

The Critical Concept of Afrocentrism in Nigerian Literature

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Abstract

Since the early 1960s, Afrocentrism has been developed as a theory that resists forms of marginalisation of African peoples, places African culture at the centre of inquiry, and promotes African peoples as subjects rather than objects of humanity. However, as this thesis sets out to show, this theory has gained more ground as an anti-Eurocentric theory that liberates Africans from the margins of western domination and colonization. This project intends to challenge this limited critique of Afrocentrism. In ‘Afrocentrism: The Argument We’re Really Having’ [*American Historical Review*, 30 (1996), 202-39], Ibrahim Sundiata, a leading Afrocentrist, argues that ‘any theoretical move directed at erasing inscriptions of inequality, marginalisation and subjugation of any kind among African peoples could be classified as a version of the Afrocentric impulse.’ Extending Sundiata’s argument, this thesis situates the criticism of three insidious Nigerian traditions which marginalise and subjugate fellow Nigerians as Afrocentric discourse: i) the marginalisation of women, ii) the Osu caste system, and iii) the Oro festival and the tradition of ritual suicide. This project will redefine the theoretical concept of the Afrocentric discipline as a discourse that challenges both external and, importantly, *internal* forces of oppression in Africa.

The study is divided into three chapters. The first examines and situates the discourse of Womanism in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and *Idu* as an Afrocentric discipline. It exposes the sufferings and marginalisation of women in patriarchal Nigerian society. Through a critical evaluation of Nwapa’s use of myth, meta-fiction and, borrowing from Siga Jajne’s study, what I call ‘voice-throwing’ [‘African Women and the Category ‘WOMAN’ in Feminist Theory’ *Proceedings at the Annual Conference of the African Literature Association*, Ohio, March, 1995], I demonstrate how Nwapa creates a new world and an escape route for Nigerian women. If Afrocentrism is a discourse that offers a space to eradicate inequality of any kind within the African community, the critique of the subjugation of women in Nigeria, I argue, might be

understood as a part of Afrocentrism. The second chapter attempts to critically analyse Chinua Achebe's challenge of the Igbo tradition of the Osu caste system in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* as an Afrocentric discourse. It analyses Achebe's use of the literary technique of dualism and the critical engagement with questions of 'form' in his challenge of the Osu system. Through a close reading of these texts, I analyse Achebe's position of the role of the intellectuals, the 'voiceless' situation of the Osu in *Things Fall Apart*, and the 'voice-consciousness' of the Osu in his short story, 'Chike's School Days.' From the outset, this chapter maintains that Achebe's first and second novels are critical to the challenge of the Osu system. This is what makes these texts Afrocentric. The final chapter analyses Afrocentric interventions into the debilitating traditions of the Oro festival and ritual suicide in Adaora Ulasi's *Many Thing You No Understand*, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Duro Ladipo's *Oba Waja (The King is Dead)*. While there are continued practice of some traditional customs and social structures that oppress, marginalise and displace Africans, this thesis shows that there is need to redefine and extend the Afrocentric paradigm as a theory that critically challenges any internal system of oppression in Africa. Theorizing Afrocentrism in this way will therefore address the challenges of twenty-first century Africa.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Title	Page
	<i>Title Page</i>	
	<i>Abstract</i>	ii
	<i>Table of Contents</i>	iv
	<i>Dedication</i>	v
	<i>Acknowledgement</i>	vi
	Introduction	1
	What is Afrocentrism?	2
	Significant Criticisms on Afrocentrism	5
	Rationale for this Thesis	16
	Methodology	18
	Approaching the Case Studies	21
	Chapter Outlines	24
1.	Womanism as an Afrocentric Discourse: Reading Flora Nwapa's <i>Efuru</i> and <i>Idu</i>	25
	1.1 Reasons for the rejection of Feminism	25
	1.2 What is Womanism?	33
	1.3 <i>Efuru</i> and <i>Idu</i>	35
2.	The Critique of the Osu Caste System as an Afrocentric Discourse: Chinua Achebe	74
	2.1 Definitions of the Osu caste system	78
	2.2 Origin of the Osu caste system	80
	2.3 Classifications of Osu	84
	2.4 Discriminations against Osu	86
	2.5 <i>Things Fall Apart</i> and <i>No Longer at Ease</i>	92
3.	The Critique of the Oro Festival and the Tradition of Ritual Suicide as a Discourse of Afrocentrism: Adaora Ulasi, Wole Soyinka and Duro Ladipo	140
	3.1 The Yoruba People	144
	3.2 Veneration to the <i>Oba</i> (King)	145
	3.3 The Oro Festival and Ritual Suicide	147
	3.4 <i>Many Thing You No Understand, Death and the King's Horseman,</i> and <i>Oba Waja</i>	156
	Thesis Conclusion	204
	Bibliography	208

