AWLEL: African, World Literature and English Language

University of Nigeria Journal of Language and Literary Studies

Volume 21 (July 2023)
ISSN: 2315-5493

Special Issue on:
Conflict and National Integration: Critical Reflections in Language and literature

Guest Editors: Kingsley O. Ugwuanyi & Onyemuche A. Ejesu

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An Epic of the Superwoman: A Reading of J. P. Clark's *Ozidi*

Onyinyechi Anyalenkeya
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti | onyinyechi.omenkwu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Humans are social beings that love to dwell in groups. These groups, however, do not always share the same ideologies or beliefs; hence conflicts are bound to occur. Humankind's attempts at conflict resolution have been known to take turns more precipitous than the conflict they were trying to resolve: more battles, destruction of property and the loss of even more lives. The conflicts in J. P. Clark's *Ozidi* are born of revenge and justice, hinged on the interconnectivity between murder and revenge on the one hand, and innocence and guilt on the other. Although Ozidi Junior is the actual avenger, his grandmother, Oreame, is the undisguisable force behind his success. She engages her wit, mental stamina, and superhuman powers towards the success of her grandson's conquest. This paper, using Motherism, one of the subdivisions of African Feminism, explores the mother figure in relation to plot development while highlighting Clark's prejudiced assessment of the female characters in the play. Since Motherism sees the mother as a spiritual backbone, I argue that Oreame in *Ozidi* is a perfect embodiment of this figuration of motherhood.

Keywords: Motherism, superhuman, conflict, prejudice, J. P. Clark

1. Introduction

Several male-authored African texts have been criticized for their misrepresentation of African women. Although a widely acclaimed novel, even Chinua Achebe's iconic *Things Fall Apart* did not escape such scrutiny. The argument has been that he portrayed women in the novel as silent, powerless, and weak. In 1988, about three decades after *Things Fall Apart,* when the novel had generated massive (feminist) literary, psychological, socio-cultural and religious arguments, discourses and counter-discourses, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* was published. In the text, there is an apparent laundering of the image of women as against what obtains in *Things Fall Apart.* Achebe, through Ikem's character, accurately summarizes men's unjust and unfair treatment of women. Ikem explains that:

> The original oppression of Woman was based on a crude denigration. She caused Man to fall. So she became a scapegoat. No, not a scapegoat which might be blameless but a culprit richly deserving of whatever suffering Man chose thereafter to heap on her. That is Woman in the Book of Genesis. Out here, our ancestors, without the benefit of hearing about the Old Testament, made the very same story differing only in local colour. At first, the Sky was very close to the Earth. But, every

> evening, Woman cut off a piece of the Sky to put in her soup pot or, as in another version, she repeatedly banged the top of her pestle carelessly against the Sky whenever she pounded the millet or as in yet another rendering – so prodigious is Man's inventiveness – she wiped her kitchen hands on the Sky's face. Whatever the detail of Woman's provocation, the Sky finally moved away in anger, and God with it. (*Anthills* 97)

From the Bible down to folktales, myths, and legends, the woman's lot has been an uneasy one. And in many of these accounts, humankind's fall – or the loss of Eden, of paradise, of the Sky and easy access to God/gods – has been as a result of woman's actions. In other words, the weight of all of man's misfortunes can be laid on the shoulders of the woman, for she (in her characteristic callousness, recklessness, and insensibility) *let* herself be deceived by a mere serpent, desecrated the pristine Sky and drove God far away from man's reach. Ikem's screed continues:

> The New Testament required a more enlightened, more refined, more loving even strategy – ostensibly, that is**.** So the idea came to Man to turn his spouse into the very Mother of God, to pick her up from right under his foot where she had been since Creation and carry her reverently to a nice corner pedestal. Up there, her feet completely off the ground she will just be as irrelevant to the practical decisions of running the world as she was in her old bad days. The only difference is that now, Man will suffer no guilt feelings; he can sit back and congratulate himself on his generosity and gentlemanliness. (*Anthills* 98)

