48)

Udenkwo persists in describing the ill-treatment that women experience in Oganaiwe's house. She says "You do not know him; he did not mourn my step mother before he ran to take a new wife (p.51). Marriage, in the play is presented as a domain that poses challenges for women in Igbo culture. The prevailing Igbo belief in the supremacy of male offspring permits a man to marry multiple wives. In the event of a wife's passing, societal judgment doesn't scrutinize a man's choice to wed a new spouse, according to Udenkwo's account. Similarly, Gregory Okorobia notes that "the woman is regarded and used as a "spare tyre" this is a most unfortunate way of regarding a human being. Almost all reasons for polygamy are for the benefit of man, even though out of vanity some women opted for polygamy, the whole idea is for the pleasure of man. (Okorobia p.443) This distinctly elucidates the disadvantages women encounter in marriages, as Igbo customary laws favor men, permitting them to practice polygamy. Yet, the tradition of 'Nhachi' is a cultural norm in Igbo land, as depicted in the play. It proves to be a method used to compel female children to comply with the wishes of male individuals. This is evident in the dialogue between the characters:

Nnadozie: I have advised you before to do Nhachi. Let one of your daughters take in, you may be fortunate and she will have a son, that son becomes a member of your family.

Ogana: You are advising me that another man not married to my daughter should impregnate her and maybe a son will result from it, who will become mine.

Ofodile; Ogana, you know the traditional. The son becomes yours but your daughters will still marry. (p.35).

In certain Igbo societies, daughters are required to stay within their families for the purpose of bearing children, particularly when there are no male offspring from their parents. In the practice of 'Nhachi,' the father organizes for any man capable of impregnating his daughter, subjecting her to endure any associated hardships in silence until she becomes a mother. And not just any mother, but specifically the mother of a son. In certain instances, as noted by Evelyn Nwachukwu:

The childless wife or a wife who has no male child is given a legal right to marry another wife to produce a male child to make the woman achieve recognition in her husband's home. This will make the wife a "female husband" An unmarried daughter of a man who does not have a male child also has the legal right to marry a wife who will produce children to bear her father's name for the continuity of her father's lineage. (Nwachukwu, 2019, p.2)

This is apparent within Oganaigwe's household, as expressed by Nnuona. Coupled with Ogana's ill-treatment and obstructing the chances of his daughters, getting married, Ogana has offended *Umuada* so much. Ugoli says that "He harasses us, threatening that he will finish us with gun each time we admonished him that he should leave our sisters to marry and be part of us. (p.53). Ignoring the *Umuada* shows that he does not have any regard to a female group operating at the extended family level.

The *Umuada* plays a crucial role in directly overseeing the activities of women in their patrilineal homes. Nwagbo recognizes and appreciates the potency of the *Umuada* when they solemnly declare that anyone who despises women will never have the chance to see them. This curse is imposed on Oganaigwe, bringing him both satisfaction and destruction. The satisfaction arises when he eventually fathers five sons, but the destruction ensues as the sons engage in a fatal conflict over inheritance. The societal emphasis on the significance of male children becomes evident in various aspects.

The play also explores the challenges faced by women as their economic empowerment is undermined. In the play, the women of Umundiagu community engages in the production of palm oil, symbolizing Nigeria's economic backbone. Nwagbo Patrick Obi employs palm oil as a symbol in Umundiagu. The palm oil production by women, much like crude oil serves as the essential lifeblood of Nigeria. The women play a crucial role as producers of palm oil, and the masquerades, who visit the oil-production houses, intimidate the women with canes and pilfer the oil. According to Nnamah and Ezeajugh "Nwagbo also uses masquerade as a form of women's subjugation in the play. Women are forbidden from challenging masquerades and in some cases not even to watch them because it is believed in that they are representatives of the spirit world" (Nnamah and Ezeajugh, 2021, p.68). In the play, a masquerade appears with an attempt to pilfer containers of Udenkwo's oil. Typically, women are supposed to seek refuge upon encountering a masquerade. However, in this instance, Udenkwo defies this tradition by shouting and seizing the masquerade, leading to the following interaction between them:

Udenkwo: Thief of oil! This is how you masquerade yourselves and come to steal oil.

Opiamkpala: (with a disguised voice) you call a masquerade a thief? (p.55)



Opiamkpala asserts that women lack the privilege to question masquerades, regardless of their actions. However, Udenkwo boldly challenges this assertion:

Opiamkpala: You still have the mouth to say that I have come to steal?

Udenkwo: Whoever has come to take forcefully what does not belong to him, what has he come to do?(Choruses with Nnuona)To steal!

Opiamkpala: You women are not afraid of a masquerade? (p.56)

Hence, the possibility for men using masquerade disguises to oppress women and seize their possessions becomes more evident, leading to a confrontation that culminates in Udenkwo killing Opiamkpala, the Masquerade. King Oganaigwe deems this act sacrilegious, openly stating that a masquerade holds more significance than a pregnant woman. He orders Udenkwo to face punishment by being stripped naked. The influence of the *Umuada* is revealed as they collectively disrobe in protest against the King's decree, asserting that the nakedness of one woman represents the nakedness of all women, both living and deceased. This underscores a powerful sense of female solidarity.