DEDICATION

In memoriam of my late parents:

Mr and Mrs Chukwuemeka Godwin MGBEADICHIE

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Introduction

This thesis extends the scope of Afrocentrism from a theory that resists western forms of marginalisation of African peoples to a principle that challenges internal systems of discrimination in Africa as well. Whilst giant strides have been made in recent years to position Afrocentric theory as an ideology that critiques external forms of discrimination in Africa, there has as yet been no robust and accurate attempt by Afrocentrists to critically position the Afrocentric ideology as a theory that challenges debilitating African cultural traditions which marginalise certain communities and persons within African countries. I do not by this suggest that African critics like Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Mahmood Mandani, Barney Pityana, Lesiba Teffo and Toyin Falola amongst others have not advocated challenging retrogressive practices. They have done this but not specifically in the context of Afrocentrism. For example, the works of Fanon, especially his essay ‘On National Culture’ in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) advocate clearly the notion of autocritique and reflexivity amongst black, anti-colonial intellectuals but not explicitly in relation to Afrocentrism. For this research, Nigeria will be the focal point and I have identified three discriminatory cultural structures within the country that have continued to hinder the well-being of Nigerians: firstly, discrimination against women; secondly, the Osu caste system; and thirdly, the tradition of ritual suicide and the Oro festival. I have chosen to focus on Nigeria for a number of reasons: firstly, Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa with a population of over a hundred and fifty million; secondly, it is a multi-ethnic nation with over three hundred ethnic groups, rich in traditions and customs, both indigenous and modern;¹ and thirdly, as Toyin Falola argues, ‘traditional practices affect the ways millions of Nigerians explain reality, understand how the country works, relate to other members of the society, react to events and changes, and reflect

¹ The Adarawa, Manga, Kanuri, Bede, Fali, Egede, Igala, Tiv, Urhobo, Basa, Jaba, Angas and Borgawa to mention a few are the minority ethnic groups in the country. The Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are the three major ethnic groups. For comprehensive discussion of the different cultural ethnic communities in Nigeria, see Toyin Falola, *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*. London: Greenwood press, 2001. pp. 4- 15.

on and even predict their future and that of their country.² In *Culture and Customs of Nigeria* (2001), Falola argues that ‘Religious ceremonies are more important to Nigerians. There is no open opposition to organised religious practices either by the state or by private individuals.’³ Given these reasons, Nigeria is thus the ideal African nation to begin an Afrocentric critique of traditional practices. The objective of this study, then, is to analyse Afrocentric interventions into these three debilitating Nigerian cultural traditions, while arguing that Afrocentrism is an ideology that should resist both external and internal forms of oppressions in Africa, with the purpose of creating a utopian Nigerian society. My thesis, in this way, then, will add an original approach to the expanding discourse on Afrocentrism.

What is Afrocentrism?

Afrocentrism is a discourse originally developed in African American studies in the early 1930s with the primary aim to ‘create a substantive knowledge about the African world experience.’⁴ In recent years, it has been successfully applied to the African continent and to the black peoples in the African diaspora. It was first traced to the African-American historian W.E.B. Du Bois, who employed it in some of his key works to project black experience and practices. Notable amongst these are: *The Study of the Negro Problem* (1898), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), *The World and Africa* (1946), and *Africa in Battle Against Colonialism, Racialism, Imperialism* (1960). African-American and subsequently, African critics and scholars have provided their own interpretations of this theory. This has rendered the term ‘Afrocentrism’ a little confusing: it is a widely used but critically contested term which means many things to many people, and has been defined within different cultural moments. For this reason, it is not possible to arrive at any single definition,

² Toyin Falola, *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*. p. 29

³ Toyin Falola, p. 29

⁴ James Conyers, ‘The Evolution of Africology: An Afrocentric Appraisal.’ p. 648

but I should like to sketch some definitions and interpretations to identify and position the scope and purpose of this study.