The woman's story is now rewritten. This time, she is redeemed from the image of the initiator/architect of man's fall and suffering and placed on a high-flung pedestal. She, no longer Eve, Delilah, and Jezebel, turned around and became 'Nneka,' – the supreme mother **(**or Mary, the Virgin Mother of God**)**. This supreme (or super-powerful) mother trope has been serially used and abused by Nigerian/African writers. As a matter of fact, right from *Things Fall Apart,* Achebe was accused of deliberately making the only strong enough female character in the text to be a priestess, and a habitually possessed one at that. Expostulating on the ideology, the strength and the weakness of the African concept of the supreme mother, Helen Chukwuma explains that most male-authored texts harp on:

> [C]ertain male stereotypes of the African woman as goddess or as Supreme Mother, self-sacrificing and suffering willingly and silently. An African woman is frequently seen as fertile mother of the nation, an image that African male writers have contributed to disseminating. This mystification of African mothers is due to the importance of motherhood in Africa… African people's ideas about African motherhood emanating from African societies have been quite different from the West. (131-132)

The wife, though, is seen and treated in a highly contradictory manner. Chukwuma says that in Igbo land and other parts of Africa, "mothers and wives play contradictory roles, the man who worships his mother is the same one who despises his woman" (132). This skewed ideology plays out in other nations/tribes. Across world religions, there is an archetypal supremacy of the mother figure: the Isis of Egypt, Athena of Rome, Artemis of the Ephesians, Virgin Mary of the (Roman Catholic) Christians and Rhea, the wife of Cronos and hence the 'cunning' mother of Zeus in Greek mythology. This supremacy of the mother figure, for the Igbo people, is aptly captured in Ikem's concluding syllogism in *Anthills of the Savannah*:

> Our ancestors out here, unaware of the New Testament, were working out independently a parallel subterfuge of their own. *Nneka,* they said, Mother is supreme. Let us keep her in reserve until the ultimate crisis arrives and the waist is broken and hung over the fire and the palm bears its fruit at the tail of its leaf. Then as the world crashes around Man's ears, Woman in her supremacy will descend and sweep the shards together. (*Anthills* 98)

These are the same shards that Oreame in *Ozidi* sweeps together. Her son-in-law's foolhardiness drives him to his untimely death, and his only brother and crowned king, Temugedege, abandons both the throne and home, leaving his late brother's wife behind. This work reflects on superheroism in *Ozidi*, with attention on Clark's presentation of the powerful (grand)mother, as against the ineffectual, feeble wife.

2. (Re)conceptualising Feminism in African Literature

Between 1975 and 1985, the United Nations (UN) held three international conferences on women's issues in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi. It was acknowledged that feminism constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, there was an acknowledgement of diversity in forms of feminism responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, as defined by them for themselves. In considering women's experience and its links to more general structural inequalities, feminists addressed issues that border on lack of education, family dynamics, (early)marriage and childrearing, birth control and abortion, women's health, forced prostitution, pornography and other sexualized representations of women, domestic and sexual violence, lesbianism, and other issues. More recently, feminism has branched out severally as different people choose the form more specific to their shared history and goals. So, whereas Western feminism is focused on lesbian studies, transgender/binary female identity, body positivity and all, African feminism is more concerned with things manifestly particular to a typical African woman. Within this purview, we have patriarchy, religious subjugation, child marriages,

female genital mutilation and scarification, and a shared history of postcolonial feminist complexities.

Feminism, with the aim of ending sexist oppression, has as its many branches radical feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, French feminism, religious feminism (Christian women started demanding clerical positions, as against the 'Paulian' women-should-be-silent-in-church injunction (NIV Bible 1 Corinthians 14.34), eco-feminism, Black feminism, and African feminism. African feminism is totally different from the rest of its viewpoints and has been closely associated with 'womanism' and 'motherism' as its variants**.** Womanism was propounded by Alice Walker, an African American writer, in her 1982 text, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose.* Her ideology stems from the realisation that (white) feminist concerns are, for the Black American woman, overshadowed by race, racism, and a harrowing history of slavery. In addition, Chikwenye Ogunyemi suggests:

> African and Afro-American women writers share similar aesthetic attitudes in spite of factors that separate them. As a group, they are distinct from white feminists because of their race, because they have experienced the past and present subjugation of the black population along with present-day subtle (or not so subtle) control exercised over them…. (64)

Right within the heart of womanism is working *together* of both the African (and African American) males and females for the common goal of ethnic equality.

