



Unravelling The Portrayals of Motherhood in Unigwe's Night Dancer

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood in African writings have been examined from different angles. From these lenses, it reveals negative naming. At the same time, some mother figures in literature keeps a mute nature but acts out. This has created so many confusing representations that have given an image that can be pitched as stereotypical. This inquiry sought to unravel the portrayals of mothers in Unigwe's Night Dancer. A feminist theoretical approach was used. The characters of interest in this essay are Ezi, Rapu, Rapu's mother and Madam Gold. These are strong willed mothers who challenge some of the ideological traditional world views and embraced other diverse views. As a result, some succumbed to the Western lifestyle in rejection to the norms. Furthermore, different sacrifices were made due to their different choices. The effect that comes with the character's decision are well elucidated and how these traditional norms are challenged. Eze sacrificed all for her daughter (Adamma). Rapu's mother was an enforcing mother. She ensures that Rapu goes to Ezi's home and takes over her husband. Madam Gold was a supportive mother. argument, methodology, and/or conclusions.

Keywords: Motherhood, Feminist Theory, Unigwe

I. Introduction

There is no gainsaying the obvious that history has provided the Africans with extraordinary female writers such as Tsitsi Dangerembga, Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saadawi, Mariama B, Ama Ata Aidoo and others. Yet, it can still be debated that the vocation for many years has been male saturated. Also, the way that women have been represented in literature can in many cases be found to enforce the unequal power relationship between men and women. As a result of this, can it be wrong to ascertain that literature seems to be influenced by a patriarchal mindset? The female trait of motherhood has also been long stereotyped within the society as well as in literature. Stephanie

Demetrakopulos (2017), posits that, motherhood can also be said to have been glorified in literature. For instance, through the conception that every woman will enjoy being a mother, while the darker side of mothering, such as loss of self or depression, has instead rarely been explored (51). Looking at motherhood, it is biological and cannot be denied but that it cannot be harmful to the mother, might not be totally correct.

Discussions relating to gender has gained a lot of prominence since the twentieth century when literary theories and criticism flooded the literary scene. These are used as responses to the realities of our times. Many African writers have made conscious efforts to interrogate the motherhood experiences in literature and many publications have elucidated varied motherhood styles and approaches. However, there is a constant change on the seeming abstract definition to the different motherhood styles and approaches. This paper will dwell on the literary manifestations of motherhood in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* (2013). This is a novel written by a woman who challenges the stereotypical representation of motherhood. The characters that will be of note are Ezi, Rapu, Rapu's mother and Madam Gold. The perspective of mothers and motherhood in their culture will be subjected to analysis and considered in a way to explore reasons for their portrayals. This might be significant in the use of feminist critical approach. This will equally bring the paper to consider the differences in motherhood as presented by Unigwe and the general effect that such motherhood can produce. The research questions are how is motherhood illustrated in *Night Dancer*, what are the reasons and repercussions?

1.1.1 Feminism Critical Theory

Feminist criticism focuses on the ways in which literature (or cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. Feminist



theory was created in response to patriarchy. Feminist critics view patriarchy as a social system in which men have a large concentration of power, and women are systematically excluded. Feminist critics believe that the inside of any power inequity and the default experience is always the most dominant. According to the theory, male experience as the standard by which the experience of both sexes is evaluated is unacceptable. Within society, women deal with false binaries that control their existence. For example, being logical is more accepted than being emotional, or being a virgin versus possessing sexual freedom. Critics believe that one of the main objectives of patriarchy is to turn women against each other. Feminist theorists believe that patriarchy doesn't just hurt women, but also men who may not fit into the full masculine identity. Within literature, feminist theorists try to recover works by women, analyze representations of women that forward or subvert patriarchal assumptions about gender, and showcase "female" characteristics as desirable.

Feminist critics also try to eliminate assumptions about feminism. Kate Millet and French feminist Julia Kristeva are one of many critics within feminism. Millet takes a Marxist approach to feminist critical theory, and believes that gender is socially constructed. Millet is social. Gender is taught, performed, and reinforced. Kristeva utilizes psychoanalysis and believes that penis envy is about more than just the penis but social power it brings. There were three waves of feminism through the generations, and there is also a subdivision of feminism called Black feminism.