According to Molefi Asante, who is arguably the most provocative voice in the discourse on Afrocentrism, ‘Afrocentrism is a philosophical perspective associated with the discovery, location, and actualization of African agency within the context of history and culture.’⁵ This statement positions Afrocentrism as that ideology which resists forms of marginalisation of African peoples, places African culture at the centre of inquiry, and promotes African peoples as subjects rather than objects of humanity. Asante argues that Afrocentrism must directly challenge Eurocentric views on Africa. In *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (1990), he writes,

Eurocentric methods: they usually seek to realise phenomena in the European experience as if it were universal. While we [Afrocentrists] cannot question the centrality of European view in matters pertaining strictly to Europe [...] we must always challenge the position of Europe on others.⁶

Asante’s argument thus places Afrocentrism as a direct response to Eurocentrism. His ideas are intended to transform reality for Africans by making them the focus of human regeneration. He critiques the Western intellectual community’s contribution to human knowledge, concentrating on rhetoric, logic, and reasoning. He presents the Afrocentric perspective as ‘an alternative cosmology that critiques a Eurocentric hegemony [...]’⁷ Moreover, Asante attacks other Afrocentrists, proposing that the Afrocentrists ‘frame of reference has too often been Eurocentric, that is, flowing from a conceptualisation of African people developed to support the western version of Africa.’⁸ Asante further opines that an African renaissance is only possible if there is an African ideology, distinct from a Eurocentric ideology that allows African

⁵ Molefi Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. p.3

⁶ Molefi Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. p. 189

⁷ Clarence Walker, ‘The Distortions of Afrocentric History.’ p. 80

⁸ Molefi Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. p.23

agency, that is, a sense of self-actualisation based upon the best interests of African people. By African ideology, he means the African beliefs, cultures and systems which form the crux of the Afrocentric theory.

Cheik Anta Diop, another key proponent of Afrocentrism, argues that ‘Afrocentrism is the doctrine to recover the past and systematically overturn Western cultural assumptions of Africa.’⁹ Both Asante and Diop thus theorize Afrocentrism as a struggle to set African peoples at liberty from the margins of Western domination, and posit the African culture at ‘the centre, not periphery; as subject, not object’ in the discourse of humanity.¹⁰ Wilson Jeremiah Moses further describes Afrocentrism as ‘the natural product of people who have been faced with the task of reconciling the ironies and contradictions that we all perceive in our minds and in the world that surround us.’¹¹ These people are Africans who are faced with the task of projecting their culture and beliefs and to rewrite their history. Afrocentrism provides ‘a critical corrective to a displaced agency among Africans.’¹² In the words of Gerald Early, ‘it encompasses centeredness, location, voice or agency, and it empowers African Americans to place themselves in the centre of their analysis so that they are grounded in a historical and cultural context.’¹³ Whilst this quote refers to the African-American context, I have transposed it to an African one, since African-American intellectuals, like their African counterparts, emphasize Afrocentrism as a theory to challenge and resist western cultural and ideological discourses and practices towards Africa.

⁹ Cheikh Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthology*. p.50

¹⁰ Clarence Walker, ‘The Distortions of Afrocentric History.’ p.10

¹¹ Wilson Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History*. p. 180

¹² James Conyers, ‘The Evolution of Africology: An Afrocentric Appraisal.’ P. 643

¹³ Gerald Early, ‘The Anatomy of Afrocentrism.’ p. 312

The publication of *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (1998) marked another interesting, yet similar point in the development of these ideas. Wilson Moses opines that

Afrocentrism argues for an Africa-centred world view ... [and] seeks to include African contributions to the world alongside, and sometimes in place of, those of Europe. It challenges the Western historical perception of European pre-eminence in art, culture, science, mathematics, religion and philosophy.¹⁴ (cf. Tunde)

This contribution supports the notion of Afrocentrism propounded by Asante, Diop, Early, and of course, Walker, which is to ‘place black people squarely on the stage of human drama within the historical sequence and chronology of humankind.’¹⁵ It views Afrocentrism as a calculated ideology that challenges the Eurocentric perception of African history.

Significant Criticisms on Afrocentrism:

In order to show how this study intends to broaden Afrocentric theory, I have carefully drawn out four significant paradigms and criticisms that have shaped the Afrocentric perspective: i) the early mission of Afrocentrism, ii) the debate on civilization, iii) Africa as the source of all Black identity, and iv) the contemporary exploration of Afrocentrism.