The playwright critiques Ogana's oppressive stance through the characters of Nnuona and Ugoli, cautioning against such attitudes towards women. Ugoli, in particular, advocates for gender equality and challenges Ogana's oppressive views, emphasizing the consequences of oppressing women. Palm oil production serves as a symbolic lens to examine the changing role of women in the evolving society. Despite being the primary source of economic empowerment for women, their agency is undermined as the oil is taken away, reflecting broader issues of societal injustice. Udenkwo, a resilient female character, embodies the struggles of women who strive to provide for their families despite societal constraints. The intrusion of masquerades into Unoakwu, stealing oil, and Ogana's demand for tribute from female palm oil producers exemplify the marginalization of women. Udenkwo's violent act against the masquerade is an act of outright challenge to oppressive patriarchal norms.

Ogana condemns Udenkwo solely because she is a woman, with no criticism directed at the masquerades who steal women's oil. The patriarchal social order avoids questioning why masquerades terrorize and steal from women. The flogging of Udenkwo by the masquerade is viewed as "correction," downplaying the violent nature of the act. Ogana insists that correction is the masquerades' duty, with no need for reconsideration. Udenkwo's act of killing the masquerade, a bold defiance of patriarchy, is deemed an abomination, warranting punishment. Cultural restrictions and societal norms play a role in enforcing prescribed gender roles. Despite women being vital contributors to the economy, they face limitations and constraints imposed by cultural taboos, often leading to their individual subjugation to their husbands. According to Nkiruka Akaenyi these cultural taboos

hamper the women cause in Modern Nigerian society. This is because the very nature of this cultural taboo and sanctions poses a serious challenge to the efforts of families and different institutions, particularly schools, religious groups and government ministries engaged in the process of socialization and in addressing gender imbalances and the promotion of women's advancement in Africa, especially Nigeria (Akaenyi p. 16).

Udenkwo embodies a brave female character symbolizing the voiceless and unyielding oppressed woman in society. She refuses to be subdued or confined by restrictions, serving as a beacon of hope for women. Her strong determination offers a clear and straightforward protest, inspiring confidence in the future for women.

The play illustrates how a phallic-centered society deploys cultural myths and taboos to marginalize women. Ogana staunchly defends oppressive traditions, and women recognize these unjust practices meant to subjugate them. In response, women engage in a nude protest, a historical strategy of female resistance in pre-colonial West Africa. Despite a united effort by Umundiagu women for equality, men vehemently uphold their superior status. This conflict leads to a crisis and deaths in the Umundiagu community. Ultimately, the play vindicates Ugoli's perspective, proving Ogana completely wrong. The crucial outcome is the triumphant victory of Umundiagu women in their battle against oppression.

### **Empowerment or Stereotypes? Navigating Complexities in Patrick Obi's *When Women Go Naked***

Patrick Nwagbo Obi is one of the few male writers who exhibits a keen interest in matters related to women, particularly their role in the evolving contemporary Nigeria. He advocates for a transformation in every aspect of the new state, emphasizing the need for a simultaneous shift in the status and role of women to ensure a comprehensive and progressive change. However, some skepticism arises regarding his dedication to the "female question," given uncertainties surrounding his chosen methodology.

Despite the play's apparent focus on women's awakening, it actually reflects Nwagbo Patrick Obi's alignment with patriarchal bias. *When Women Go Naked* unfolds in a society with clear cultural expectations of men and women's roles, emphasizing marriage as the sole place for women. Margaret Frances Saviolis says that 'the traditional arrangement of the nuclear family, with women as homemakers and caretakers of children, requires that a woman's identity is linked to her husband, and women who fall outside of this standard are seen as a threat to the society' (Saviolis, 2004, p. 112).

In the play, Udenkwo's economic empowerment is virtually seen as nothing, since she is not married. Without a husband, she is seen as an incomplete woman. Even Ogana asserts that a woman's wealth is only valuable when connected to a man, even if the man is not affluent. He says that "the wealth of a woman is an appendage. Its value is only when you attach it to a man behind her even if the man is poor" (p.37). According to Nnamah and Ezeajugh "The wealth of a woman in Igbo land is usually attached to a man, and so, women who struggle to make wealth always have their husbands to provide covering to avoid criticism from the society" (Nnamah and Ezeajugh, 2021, p. 64). Therefore, Udenkwo is shown as suffering from emotional deprivation due to a lack of realization of her womanhood. Udenkwo is conscious of this biological role she needs to fulfil, when she tries to elope with Udunna but Ugoli intervenes, preventing Udenkwo from eloping without her bride price being paid. Ugoli says:

UGOLI: (*Holds her*) Ude, come back. A woman does not follow a man when her bride price has not been paid. Elopement is a shameful behavior to a family and womanhood. It has not happened in our family. Nkechi, your mother did not do it. You are part of us, you will not elope. Udunna has said it all. If it is the will of Chukwu, your bride price would be paid (p.46).

