

# Childlessness in Ifeoma Odinye's *My African China*: A Turn Around

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## Abstract

*In African cultural contexts, infertility often imposes severe social sanction on married women unable to bear children, as reproduction is centrally tied to notions of healthy womanhood and familial lineage. Female writers have compellingly rendered the trauma of barren women in patriarchal societies pressuring them to produce progeny to secure marital stability. However, Ifeoma Odinye's novel *My African China* substantively flouts such conventions by depicting a polygamous husband, Agiriga, as the figure attracting communal ridicule and ostracism for his sterile predicament across four marriages. This paper utilizes feminist literary analysis to elucidate Odinye's subversion of gendered assumptions underlying the stigma of childlessness. Her political inversion insightfully highlights the need for greater public awareness that male-factor infertility is equally responsible for many couples' childless condition. Ultimately, Odinye utilizes humour and paradox to caution against excessively burdening women over matters of biology heavily contingent on both partners' reproductive capabilities. This paper concludes by reiterating calls for educational efforts promoting more equitable social expectations.*

**Keywords:** Childlessness, Patriarchy, Marriage, Polygamy

## 1. Introduction

Marriage and motherhood are highly esteemed traditional values in Igbo traditional societies. The marriage institution adores two major things - life (*ndu*) and child (*nwa*) but child occupies a central position [1]. On the event of any marriage, the only reiterated prayers and wishes offered to the new couple remain ... "in nine months, may we return to your home to celebrate the birth of a child", "Thus, a childless marriage is a tragedy whereby the woman is the tragic heroine", Obi and Manus also observe that among the Igbos [1]. The inability of any married woman to bear a child is always seen as an unfavourable situation; the woman is regarded as *onye chi ojo* - one who is misfortune. There is no much mention about the men's place in this. This is the indication that men carry fewer burdens as far as childlessness is concerned. The only burden the men has to bear is that of not having an heir, while the woman bears the pains of not having a child as well as the trauma that results from verbal attacks from both the husband (in some cases) and from other members of the family. The wider society sees her more as a failure than the man. Women are made to be the objects of mockery and disdain when it comes to childlessness. This is why childlessness in marriage is mostly attributed to the

woman's barrenness than to the man's infertility [2].

To support this, Ihueze and Anyachebelu postulate that wherever women are on the African continent or beyond the African continent, as long as women are bound within spaces that confine and silence them, and having to daily confront patriarchal injustices, their mental, physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing becomes impaired (598). As a result, Nigerian female writers use their creative works to explore the yearnings, experiences and predicaments of childless women in a patriarchal society. Nwapa blazed the feminist trail in Nigeria with the publication of *Efuru* in 1966. Helen Chukwuma hence portrays 1966 as a year of quiet revolution that ushered in the first female novelist [3]. No novel before then was penned after a woman. Nwapa writes to inform and educate women all over the world about the role of women in Nigeria, their economic independence, their relationship with their husbands and children, and their position in society. She identifies with her gender, probes into their life conditions and their problems in a male dominated society. The people's craving for children and their obsession are also highlighted. Women are generally portrayed in both male and female-authored literary texts, as the major cause of the

childless marriage and as a result subjected to humiliation, degradation and dehumanization. The trend, however, has changed as Odinye imbues her female characters, in *My African China*, with the guts, voices and impetus to walk out of a childless marriage [4, 5]. In the world of her text, the man, and not the woman, is regarded as the failure and the major source of infertility. She recreates her childless women.

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research is grounded in Africana womanism, a culturally rooted ideology that promotes a sense of "Africanness." Coined by Alice Walker in the 1970s, Africana womanism was conceived to establish a distinction between Western feminism and Black Feminism, as articulated by Onuora Nweke. However, African feminism did not entirely embrace Walker's concept, finding certain aspects incompatible with the experiences of African women.