For 'motherism,' a coinage that depicts more the African concept of the mother figure, its tenets are anchored on motherhood as, perhaps, the central focus of African literature/art. As theorized by its major proponent, Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, motherism is "Africa's alternative to Western feminism" (3). She further explains that motherism preaches "mutual cooperation of the sexes… and is not sexist. The motherist male writer or artist does not create his work from a patriarchal, masculinist, dominatory perspective" (3). Motherism espouses mothers/motherhood as every family's, community's or nation's spiritual base. According to Dorcas Akintunde:

> Among Africans, the mother is an embodiment of respect. This is exhibited in some matricent proverbs, which exalt the women's roles as mother, both literally and symbolically. For example, the Yoruba people of Nigeria say, "*iya ni wura",* that is "Mother is Gold" .... Among the Akan people of Ghana, the concept of the good woman, *obeapu,* is an important philosophy ... *enapa ye* (Mother is precious).... In Igbo cosmology, *Nneka* (Mother is Supreme). (350-351)

However, from this ideology spins off a major concern: men's exaggerated portrayal of women as exceptional beings, the Supreme Mother (after the concept of Mother Africa). In

"Women's Quest for Rights: African Feminist Theory in Fiction," Chukwuma argues against Chinweizu's assertion that "women rule the men who rule the world," for to her "*Onwunwe nwata na enwe ewu bu na aji*," which translates to "a child's ownership of a goat is only skin-deep" – no matter how well a child cares for a goat he is told belongs to him, his permission is not sought for on the day the said goat is to be sold or killed. This, to her, sums up the entirety of (male-acceded) female power. This so-called power is superficial, ephemeral, and inconsequential, and has engendered the need for women to take the power for themselves through their writings.

As Achebe once said, it is necessary for the lions to have their own historians, or else the story of the hunt will only glorify the hunters. Women writers have over the years been able to establish their own 'herstory': resisting the female stereotypes in male-authored texts, analysing language, questioning cultural and traditional structures limiting women, and studying the social distinctions of the male and female gender. Adrienne Rich is of the opinion that female writers are merely undertaking a:

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. …it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, and how we can begin to see – and therefore live – afresh. (48)

Some male writers, in their defence**,** have tried to discredit women's position on this by claiming that, from centuries ago, there have always existed male writers who do not negatively portray women in their texts. In his introduction to *Feminism and Masculinities*, Peter F. Murphy writes that "[m]ale authors of pro-woman and pro-feminist works span at least twenty-five hundred years and represent a vitally rich tradition" (1). He offers "an abridged overview of this critical tradition" that features an impressive roster of men's names, from Aristophanes to Bertrand Russell, further noting that his initial research has identified about 250 male advocates of women's rights.

That is, in 2500 years, only about 250 male writers have been pro-feminist in their writings; mathematically, the ratio will be represented as 10:1. That is, in every decade, one male writer emerges whose work does not have disreputable female characters. To buttress this point, Nawal El Saadawi observes in her "The Heroine in Arab Literature," that:

> Among the male authors I have read, both in the West and in Arab world, irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which

> they have come, not one has been able to free himself from this age-old image of woman handed down to us from an ancient past, no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defence of human rights, human values and justice, and their vigorous resistance to the oppression and tyranny in any form. *Arab literature is littered with the image of the She-devil, possessed of many faces.* (520)