The Early Mission of Afrocentrism:

It would be wrong to discuss Afrocentrism without reference to the arguments of the early Afrocentrists – mainly African-American intellectuals – who first theorized the Afrocentric paradigm. In the early twentieth century, Carter Woodson, an African-American historian, became concerned with the education of African-Americans. Western-style education, which was understood to be a process of harnessing the inner potential of a person, became for Woodson, ‘the process of systematically depriving African-Americans of their

¹⁴ Wilson Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History*. p.130

¹⁵ Clarence Walker, ‘The Distortions of Afrocentric History.’ p. 83

knowledge of self.’¹⁶ As Fouad Mami observes, ‘instead of being rewarding and liberating, western education is seen as an institutional machinery that indoctrinates African minds in submission to western power and blinds the same minds from ever aspiring to a just world order!’¹⁷ In *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), Woodson argues that ‘mis-education was the root of the problems of the masses of the African-American community and that if the masses of the African-American community were given the correct knowledge and education from the beginning, they would not be in the situation that they find themselves in today.’¹⁸ Western education is seen by Woodson as a strategy to ‘teach African-American students to perceive the world through the eyes of another culture, and unconsciously learn to see themselves as an insignificant part of their world.’¹⁹ A ‘mis-education’ makes Africans valorise European culture to the detriment of their own culture.

To decolonize the African mind from European hegemony, African-American educators, some of whom are Edward Wilmot Blyden, W.E.B. Du Bois, J.A. Rogers, and Woodson, formed a school of thought which is aimed at overthrowing the authority that alien traditions might have placed in the minds of African-Americans through education. This group began what is known as ‘Afrocentric-education’. Afrocentric-education, a school based on African values, ‘does not necessarily wish to isolate Africans from a Eurocentric education system but wishes to assert the autonomy of Africans and encompass the cultural uniqueness of all learners.’²⁰ Such education which is immersed in African traditions, rituals and symbols, it was believed, would eliminate the patterns of rejection and alienation that engulf so many African-American school children.

¹⁶ Carter Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*. p. 26

¹⁷ Fouad Mami, ‘Identity in Africa: A Philosophical Perspective.’ p. 70

¹⁸ I.C Onyewuenyi, *The African origin of Greek Philosophy: An Exercise in Afrocentrism*. p. 20

¹⁹ Carter Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*. P. 30

²⁰ Carter Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*. P 50

For the early Afrocentrists, or the Afrocentric-educators, the goal of Afrocentrism was to break what they saw as a vicious cycle of the reproduction of black self-abnegation. As I.C. Onyewuenyi, a Nigerian critic, points out,

the leaders of the movement are very much aware of the roles of education in character formation. They trace the root of African-Americans' frustration, self-alienation and inferiority to the education (mis-education) that the system has imposed on them - an education that has stuffed them with an overdose of western ideology and denied them of any knowledge of their own ancestral history and culture. Afrocentrism became a response to this unfair situation of African-Americans.²¹

To Du Bois, the world left African-Americans with a 'double consciousness', and a sense of 'always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.'²² To liberate Africans and African-Americans, Mami argues that 'an intellectual renaissance of Africa cannot be generated unless authentic African intellectuals combat the Eurocentric and potentially destructive reflexes that shape and define neo-colonial schools.'²³ In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson has thus put forward what is arguably the first comprehensive intellectual challenge to the denigration of Blacks. His arguments have today informed the fundamental concept of Afrocentrism as nothing more than an intellectual antithesis to what is considered a Eurocentric hegemony. This is why early and contemporary Afrocentrists claim *The Mis-Education of the Negro* as one of their foundational texts. And it is upon this principle that the popular Afrocentric movement of the 1960s led by Asante, Diop and others build their Afrocentric ideology.