According to Nweke, one contentious issue lies in the perception of women who love other women, whether in a sexual or non-sexual manner. In the context of Africana womanism, such affection is often stigmatized as advocating lesbianism, a notion deemed forbidden in African cultural contexts. This perspective, endorsed by Walker, faces criticism from scholars like Kolawole, who denounces the support for lesbianism within the framework of Africana womanism. These divergent viewpoints highlight the complexities and cultural nuances within African feminism, illustrating the ongoing discourse surrounding the compatibility of certain feminist ideologies with the diverse realities of African women. Thus, Walker's support for lesbianism is likewise denounced by Kolawole who asserts that [6]. Lesbianism is a non-issue for the majority of ordinary Africans since it is based on self-expression that is entirely foreign to their worldview. It is not even a choice for millions of African women; therefore, it cannot be the solution (115). Nweke also added, "This is one of several other issues at the heart of feminism's rejection, not only by African women, but by many Third World and non-Eurocentric Women" (15). Hudson-Weems, too, disagrees with Walker's definition of womanism, preferring the term Africana Womanism which she sees as more culturally relevant [7].

Africana womanism differs from Alice Walker's and Hudson-Weem's brands by its identification with "what Ogunyemi calls the four Cs-Conciliation, Collaboration, Consensus, and Complementarity" (Adimira-Ezeigbo 20). While Ogunyemi advocates for an atmosphere of peace and mutual respect between women, men and children, she is aware that patriarchal norms in African society often position men as barriers to women's advancement. Specifically, Ogunyemi notes that husbands oppress women more than fathers, brothers, and sons within the prevailing patriarchal family structure. Her Africana Womanism theory is founded on her analysis of works by leading Nigerian female authors such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali and others. Her philosophy promotes building strong interpersonal relationships across lines of ethnicity, region, education, gender, religion and politics. Womanism, according to Kolawole, is "the totality of feminine self-

expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive ways" (24) that enhance and affirm women's collective identity and sisterhood rather than keeping them constrained by restrictive ideologies [7]. The womanist perspective resonates with many African female writers and activists because of its grounding in African values and experiences. As Kolawole notes, a unifying theme across different strands of womanism is the determination to uplift and empower women while also liberating them from oppressive traditions [7].

A core tenet of Africana womanism is that "women 'associate with men and enjoy close relationships with them.' However, it must be a relationship of equals or partners. "There is no difference between a master and a minor" [8]. Womanists are religious and believe in God. They like being women, see themselves as victorious, commits to men and society, remain mute about sex, and encourage marriage [9]. They would rather be recognized as victors than of their own victims. They want to be masters of their own fate. They do not regard men as their principal adversaries and would collaborate with them to promote domestic stability and the broader welfare of society (Nweke). Nnolim quoted Maria Umeh that, "whereas feminist plans conclude with the separation of the man and woman... Womanist literature are dedicated to masculine and female survival and unity" (137) [10].

### 1.2. Marriage Institution in Igbo Traditional Society

"The Igbos comprise the five South Eastern States of Abia, Imo, Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi with sub-groups in Delta and Rivers" [11]. They believe in collective will, high-rated communal life, respect for age and achievements that glorify the village. They are culture oriented. A typical Igbo family, like many cultures, is constituted through the rites of marriage. These rites emphasize the communal nature of the Igbo family. Considering the fact that celibacy was not a prominent social status among the Igbo, marriage was regarded as a mile-stone in the life of a man and a woman. A number of sayings show the importance attached to marriage and its indication of maturity.

The saying, *nwata gafe onye mu, obanye onye na-anu* (if a girl graduates from who is your father? She graduates into who is your husband?) demonstrates the communality of Igbo culture as well as the expectations of the individual by the community. The identity of the person is established and discovered in the various relations that constitute the person as such. While the relation of birth provides the first identity for the individual, the relation of marriage continues this identification and is as were, expected to be a permanent structure that contributes significantly to the perfection of identity. The child that has grown to who is your husband has qualified for the marital status and is not expected to outgrow it but rather to grow and mature in it. In this maturity, this child is expected to also become the mother of yet another child for the continuation of this communal identification thread [12].

The paramount function of marriage in Igbo traditional society is procreation. Motherhood is the pre-condition of womanhood and lack of it is tantamount to a refutation of the importance of one's social existence. "Parenthood becomes, therefore, a reaffirmation of life; barrenness a confirmation of death [13]. The woman's role as a mother is paramount because it is through her that the lineage is perpetuated. Ideally, a pre-colonial woman would gladly marry any man arranged for her. Ubani cited in Okpala on Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, queries [14, 15], how can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people! You (the man) are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them. A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified [71].