This politics of representation of either sex has become a somewhat pissing contest where neither sex is willing to give grounds to the other. This is reflective of the contemporary thematic preoccupations of literary productions by either gender. Once female writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Ama Ata Aidoo began writing, there was no hesitation on their part to invest their female characters with a higher level of wisdom, power, and self-reliance than any African female character has ever enjoyed in male-authored texts. Where they characterize women as good mothers, they do not contrive to accede them with the same exhilarating (and non-existent) superiority as male writers do. Recently, Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe, Nnedi Okorafor, and other 21st-century female African writers have taken the baton and are doing great justice in the race towards the redemption of the African woman's image. They have all contrived to negate the status quo, to move the African female characters from the margin to the centre. Where she was hitherto uneducated, jobless, immoral, gullible, poor, infertile, vulnerable, and senseless, now it is the male characters who are houseboys for women (Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*); are sterile and cannot impregnate their wives (Lola Shoneiyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*); are solely dependent on their wives' income (Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and Nwapa's *Efuru)*; and are now the ones whose wives leave behind in failed marriages (Attah's *Everything Good Will Come* and Aidoo's *Changes*).

When Flora Nwapa started writing in 1966, she was the first published Nigerian female writer. Her writing interest was women and her motive for writing was to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels. She started from the grassroots and situated her female characters in the village environment where masculine supremacy and dominance hold sway. It was apparent that a conflict has arisen over who holds the creative fort and Nigerian female writers were not just going to sit back and watch the injustice done to their image continue unchecked.

This conflict has resulted in an inordinate number of texts where male writers sought to invest their female characters with as much wit, mental prowess, and physical stamina as credibility (and an inbred patriarchy) will permit. One such text is Clark's *Ozidi,* an adaptation of an Ijaw epic of the Niger Delta, as discussed in the next section.

3. A Feminist Rereading of J. P. Clark's *Ozidi*

J. P. Clark's *Ozidi* recounts the brutal murder of a village warrior, Ozidi (senior), by enemies disguised as friends. His young wife, Orea, flees back to her hometown, Ododama, to escape a similar fate and while there Ozidi, the younger one, is born and raised. Ozidi's birth is kept a secret from his father's people for decades after his birth until the young man returns home to exact revenge for his father's brutal murder.

As is true to character, every epic intertwines with conflict(s). An epic of *Ozidi*'s proportion thrives on conflict, its resolution, and then more conflict. Ozidi wages one battle after another, and always comes away triumphant. He eventually develops an unquenchable taste for battles and bloodshed. When his rightful enemies are all exterminated, he goes out of his way to acquire even more enemies.

Deftly tucked within this saga is the narrative of a superwoman. Clark might have written *Ozidi* as an epic of Ozidi's heroism; howbeit, one is not oblivious of the feminist undertone in the play. Ozidi's rise to fame and eventual victory over his father's enemies are achievable not because of any particular strength on his part but because of Oreame, his maternal grandmother. Clark portrays her as not just a (grand)mother but as an unrivalled powerful force behind Ozidi's victory in all his numerous battles. His depiction of the powerful grandmother is proudly ensconced in the mother-is-supreme motif of several male-authored texts. Angelita Reyes in *Mothering across Cultures* explains that the concept of the terrific grandmother is "cross-culturally prominent. At her most powerful, the grandmother is the source of knowledge, magic, ancestors, stories, healing practices, and food. She is an inheritor of African belief systems and African languages. She may be informed with àshe, the power to make things happen, the responsibility to mete justice" (18-19).

To Ozidi, Oreame is truly the "source of knowledge, magic, ancestors, stories, healing practices, and food." She, at first, provides her widowed daughter with a home where the latter successfully bears her late husband a son. To ensure that this (grand)son achieves victory over his (father's) enemies, Oreame, just like Achilles' mother**,** fortifies him by having him 'cooked' in a high portent medicine by the play's greatest witch doctor:

> Oreame: My daughter had a son for Ozidi after his death, it is what I am telling you. Now that issue must go forth and scatter death among his father's enemies.
>
> Old Man: It's a good son; for how else can his father come home from the company of the castaway?
>
> Oreame: So first we must invest him with the mortar and pestle charm.
>
> ...