²¹ I.C. Onyewuenyi, *The African origin of Greek Philosophy, An Exercise in Afrocentrism*. P. 43

²² Molefi Asante. *Afrocentricity*. p. 100

²³ Fouad Mami, 'Identity in Africa: A Philosophical Perspective.' P. 69

The Debate on Civilization:

At a 1974 UNESCO symposium in Cairo, Egypt titled ‘The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and the Decipherment of Meroitic Script’, Cheikh Anta Diop brought together scholars of Egypt from around the world. The purpose of this was to investigate Egypt and Africa’s contribution to the civilization of the world. The findings of the members of the symposium were that ‘Egyptian civilization remains profoundly distinctive throughout historical times’ and that ‘it strongly contributed to world civilization’.²⁴ Discrediting Egypt and Africa as the bedrock of world civilization, western critics at the symposium argued that ‘the people who lived in ancient Egypt were ‘white’, even though their pigmentation was dark, or even black, as early as the pre-dynastic period. Negroes made their appearance only from the eighteenth dynasty onwards.’²⁵ Diop refutes this position. He argues: ‘In fact, the inhabitants of the Egyptian and Nubian valley were Negroes ... Negroes were responsible for building the prehistoric ... and historic Egypto-Nubian civilization.’²⁶ Diop hypothesised that the civilization which emerged in Egypt and spread across the world was authentically African. In Diop’s challenge to Western hegemony, a new focus was created for Afrocentric theory. Afrocentrism thus becomes that ‘intellectual theory which asserts that Africans should be given their intellectual pride of place as the originator of civilization.’²⁷ Like Diop, T. U. Nwala, a Nigerian critic, joins many Afrocentrists to condemn Europe’s assertion that it has been responsible for civilization. Nwala angrily responds to such western assumptions: ‘African achievements in science and philosophy were appropriated as European achievements. Thus we read about such African philosophers like St. Augustine, Origen, Philo, Plotinus, Porphyry, as part of western intellectual tradition and achievements. This is a phenomenon which GGM

²⁴ Jean Vercoutter, ‘The Peopling of ancient Egypt.’ 1978. P. 17

²⁵ Jean Vercoutter, ‘The Peopling of ancient Egypt.’ P. 20

²⁶ Cheikh Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthology*. p. 32

²⁷ A.C. Areji, ‘Eurocentricity, Afrocentricity and Globalization.’ *Uche*. Vol. 11.1 (2005): p. 65

James called *Stolen Legacy*.²⁸ The Afrocentrism of Nwala, Diop and many others is a resolute attempt to set the record straight. It is about placing African people within their own historical framework. It is a demand that the contributions of Africans in all areas of civilization be reflected in world history.

Numerous debates – what Walker calls ‘an inordinate critical opposition’ – which demonstrate the weaknesses and limitations of Afrocentrism have arisen as a result of the arguments of the above Afrocentrists.²⁹ One such argument that has been acutely critical of the Afrocentric perspective is Mary Lefkowitz’s *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (1996). Lefkowitz challenges the accuracy, interpretation, scholarship, and research of Afrocentrists. In her book, she questions the supposed supremacy of Egypt (Africa) over Greece (Europe) that Afrocentric critics like Diop, Asante, Michael Meyers, Gilbert Sewall, and Stanley Crouch, among others have identified. Lefkowitz points out that some Afrocentrists state that ancient Greeks stole their philosophy from Egypt. She is further of the opinion that any idea of an ‘Egyptian civilisation’ is ultimately based on Greco-Roman sources which present only a partial and late version of Egyptian practice and ritual. What this suggests is that Lefkowitz maintains that the supposed Egypt civilization is an offshoot of the Greek and Roman concept and culture which reveals no Egyptian influence. Ibrahim Sundiata sums up her analysis as a ‘cudgel to beat home certain ideas about standards, pedagogy and race’.³⁰ Lefkowitz, Sundiata argues, ‘seeks to demolish what she construes to be “Afrocentrists” and to save young people from their clutches’; adding that her work is a

²⁸ T. U. Nwala, *Critical Review of the Great Debate on African Philosophy (1970-1990)*. P. 5

²⁹ Clarence Walker, ‘The Distortions of Afrocentric History.’ p. 90

³⁰ Ibrahim Sundiata, ‘Afrocentrism: The Argument We’re Really Having.’ p. 211

‘critique of “relativist” or “subjectivist” history that attempts to vindicate the past of any particular group- in this case Blacks.’³¹

In the same vein, Glen Bowersock’s ‘Still Out of Africa’, a review of Lefkowitz’s *Not Out of Africa*, questions ‘why Egyptian origins or influences should be linked with Africans at all, except in the simple-minded geographical sense.’³² Asante condemns this position, saying:

Having separated Egypt from Africa in their minds, the Eurocentric Egyptologists began the process of making African societies [...] static entities that never changed over time. This was in some ways an intellectually criminal act because it violated the best traditions of evidence and beyond that it violently detached a part of the continent from the rest of the continent.³³

Asante challenges the idea of separating and detaching Egypt from Africa, stating that ‘African civilization in Egypt had flourished 4,000 years prior to the coming of Arabs.’³⁴ Furthering this debate on civilization, Asante ‘challenges the idea of Eurocentrism masquerading as universalism.’³⁵ What this suggests is that Eurocentrism as a discourse claims to be the cradle of world civilisation and downplays the inclusion of any body of knowledge which refutes this. ‘Eurocentric scholars are of the opinion that positivist thoughts and traditions of rationality, objectification, reason, progress, and the certainty of knowledge are attributed to western science,’ he argues.³⁶

To the early Afrocentrists who perceived Afrocentrism to be a response to Western ideological education on African-Americans and to the Afrocentrists who conceptualised Afrocentrism as a movement to re-inscribe Africa in its rightful place in the world’s

³¹Ibrahim Sundiata, ‘Afrocentrism: The Argument We’re Really Having.’ p. 218

³² Glen Bowersock, ‘Still: Out of Africa.’ p.35

³³ Molefi Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. p. 61-62

³⁴ Molefi Asante, *Kemet Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. p. 34

³⁵ Molefi Asante, *Kemet Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. p. 30

³⁶ George Sefa Dei, ‘“Why Write Back?”: The Role of Afrocentric Discourse in Social Change.’ p. 203

civilization, there is a similar ideological position between these two groups in their conceptualization of the Afrocentric paradigm. Onyewuenyi provides a definition for Afrocentrism which clearly depicts the similar Afrocentric agenda of the two groups:

The Afrocentric movement is a series of activities by concerned African and African-American scholars and educators and directed towards achieving the particular end of ensuring that the African heritage and culture, its history and contribution to world civilization and scholarship are reflected in the curricula on every level of academic instruction ... Advocates of Afrocentrism demand a reconstruction and rewriting of the whole panorama of human history in its account of the origin of mankind, the origin of philosophy, science, medicine, agriculture and architecture ... To achieve these, Afrocentrism should be interpreted as a direct challenge to Eurocentric hegemony.³⁷

From Onyewuenyi's detailed definition, it is clear that the Afrocentric paradigm of these two groups develops as an understandable historical response to years of colonialism and epistemic imperialist violence. Such an act, in my opinion, could render the theory of Afrocentrism less intellectually stimulating and introduce prejudice against the West which might misdirect and misguide the theorists in achieving the objectives of the theory. One such objective is to promote African culture and aesthetics. According to George Sefa Dei, 'when the history of a people becomes the point of analysis to project the people's future, those with a bleak history definitely would get a dark future.'³⁸ On this note, Sefa Dei argues that Afrocentrism should not be analysed, described and defined historically. It should rather be defined through 'a constructive process that recognises the limitations and partiality of all knowledge.'³⁹ By recognising 'the limitations of knowledge', Sefa Dei suggests a deliberate attempt by an embattled people to set aside their historical knowledge to open up and project a chiliastic future. To properly situate Afrocentrism, Afrocentrists must take the ideology beyond a simple

³⁷ I.C. Onyewuenyi, *The African origin of Greek Philosophy, An Exercise in Afrocentrism*. P. 22

³⁸ George Sefa Dei, 'Why Write Back?: The Role of Afrocentric Discourse in Social Change.' p. 203

³⁹ George Sefa Dei, 'Why Write Back?: The Role of Afrocentric Discourse in Social Change.' p. 204

opposition to Eurocentrism and ‘move aside some knowledge in order to open up new spaces [and ideas].’⁴⁰

One such example is the knowledge of colonialism in the history of Africa. The definition of Afrocentrism as a reaction against European conceptions of Africa undermines the very principle of Afrocentrism outlined by Winter Clyde as ‘the African value of sharing, and spirituality which emphasizes the unity of things and the importance of both vertical and horizontal relationships.’⁴¹ ‘Vertical relationships’ in this context refers to the interpersonal alliance of Africans, while ‘horizontal relationships’ suggests the interrelationship of Africans and Europeans. Theorists of Afrocentrism view the theory as solely a response to racism or Eurocentrism. According to Sefa-Dei, Afrocentrism should not ‘degrade Eurocentric knowledge in order to affirm alternative knowledges.’⁴² It opens up new knowledge to solve the problems in African society whether they are problems that are the legacy of colonialism or problems that are the result of African social/cultural practices.