Her colonial and post-colonial counterparts marry a man of their choice, though, subject to the parent's approval. This is mainly because till date, "the Igbo strongly believe that a marriage without parental sanction is doomed" [13]. Payment and acceptance of bride price is the ultimate in Igbo traditional marriage, despite the fact that some critics posit that bride price reduces the girl's worth to the economic level on which her parent's sustenance, payment of bills or rehabilitation of other extended family members depend on [4]. According to Odimegwu, the father is the head of the family. The mother, on the other hand, is the heart [12]. Like the heart distributes the life-giving fluid to each member of the body, the mother serves as the procurer and consummate provider of care for each member in the family. Like the heart regulates the vital organs without violence, the mother keeps an eye on each member of her house without policing. Thus, the relationship between each member and the mother is one of love.

A male child, no doubt, is preferred, but the strong desire for a baby girl, who usually takes care of the parents in their old age, is founded on the craving of a mother for a companionship and of the father for the joy of giving the hand of his daughter in marriage. This assertion is evidenced in the Igbo proverb – "*Aturu muru ebule gba aka nwa* (the sheep that begets only rams has no offspring as such)" [12]. Ejiofor equally supports that the wishes of a daughter (*Nwada*) receive adequate attention, indulgence and respect. They are well protected by her family [16]. Most Igbo girls will desire to marry and have children as confirmed by Amaka's assertion in Nwapa's *One is Enough*, that "a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish, and children to crown the marriage" (3) [17]. This indicates that "childlessness and spinsterhood are neither a satisfactory nor enviable way of life" [10]. Furthermore, marriage qualifications in contemporary society have deviated from family approval to good looks, high academic qualifications and lucrative professions. Lack of strong family involvement and community support seems to contribute immensely to the problems in modern marital relationships. This is because foreign values are not seriously rooted to bind modern husband and wife [18].

### 1.3. Childless Women in Selected Nigerian Fictions

Motherhood is crucial to any woman's social position in Nigerian traditional milieu. Childlessness in any Nigerian marriage besets a woman with a very low social esteem and disadvantaged position. The right of a Nigerian woman in her husband's home depends on the number of children (especially males) she has. To be married and bear children entitles a woman more respect from her husband's relatives for she can be addressed as a mother [19]. Steady also supports that (36), the most important factor with regards to the woman in traditional society is her role as a mother and the centrality of this role as a whole. Even in strictly patrilineal societies, women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial in the maintenance of the husband's lineage (243).

Nigeria is a child hungry society and has by omission or commission encouraged humiliation of childless women, "forcing them to consult various medicine men, doctors, prophets or leave their matrimonial homes in frustration" [10]. To achieve a sense of success and fulfillment in marriage, women therefore go extra mile to have children. Agnes, in Flora Nwapa's *This is Lagos and Other Stories*, driven by desperation by her estrangement from her husband on account of childlessness, becomes a child thief [20,21]. Nwapa depicts the trauma a woman faces when it dawns on her that she cannot have a child. She also points out that too much pressure on women to produce children can push them over the edge. Pressure can instigate these women to do anything to achieve whatever they desire. Agnes for instance, in order to keep her marriage, "employs all kinds of deceit and finally resorts to stealing a baby from the hospital" [20].

Out of desperation to achieve pregnancy, Beatrice, Ije's old school friend in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Cloud*, slept with a false prophet (Apostle Joseph) [22]. Her husband is at the verge of sending her away and taking a new wife. In utmost satisfaction, she proclaims "my infidelity has saved my marriage. A childless woman in our society does not realize the extent of her handicap until she grows old" (61-62). In addition, Ije Appiah in the same text is degraded and dehumanized by Virginia who seduces Dozie (Ije's husband), presents herself with a purported pregnancy and accuses him of being responsible [23].

Chieme in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong One* is divorced and sent back to her parents because of her inability to bear a child [24]. Chieme, as observes, is "groveling before her husband begging not to be thrown out because she has failed the test of motherhood in her four years of marriage with Iwuchukwu" (139). Chieme prays to be allowed to stay, "I am not against your taking a second wife, but let me stay with you" (77). Iwuchukwu, however rejects the plea with scorn. "You are not a woman; I want to marry another wife who can give me children. I am afraid of you and can no longer continue with this marriage, which I consider no marriage at all and I do not want to live with a person whom I cannot say is male or female" (18). Childlessness is often unfairly stigmatized, pushing women to face unwarranted

scrutiny and negative labels. A woman without children can endure various challenges, yet she remains resilient in the face of societal expectations and biases [25].