Old Man: That's as it should be, that's as it should be with pot of palm-wine: so the spirit will issue forth. Now, you may go home, Boy.

Oreame: No, not yet, Bouakarakarabiri!

...

Old Man: I have served your son the meal you asked for.

Oreame: So I see. But what will people say if he walked out now, one side of him clothed the other exposed?

...

Old Man: So what am I supposed to do next which I have not done? No, tell me, since you know all.

Oreame: Not so, Tebekawene. Take the boy into your shrine so, like his late father, no sword wielded by man may cut through his skin nor any spear or bullet wound pass beyond a bump. (47-48)

Oreame is identified as a great witch by the Old Man. Another character, Old Woman, who comes to rescue Orea the day her husband's decapitated head was brought home, also confesses Oreame as the Queen of all witches. As a widowed childless young woman, Orea flees to her mother in Ododama when Temugedege, her husband's older brother and crowned king of Orua who would have protected her flees from Orua in timidity and fright, unapologetically abandoning house, sister-in-law, and throne. It is at Ododoma that Ozidi is born and raised, with his identity safely kept as a secret from him. After Ozidi, who at this time still goes by the name 'Boy', is goaded by his playmates for not knowing who his father is, he charges home to his mother and grandmother with questions about his origin:

Boy: What is my name? Where is my father? Why haven't I got any? [*Mother and daughter look at each other and then back to the boy.*]

Oreame: [*going up to him*] Of course you've got a name, Boy.

Boy [*moving away*] That's a name for three-month-olds. Now why haven't I a proper one? Are you going to tell me who my father is?

Orea: [*with tears in her voice*] Why? Has anybody been taunting you?

Boy: [*stamps his feet impatiently*] Yes, my playmates. Every time I beat them at wrestling or kolo, they set upon me like flies.

Oreame: You are a cow and a whole clan of those flies should not push you over.

Boy: [*sullen still but now weakening to his grandmother*] But who is my father?

(35)

With the identity of his father shrouded in secrecy, he is further trained by Oreame in the act of bravery and quick wit. Time after time, she takes him on expeditions where his courage, problem-solving skills, and mental acuity are grown and sharpened till they are

satisfactory enough to her. In no time, the young boy who wants to "run at once for help from town" (39) when his grandmother screams for help metamorphoses into the one "pummelling, grappling, and shouting it was no use running first for a club long enough before one beat a snake to death" (40). He becomes more than a match for Oreame's tricks, disguises, and mind games. His growth, mental prowess, and maturity are further exhibited when he single-handedly uproots an Iroko tree blocking his path and carries the same home to break into firewood for the women so they "will know there's a man about the house." Oreame realizes Ozidi is fully grown to face the challenges ahead of him:

> Boy: Hold it, mother. So my father is dead then? Is that the story you too have kept from me all my life?
>
> Oreame: [*ignoring the boy and talking to his mother*] You that allow every breath of wind to blow out your feathers like a foolish hen, just let any hawk snatch at the boy and you will see whether or not he is a chick…. And look here, young man, you are a child no longer. Whether or not you have a father and he is above or below the earth, it is for you to fly out and find the fact of the matter. (49-50)

He is made aware of his identity, though in this very scene. This revelation involves the simple task of fetching a bowl for his grandmother, but while he embarks on it, there is a mystical unravelling of who he is:

> [*The boy though reluctant is curious; he goes in to fetch the bowl. He crosses the verandah into the house…. On entering the house, he trips on the floor which he does not know has been highly polished with a special preparation by the witch. As the boy moves farther on to where the bowl of potassium stands on a rack against the back wall, the passage becomes one of progressively tripping up. Because as a true Ijaw man he regards a fall… as a matter of great dishonour to his manhood, the boy though sliding dangerously does all in his power to stay standing in one continuous struggling movement. Meanwhile, his grandmother has jumped up and, prancing about the place, cheers the boy on in his dance on the slippery floor.*]
>
> Oreame: Hold it, hold it, my son, hold it! Has the back of the cat ever touched mud although you throw him to the ceiling top? Does the soldier ant slip on the field though caught in a stampede?
>
> [*… The boy eventually reaches the rack and, holding the bowl of potassium salt, returns shouting in a complete state of possession. As he dances his way out, his words become coherent…*]