1.1 Theoretical and Critical Approach

The novel *Night Dancer* creates an insight to Igbo traditional culture and some characters who pass through the western culture trying to ration out the best way to handle motherhood. The novel depicts a blend of the traditional lifestyle, trying to rub on the acquired western lifestyle (ideologies). Due to the fact that motherhood is the anchor of this essay, the main theoretical approach will be a feminist theory by Simone de Beauvoir (1972) who propounds that the initial idea of feminism was an attempt to find out why women have a subordinate role to men.

Peter Berry(2009) contributes thus:

The representation of women in literature, then, was felt

to be one of the most important forms of socialization;

Since it provided the role models which indicated to women

And men what constituted acceptable versions of feminine and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. (14)

There are other aspects aside literature that has contributed to the social construction that exist in the society. An example is the film industry which is largely owned by men, it fosters assumptions that continues to portray the subordination of women. Hardly do they represent women who have images of strong public competence. Although, there are many other areas to delve into, but literature is still a vital area of consideration. It is no gainsaying that due to contact with western ideologies, gender roles are fast changing. These influences expose the characters to carve a niche for themselves in a way that best pleases them irrespective of how the society sees or tags them. The most important aspect is how well such decisions are acceptable. This prominent point makes the use of feminist approach to this investigation relevant. The reader is presented with an insight to another angle to motherhood where the mothers are strong-willed and independent.

There are multiple portrayals of varied roles of motherhood in which the truths and myths of motherhood are sustained in a myriad of experiences. Motherhood is difficult to describe because it is an abstract term. In the most ideal sense, to be called a mother, you must have given birth either physically or through adoption. However, motherhood can be taken through marriage to a widower, death or some absence of the child's biological mother. Mothers are great influencers in the lives of their children. They are saddled with the potentials of influencing their children's future and impacting the society and the world generally. The concerned and sacrificial mother as well as the unconcerned mother exist and are well replicated in literatures. Some mothers have shown these different motherhood traits thereby creating a balance. Nevertheless, some mothers in Unigwe's *Night Dancer* exhibit the following; self-absorbed/sacrificing mother, child sacrificing mother and substitute mothers.

1.3 Explanation of the different Mother Portrayal

1.3.1 Self-Absorbed Mother/ Sacrificing Mother.

To a be self-absorbed or Sacrificing mother, is to believe in one's own thoughts, needs or preoccupation. She takes her pleasure as a priority



and the family suffers. She does not believe that her life must be determined by the duties of motherhood. Motherhood to her is a burden. Ezi in *Night Dancer* further sheds light on this when she asserts thus "it's not a true form of happiness". (53) For the self-absorbed or sacrificing mother, she will resist the trappings of the unwelcome position. The above description of a mother fits the career women who put their career, money, position and fame above their families. This is not the ideology of the traditional notion of motherhood. In *Night Dancer*, Rapu's mother seems to tilt a little towards this type of mother portrayal but eventually one can deduce that she only used her daughter (Rapu) to liberate the family from poverty. She sells her daughter into servitude and prepares her ahead to take over her mistress's home by taking her madam's husband Mike. She gets involved with him sexually and becomes pregnant. It seems Rapu's mother cannot help herself and her family from their state of poverty. She uses her daughter to hatch and achieve her plan.

1.3.2 Self-Martyred Mother

She finds worth in her sacrifices. Her life is usually filled with disappointments and unfulfilled desires. She feels helpless to change her world and accepts to enjoy and endure what fate has ditched to her. She gives her all to her offspring. She sets her children's needs above her. She refuses all attention and love given to her. Ezi in *Night Dancer* (2013) seems to fit these characteristics mentioned above. She sacrifices everything for the sake of her daughter, Adamma (Nma). She goes into prostitution to perform the roles of both her mother and father. She nurtures her and provided for all her needs as a mother. She even left so many properties for her to inherit after her demise. She decides not to re-marry so as to remain focused on her daughter. Despite the fact that Ezi's father disowns her for leaving a septic marriage that is involved in infidelity, she remains adamant that if her husband (Mike) does not send Rapu and her son away, she will not return. Mike as a traditional man, who knows that the male child is paramount in the African culture, vehemently refuses to send Rapu and her son away. The traditional notion of the female child is well explained in Adebayo (2006). She describes a daughter thus:

a daughter is a vain treasure to her father. From anxiety about her, he does not sleep at night during her early age, least she be seduced, in her marriageable age, least

she does not find a husband; when she's married, least she becomes childless and when she is old, least she practices witchcraft (34)

As far as Ezi is concerned, gender roles are no longer static and she decides to adopt a style that will be of benefit to her so as to raise her child (Adamma). She tries to seek a job but she could not get one. At the same time, she refuses to bear staying in her husband's house to share him with her housemaid, (Rapu). She neglects all persuasions from her mother and friends thus:

Things have changed since mother's time, when Women were terrified of living alone. Society has become More intelligent, more tolerant, surely. There was no need to stay in a marriage which no longer suited her just so that she could lay claim to a husband..... mother, times have changed. (201)

Also, Ezi continues to show her self-martyred mother image as she refuses to remarry. She sees marriage as inhibitive. She does not want to because of its excessive demands and challenges. She tells her mother that "marriage is not really a true form of happiness" (53). Ezi believes that 'those who trust in love are big fools.' (91)

Initially, Nma dislikes her mother because of her involvement in prostitution. The stigma that the society tags her with "Ada Ashawo", how her neighbours treat her like an outcast, even her boyfriend did not take her home to his parents because of shame (not from a respectable background). However, the memoirs her mother left after her demise becomes an eye opener to all Ezi's sacrifices as a mother for her daughter, Nma. Madam Gold throws light to the dark and obscured parts of her narrative.

Looking at the feminism approach, individualism is important. Ezi refuses to take to the counsels of her family. Maybe she would have been better as Mike's wife rather than ending up as a prostitute. Rapu was not pursuing an individual goal. She is well supported by her family and remains in her husband's house with three children. She boastfully says;

.....She gives birth to three children including a medical doctor but Ezi continues to struggle on her own and her daughter studies theatre arts which is not as prestigious as medicine and surgery. (220)



1.3.3 The Child Sacrificing Mother

This is an example of a mother who sacrifices her child/children so that, they do not suffer greater harm. This mother is willing to push her children into servitude just to protect the future of such a child. This is well portrayed in the character of Rapu's mother. Rapu's mother tells her daughter (Rapu) some things secretly in her ears when Mike and Ezi were to embark on their journey to Kaduna with her. Rapu becomes a maid in Mike's house with an ulterior motive to take over as the madam of the house in no time. This explains why the virgin Rapu did not resist the advances of Mike at his first approach. Mike becomes a means of putting an end to poverty in Rapu's lineage. This is vividly described thus;

Her mother had given her own words of advice the way women do: discretely whispering into her daughter's ears as if she were afraid that if she spoke them out loud, some evil person or thing would spirit them away before they reached Rapu's ears (139).

Rapu equally neglect many sacrifices from Mike who impregnated her but she decides to endure the situation for a better life for her children in future. At a point, Rapu gets so discouraged about the way Mike treats her. She tells Anwuli (her friend) and she responds that; 'Do not worry because hot water will eventually cool down. It will not be like this forever.' (203)

Eventually Rapu gains Mike's attention after she remains patient with him. Mike finally asked her to his bedroom to sleep. Mike calls her thus; Leave the baby! he said, and come and sleep in my bed

She had hoped then that she would not be sent back to

The guest roomand she was willing to wait for it to cool. (204)

Due to Rapu's endurance in Mike's house, she can proudly flaunt her son's achievement as a medical doctor. Mike too praises his son's academic strength. The son becomes his pride. Rapu responds proudly;

Grinning from ear to ear, 'Prince is a doctor, he's doing

his internship: A smile lit up her eyes. My son, the doctor,

her father said, and pride in his choice hit Nma with the

sharpness of a blade. (221)

1.3.4 The Substitute Mother

She portrays a willingly admired woman who accepts the responsibility of another woman's offspring. She is a figure that people admire and respect. For her, every child is born from her heart, not necessarily from her womb. In Unigwe's *Night Dancer*, the character of Madam Gold encapsulates these traits. She becomes the linking gap for Nma after the death of her mother. Anything that Nma does not understand about the letter in the shoe box, Madam Gold opens up to explain to Nma. Madam Gold stays with Ezi in the past and stays with Nma in the present so as to give her a better future by providing the missing gaps in her quest for knowing the truth about her mother.

A substitute woman is usually unselfish, extends her hand and heart to a child in need of protection, encouragement and security. Madam Gold shed more light to the unanswered questions of Nma about Ezi (her late mother). She helps Nma understand her mother better through the clarifications from her letters (memoirs). From Madam Gold, she begins to have a better understanding and appreciation of her mother's actions. Her anger towards her mother begins to fade away.

Barr, is quoted in the *Routledge Library Sourcebook on Kate Chopin's: The Awakening (1894)* explains that, some mothers are close to abnegate "material responsibility..... in favour of personal fulfilment". Rapu's mother sees her entire family becoming comfortable when her daughter leaves and marries Mike. Marriage and motherhood become a tool for their upliftment.