Amaka and Obiora in Nwapa's *One is Enough* are married for six years without a child. Amaka's mother-in-law tells her to her face [17]. You are barren, that's all, barren. A year or so ago, you said you had a miscarriage. My son came to tell me. I laughed at him. I did not let him know that you were deceiving him. Therefore, my son's wife, you were never pregnant and you will never be (14). The women themselves often accept the unfavourable treatment as their lot. Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough*, laments on her husband's changed attitude - "it beats me how you should do all this behind my back, be involved with a woman, have sons by her, marry without breathing a word to your wife [17]. You have changed a good deal my husband" (29). A childless woman should give way for a new wife, who will propagate her husband's line, or forced to return, humiliated, to her parent's home. The woman seems to be a vehicle through which a man satisfies his needs and fulfills his ambition. A truly virtuous woman, in a traditional society, should neither question nor rebel against the conventions [13].

The agony of a barren woman is inexpressible. She bears the pain and the shame. Nnuego, in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, could not conceive for Amatokwu, her first husband. He denies her the basic conjugal rights; insisting that his "precious male seed" should not be wasted "on a woman who is infertile" (32), he rather subjects her to working in the farm, in the manner of a slave. In frustration, Nnuego cries and asks why her God should allow her to be punished [13,15]. Cynthia, in Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* is ousted of her matrimonial home because of same reason. She is described as a virtuous woman who is faithful to her husband [26]. Her infertility is not connected with infidelity. She is contrasted with Idara, the hard-hearted schemer, who desperately wants an access into the wealth of an oil company employee, yet Mrs. Isa, her sister-in-law, supports her brother to bring in Idara because they want a child desperately (Okpala 2019). She (Mrs Isa) later confesses to Cynthia, "I regret my secret support to push you away for Idara to be in full control" (106). Okpala & Uto-Ezeajugh reiterate how women themselves make the lives of other women painful in childless marriage thus, "The attitude of mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, girlfriends, concubines remain a source of tension and stress and inflict so much pain on barren women (7) [27].

Worgugi observes that in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of the Symbols*, *Eaglewoman* is referred to as *Okenkwu* (a male palm tree), by her mother-in-law because it is taking her too long to conceive [25]. She therefore advises Osai, "My son, do not permit an '*oke nkwu*' to grow in your farm land" (101). Despite the fact that the daughter of the family is "the cynosure of all eyes and the centre of the tender attention in the family" in Igbo traditional society, and even though she may not have a decisive voice, but her wishes are respected, she is the centre of attention and indulgence (Ejiofor), yet attitudes toward her as a childless woman remain callous

and hostile [12].

In *My African China* by Odinye, there's a departure from the prevailing narrative found in other Nigerian fictions where childless female characters are exclusively blamed for infertility [5]. Unlike characters like Idris in Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* and Dozie Appiah in Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, who decline fertility tests, Odinye's work presents a more distinct perspective, acknowledging that infertility is not solely the responsibility of childless women. Odinye's Agiriga visits many *dibias* (native doctors) who sang incantations over the charms made from cowries. His childless condition had subjected his ebony body with special tattoos from -different *dibias* while searching for answers to his problem. Indeed, his annual visits to different *dibias* at Igbo-ukwu and beyond without positive result subdued him, that he often sat by the doorway to their father's compound watching passers-by studiously without purpose. Agiriga often walked around arms folded across his chest as if he was cold. He was puzzled about what could have gone wrong with his destiny (100-101).