> Boy: I am Ozidi! Ozidi ay! Ozidi! Who disputes it? I am Ozidi! Who dares dispute it? I am Ozidi! Ozidi! Ozidi! [*He rushes out in a frenzy still proclaiming himself, his name echoing in the distance…*] (50-51)

The unnamed boy, at last, has had a revelation of his true identity.

Interestingly, Ozidi is groomed by his grandmother, not by his mother. Orea appears helpless and visionless where revenge for her husband's death is concerned. Dissimilar to Oreame, Orea is the disconcerted damsel in distress with no problem-solving skills. This antithesis in the character development of either woman shall be explored later.

In "Superwoman: Enhanced Feminity in Contemporary Women's Fiction," Harry Olufunwa states that a superwoman should be able to "defy convention, contradict expectations, discomfit the comfortable and even sow doubt, fear and hatred" (3). Oreame's desire to avenge her son-in-law decades after his murder upsets the balance his murderers, Ofe, Azezabife, Oguaran, and Agbogidi have set for themselves. When they would wax comfortable and relax to enjoy the outcome of their debauchery, she discomfits them by springing her avenging grandson on them. The secrecy with which Ozidi is born and raised gives him and his grandmother the advantage of surprise, their detractors neither knew of their existence nor their intended revenge.

As an African feminist, Chukwuma in "Women's Quest for Rights: African Feminist Theory in Fiction" argues that:

> women's rights and women's being have always been taken for granted, nicely and safely tucked away under the bed of patriarchy. Silence was the virtue of women and passivity their garner, but it was not always so. Traditional societies in pre-colonial times had spheres of power and influence for women (1).

Apparently, the African woman with a voice is the one possessed by the gods (Chielo in *Things Fall* Apart) or the one with superpowers (Oreame and Azema, her rival in *Ozidi).* Otherwise, she quickly assumes whatever role the magnanimity of patriarchy would permit her. At this point, it is pertinent to reaffirm Chukwuma's assertion that a woman's ownership of whatsoever power is merely 'skin-deep'. This is typified by Clark's conflicted depicture of women in the text: on one hand, we encounter the (superhuman) mothers and on the other, we have the (problem-bringing) wives. This is the antithesis mentioned earlier. The most interesting of these female characters is Orea, who though just a wife at the play's beginning, later becomes a mother, and eventually an old woman too. Inconsistent with Clark's over-sensationalized image of the mother, Orea the mother was neither strong nor wise. She remains as clueless and powerless as she was in the beginning. In the final scene, right after Ozidi has mistakenly murdered his grandmother, Ozidi's servants desert him and he also contracts smallpox. Orea is presented as being oblivious to the apparent abandonment her son suffers, and ignorant of what ails her son:

> Orea: …Now what is all this, Ozidi, what's all this all over your body? [*she goes to fetch the lamp*]
> Ozidi: What is it you have found? Oh, how my head echoes me.
> Orea: [*looking him over.*] There is a riot of rashes breaking over your body I cannot quite make out.
> …
> Orea: [*running her hand over his skin.*] You have eaten no electric fish lately?
> …
> Orea: …Your rashes, I think are of an oncoming cold and should go when you have had a hot bath. But first, you must have a change of clothes. [*She calls out to an attendant.*] Omoni, Omoni! Now, where are all your men gone? (117)

Accepting her ignorance, Orea invites their neighbours to come help her check and probably diagnose Ozidi's ailment; one of them suggests she should take immediate action and she replies:

> Orea: What can I alone?
> …
> Orea: [*leading them to where Ozidi lies.*] Look at him for me first, please look at him. He tosses so I cannot look at him close. Not that I have knowledge of these things…. Only this evening, his body was covered with rashes I thought of an oncoming cold. Now, I cannot tell for certain. [*all three neighbours go up to where Ozidi lies tossing, take a close look at him, and without saying a word or looking at Orea, tip-toe* out, *one after the other, each with hand to mouth. Orea runs from one to the other in frantic, silent appeal…*] (119)

This is the image Clark would rather we have of Orea, even after describing her as an old woman at the beginning of the final scene. So, although he has successfully depicted a heroic (grand)mother, he, not unwittingly, reinforces the contentious negative portrayal of women in male-authored texts. This is evident in his depiction of all the wives in the play: Orea the wife is a weak and unintuitive woman who could not stop her husband from embarking on the ill-fated trip, in addition, she easily succumbs to the mental gimmicks with which her husband's taboo is obtained from her. As for the wives of her husband's detractors, they are portrayed as ridiculously impulsive and boastful women who, in their pride and wanton arrogance, give away the secret of their husbands' decades-old crime. Another wife in the text is a young mother who cannot tell an enemy from a friend and the last is Odogu's wife who enjoys, even encourages, Ozidi's sexual overtures after he abducts her from the stream.

Oddly, the few sensible and powerful women in *Ozidi* are old husbandless mothers with superpowers to swoop down to their sons' aids when in distress. This is a calumny of epic standard, idolizing the mothers while the wives wallow in the quagmires of indignity. This lopsided imagery is not peculiar to *Ozidi.* As mentioned earlier, Achebe and other male writers have been vastly scrutinized for how they portray African women in their works. It is even more self-indicting that in his *There Was a Country,* Achebe mentions that what engendered the need for an "indigenous African literary renaissance" was the desire to "challenge stereotypes, myths and the image of ourselves and our continent and to recast them through stories – prose, poetry, essays and books for our children" (53). Yet, in challenging Western stereotypes, male writers have inadvertently ended up stereotyping the African female characters in their work. At the beginning of *Ozidi,* Clark shows us an intuitive woman, Orea, rendered helpless and inactive by the societal confines of masculinity and masochism. At the end of the play, we are confronted by the same woman, old now but still helpless – a woman who answers "what can I alone?" when in grave danger.

Ultimately, it is as though, for Clark, the mother and the wife are binary opposites. The former is powerful, wise, a source of strength and encouragement, and a diehard supporter of men while the latter is a powerless and insensible inhibitor of success and good fortune. It is exactly as some of the aforementioned African feminists have feared, an over-valourization of the mother figure. However, because this is not stemmed from a deep-rooted respect/regard for the opposite sex, most of these male writers end up with antithetical female characters. This is exactly *Ozidi*'s overriding misapplication. It is at once an epic of a female superhero and at the same time a tale full of woeful women, contemptuously presented and unjustly maligned. So, whereas *Ozidi* may have been agreeably studied as an epic of a superwoman, with Oreame's acts of valour, her tragic flaw and her painful death, one is deterred by the glaring injustice of Clark's view about the other female characters. This imbalance is expressive enough of the African feminist concerns regarding the way women are truly perceived and treated by African society (and male writers).

4. Conclusion

Evidently, Oreame's death precipitates Ozidi's end. Needless to say, Ozidi is no actual hero. He is in fact as ordinary as every other man. His heroism and acts of valour have merely been borne on the shoulders of Oreame upon whom he has been riding even from conception. Though the play justly presents the vengeful grandmother, Oreame, with all the necessary accompanying tragic features, it is found wanting when weighed in the scale of African feminism. This is more so as Clark burrows into the undesirable archetypal African ideology of supreme mothers but yet ends up in a lot of African male writers who misrepresent female characters in their works. Oreame's light as a superhero may not have

been dimmed by Orea's enervation, but Clark's remarkable discontinuity of Oreame's strength and wisdom in her only daughter is resonant –daughters can be like their mothers in wantonness, recklessness, and suchlike vices but not in superhuman abilities, wisdom, and strength.

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