Marriage, presented in the play as both a social role and a biological stimulus, is portrayed as essential for women's survival. Osita Ezenwanebe says that:

Marriage in Nigeria is seen as one of the hallmarks of a complete woman. While this attitude may be considered as indicative of strong family ties, it nonetheless betrays the state of women as wives and the level of power at their disposal. Wives occupy the private, family life and engage in domestic labour while the public

sphere of men affords them limitless exercise of power. (Ezenwanebe, 2010, p.268)

In the play, the concept of being a wife is depicted not just as a social role but also as a biological catalyst essential for sustaining women's lives. Nwamma, Ogana's wife, expresses her distress:

**NWAMMA:** Every couple prays to bless their children's marriage. But my husband's lot is to curse. That was what caused Akunnaya, my first daughter's death. All her age mates got married. In her own case, it was not as if suitors were not coming; but her father walked out on them. she was heartbroken. One night, she slept and did not wake up again. The predicament of her other sister was worse. He was forcing her to marry a man he wanted, but she stood her ground. When the man she wanted came, he told the suitor and his people to wait so that he would bring his cup to drink their wine. He left through the back door and did not come back till the next day. When he returned, he told her (Mimics) you disobeyed me and I have to pay back. One day Akuzulum went to the village river to fetch water and drowned (p. 47).

The tragic death of Ogana's daughters, as seen above serve as a foreshadowing of the health challenges women may encounter if their biological needs are unmet. In this context, Nwagbo Patrick Obi depicts men as a vital source of life. As Oram, Allison claims, "spinsters had a possibility of suffering from harmful consequences such as 'nerves' and neuroses" because of "repressing their sexual and parental instincts" (Oram, 1992, p.419). The playwright emphasizes in the play that Udenkwo's lack of self-fulfillment is due to the frustrations Ogana bestows on her, which has kept her unmarried. Irrespective of her wealth, her predominant concern is the need for a man to give meaning to her life and rescue her from a her boring status as a spinster. Nwagbo Patrick Obi in the play, lays emphasis on the need for her to conform to societal expectations. Udenkwo undergoes prolonged suffering in loneliness, realizing that independence is alien to her gender. Even Ugoli finds it difficult to comfort Udenkwo who laments Udunna's death, a tragic occurrence which renders her life meaningless. Udenkwo's distress in the play clearly serves as a subtle form of literary advocacy encouraging women to embrace societal dictates through marriage. Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye says that:

When successful, women are portrayed as usually husbandless-single, divorced or widowed. In their works, they dwell on patriarchal philosophy, which has no room for women except as a shadow of her husband. The characters of women in these male-authored plays are defined by their relationship to men: they are someone's wife, mother, daughter, mistress and daughter-in-law or sister-in-law (Salami-Agunloye, 2011, p. 119).

Hence, women's societal standing is reduced to their biological roles, as implied in *When Women go Naked*. Consequently, through the character of Udenkwo, the female protagonist, Nwagbo Patrick Obi advances a biased perspective favoring male dominance, asserting that a woman's only rightful place is in the company of a man and within a marriage where she willingly surrenders to male authority. Numerous African women and scholars, such as Ezeigbo and Ezenwanebe, express discontent about contemporary Nigerian male playwrights' tendency to deprive economically empowered women of their roles as wives and mothers. They share a common view that literature often portrays empowered women in a manner that reinforces patriarchal ideology. Despite Udenkwo's attempts to challenge gender power dynamics, the playwright contends that her true identity can only be realized through marriage.

The prevailing patriarchal mindset has successfully convinced people that empowered women disrupt social order rather than being essential components of it. The act of murder, which is Udenkwo's approach to securing freedom from oppression goes against the tenets of African feminism, which seek to uphold the virtues of womanhood. This method of seeking freedom is met with skepticism and apprehension from African audiences, who do not see murder, in all its violent nature, as the solution to ending women's oppression. Udenkwo's action is perceived as mirroring the very injustices that men are accused of committing against women. Her violent nature fail to resonate with the African audience, who prefer strong female characters they can identify with.

### Conclusion

In summary, the examination of ideological contradictions within Patrick Obi's *When Women Go Naked* has revealed a complex tapestry inherent in the portrayal of womanhood. While the play ostensibly goes beyond celebrating the strength of womanhood and breaking societal taboos, it grapples with intricate tensions and paradoxes. The study has illuminated the duality within the text, where empowerment narratives coexist with the perpetuation of stereotypes, navigating a delicate balance between cultural norms and feminist discourse.

This literary analysis has deepened our understanding of how Obi's work engages with and challenges prevailing ideologies surrounding gender dynamics. The contradictions within the play serve as a microcosm of broader societal tensions, providing readers an opportunity to reflect on the intricate interplay between tradition and progress, empowerment and restriction. The portrayal of women in the play transcends simplistic dichotomies, inviting a more profound exploration of the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by women in contemporary African literature.

As scholars and readers, we are reminded of the importance of critically engaging with literary works that address complex societal issues. Therefore, this study recommends that some of these Nigerian male playwrights should re-evaluate their perspectives on gender, culture, and empowerment and maintain a stance that is sustainable and capable of dismantling the imbalanced gender relations in contemporary Nigerian society.

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