The indescribable agony of childlessness, which only women pass through, is now experienced by Agiriga. In Igbo traditional society, the essence of marriage is strictly for procreation, so any woman who cannot fulfill this primary role is a failure, is shown the way out of her husband's house or is treated like the wooden utensil in the man's house if she stays [25]. Women are often unfairly held responsible for a wide range of life's adversities, including but not limited to infertility, involvement in prostitution, perceived immorality, and instances where a man fails to fulfill his promise of consistent commitment and marriage. Donatus Nwoga, quoted in Chukukere, that "women; since the time of Eve, have caused most of the troubles in life [13]. It appears they haven't yet paid for it in the volume of derogatory literature addressed against them. In most places, and Africa is no exception, the man is always right" (23). Odinye debunks this assertion and to register her disapproval, she presents Agiriga not only as the major source of childlessness but also subjects him to emotional torture and ridicule. He is totally helpless and his self-esteem is battered. His three wives blame him for their childless condition. They caused him great sorrow with their sharp deadly tongues that cut open the already wounded heart. "Agiriga is not a real man! He is a woman like us oooo! A confirmed woman who could not impregnate three women he lawfully married! The wives would always complain in bitterness" (101). Through Agiriga's wives, Odinye recreates the childless women in patriarchal world. Agiriga's wives are so infuriated that "they all returned their bride prices to end their conjugal connections with their husband" (102).

Bride price, according to Waheed, et al, is usually "the payment, in monetary form to the parents or guardians of a female partner made by the groom on an account of marriage [28]. Bride price varies from one culture to another, while there is no fixed amount on how much can be paid" (n.p.). This is a very important aspect of marriage since it is believed to cement the marital relationship. Ideally, an Igbo woman



cannot easily abandon her matrimonial home and remarry until there is a refund of the bride price to her husband, and if he rejects the bride price, and the woman insists on leaving him for another man, the children she bears in the new marriage belong to the first husband. This is because, by tradition, she is still legally married to him. If a woman is no longer interested in the marriage, she will return her dowry to her husband through her family. This must be done before she is free to remarry [29]. This may be probably why Agiriga's wives returned their bride prices.

Odinye's *My African-China* is a one hundred and fifty-four-page book with fifteen unequal chapters [5]. It is set in both Igboukwu, Nigeria and Guangzhou, China. The text basically portrays the plight of migrants in Western world, China to be precise. Their pains and experiences are properly described by Chinedu's assertion – "The world doesn't treat us as we wish. We are always dragged around by fate. This is why we are mere pencils in the hands of our creator" (149). While chronicling diasporic experience, Odinye tactfully chips in her feminist point. Agiriga, (Izunna's uncle) is portrayed as what Ejinkonye may describe as weak, grossly irresponsible, non-innovative, non-enterprising, emasculated man. He is, in fact, vilified, castigated, ridiculed, and denigrated in Igboukwu, his home town. The overall characterization of Agiriga seems not to clearly justify why the wives divorced him. It may also be possible that the wives deserted him not just because he is sterile but also that he is weak, "not very industrious, and he hated going to the farm. His portions of land were always left unploughed between furrows" (100). This may also attract such queries as - if Agiriga had been an Oil Company employee like Idris in Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* or a prosperous Pharmacist like Dozie Appiah in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Cloud*; would the wives return their bride prices and leave? How come none of the wives tried to help him find solution to his problem? Or at least sympathize with him [22,26]. None even tried to achieve pregnancy out of wedlock. That none of the relatives tried to intervene confirms the notion that people don't like to be associated with failures and childless mothers inclusive. Agiriga is decorated in a pitiful garb and made to depict negativity and object of ridicule. His height, for instance, which would have been an advantage, is derogatorily described as "too tall for a man" (99). A divorce of an able-bodied and vibrant young man by wives would have however, made a better feminist point [27-32].

## 2. Conclusion

In depicting her characters, Odinye takes a bold step to challenge the typical portrayal of childless women and their struggles in most Nigerian literature. While the text suggests that Agiriga's wives may have deserted him due to childlessness, poverty, or a combination, the stigma and blame surrounding infertility are for the first time turned on a man rather than placed solely on the woman. The aggressive reactions of Agiriga's wives in deserting the marriage may run counter to the Africana Womanist values of peaceful co-existence, mutual understanding, and collaboration between spouses. However, their actions do shed light on the precarious societal position of barren

women. The text prompts readers to consider that either spouse may be responsible for fertility issues, and factors like biological incompatibility or misaligned timing can also affect conception. By subverting stereotypical assumptions, Odinye prompts more nuanced dialogue regarding the complex causes of childlessness [33-37].

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