She sees marriage and motherhood (especially the birth of a male child) as a means of liberating her daughter and her entire family from the chains of poverty. As a mother, why did she not insist that her daughter be sent to school by Mike? This would have given her the opportunity of becoming somebody great in life. It becomes perturbing to see a mother use what she thinks she has to achieve what she desires in a dishonorable manner. She uses her maternal responsibility to fulfill her personal aggrandizement and gratification. This makes her a child-sacrificing mother. She reveals her good side by desiring progress for her family but achieves it in a bad way by causing Ezi pain and sorrow.



Ezi, Adamma's mother who refuses to be subversive as the traditional mothers due to her exposure to education, thereby showing the feminist tendencies decides not to share her husband with her househelp. Rapu performs Ezi's marital duties at home such as cooking for her husband and even serving his meals. These acts create a vacuum in the relationship between Ezi and Mike but brings a kind of proximity between Rapu and Mike. It shows that, Mike desire is attracted towards Rapu. It clearly explains, why there was no form of resistance from the virgin Rapu towards Mike's advances. Ezi decides to achieve all that she can financially and materially. This signifies that, she can attain all that Mike should have provided. She comfortably performs the roles of a mother and father to Nma. She breaks the stereotypical notion of representing women as weak, lazy and dependent on men. Although, she operates a closed mouth, not revealing all her ordeals to her daughter but all Ezi's actions are in Nma's best interest. She faces a difficult single parenthood and she boldly challenges the status quo. Above all, leaves assets for her daughter to inherit. Nma makes Rapu to understand this when she assumes that she (Nma) came to seek an inheritance from her father. She reiterated thus 'I don't want your money!.... my mother was rich!.(239).Ezi was very rich and Nmadoes not want anything from her father. From the aforementioned, Ezi can be referred to as a self-absorbed mother. Again, we see Ezi desire to be self-reliant, achieve financial independence, passes a worthy inheritance to her daughter. Yet, her means of achieving all these things are wrong.

Madam Gold is Ezi's best friend. Their union becomes strong when Ezi tries to overcome all the challenges she faces. She becomes a very bosom friend and stands as a faithful friend. She knows and understands her friend very well. She becomes the only character who understands why Ezi takes some decisions. She eventually becomes the only person who can fill in the missing gaps for Nma when she gets to know the character of her mother through the memoir, she leaves in the shoe box for her. At this point, Madam Gold can be called a substitute mother figure. She becomes the saviour of Nma, from a prostitution stigma. She responsibly helps to heal Nma's relationship with her mother after death without seeking anything in return.

Madam Gold helps Nma find peace and safety which she did not get before her mother's

death. She helps her heal from the right and truthful pieces of information she provides for Nma.

Ezi, self-martyred mother teaches her daughter in her own way not dictated by the culture or norms. At the initial time, the daughter does not have a good relationship with her but later she understands perfectly who she was and why she did what she did. Through her letters, she learns many things. She keeps the memoir and passes it on to her daughter. Each memory has an important message which survives time and its interfering tribulations.

According to Lawless (2001), for a woman to become empowered, she requires "three very similar things: a soul of one's own, the ability to voice it, and the courage to act it (18). Ezi has a soul, she has the ability to voice her experiences through her memoir but lacks the courage to voice her experiences but the substitute mother (Madam Gold), helps her friend complete her task.

1.4 Conclusion

This study has examined portrayals of motherhood in *Night Dancer* by Chika Unigwe. It was established that a mother provides a safe environment which nurtures a child through difficult times, they represent freedom and strength for a child who has been confined and stripped off value. The different mothers encountered in this novel set their different standards and perform their duties as mothers. Some are cheerful, some are selfish, some are not supporting enough, some are cruel in their actions and words, some cannot protect their children from abusive men and such like tendencies. All these actions are all that are sane in the minds of these mothers. The one clear connection in it all is that mothers traverse these points at different times with different levels of participation. This means that at some time, even the bad mother is caring and empathetic and the good mother at some other times can be cruel and indifferent. Other mothers stand in between these two extremes. This can be a replica of any profession; we have some who are very good at their jobs and others not that good. This is the sole business of literature. With its didactic tendencies, it may provide an affirmation or a re-orientation of readers' belief in everyday experiences as regards motherhood. Mothers are not portrayed as completely perfect or completely imperfect.

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