Africa as the source of all Black Identity:

According to Nichole Richards, ‘Afrocentrists, such as Asante, Diop, Marimba Ani, and Maulana Karenga, have used Africa as a source of all Black identity, formulating a monolithic, essentialist worldview that underscores existing fundamentally shared values and suggests a unification of all Blacks under one shared ideology for racial uplift and advancement.’⁴³ In the past decade, however, counter arguments on such a construction have found their way into Afrocentric discourses, challenging the idea of a worldwide, mutual Black experience that is foundational to Afrocentric thought. One main critic who opposes this form

⁴⁰ George Sefa Dei, ‘Why Write Back?: The Role of Afrocentric Discourse in Social Change.’ p. 205

⁴¹ Winter Clyde, ‘The Afrocentric History and Linguistic Methods.’ p. 130

⁴² George Sefa Dei, ‘Why Write Back?: The Role of Afrocentric Discourse in Social Change.’ p. 205

⁴³ Nichole Richards, ‘The Case Against Afrocentrism.’ Rev. of *The Case Against Afrocentrism* by Tunde Adeleke. *Black Diaspora Review*. 3.1 (2012), p. 50

of Afrocentric perspective advanced by Asante, Diop, Ani and Karenga is Tunde Adeleke. Adeleke in *The Case Against Afrocentrism* (2009) clearly emphasizes the difficulty of utilizing Africa in the construction of Black American identity. He challenges Afrocentrists' rejection of the existence of an American identity within a Black body. He argues against the perception that Black Americans remain essentially African despite centuries of separation in slavery. According to Adeleke, 'to suggest that Blacks retain distinct Africanisms undermines the brutality and calculating essence of the slave system that served as a process of unmasking and remaking of a people's consciousness of self.'⁴⁴ As Richards points out, 'Adeleke takes his questioning further by elaborating on the reality of the multitude of ethnic groups sprawled across the continent of Africa, plainly stating that identity is found in ethnicity not race.'⁴⁵ Considering that ethnic information is unavailable to Black Americans, the cultural source of identity construction is further complicated, which Adeleke 'solves by suggesting that Black Americans use slavery as their source.'⁴⁶

If Afrocentrism is to achieve the task of the early Afrocentrists, and accommodate Black identities in the Diaspora, to simplify Adeleke's argument, it should not adopt Africa for the identity construction of all Blacks. Theorizing Africa as the root of Afrocentrism renders Afrocentrism, in Adeleke's opinion, a 'backward-looking paradigm that cannot effectively meet the demands of the descendant of Africa in the changing and complex undercurrents of the human experience.'⁴⁷ Such bold criticism of Afrocentrism thus signals the significant shifts and approaches in the numerous debates surrounding the Afrocentric paradigm in the twenty-first century. One important strand of recent criticism is the argument of some Afrocentrists that the Afrocentric theory should not only challenge European hegemony, but criticise systems

⁴⁴ Tunde Adeleke, *The Case Against Afrocentrism*. P. 52

⁴⁵ Nichole Richards, 'The Case Against Afrocentrism.' p. 51

⁴⁶ Nichole Richards, 'The Case Against Afrocentrism.' p. 51

⁴⁷ Tunde Adeleke, *The Case Against Afrocentrism*. p. 99

within Africa and Africa diaspora that contribute to the sufferings and displacements of Africans in the twenty first century. Contemporary Afrocentrists are thus challenged to re-evaluate the Afrocentric theory to meet the demands of Africans and those of African descent of the twenty-first century. It is with this strand that the present thesis aligns itself.

The Contemporary Exploration of Afrocentrism:

Beyond the use of Africa in identity construction, Adeleke, Kanishka Chowdury, Deborah Atwater and Ibrahim Sundiata, amongst others, challenge Afrocentrism's political movement towards a Black nationalism. Before the domino effect of decolonization that occurred in the mid-twentieth century, Afrocentrism was employed as a political tool to liberate Africans under colonial European rule and dominance. Those who theorized the Afrocentric paradigm in the early age and those Afrocentrists who pursued with passion the task to situate Africa as the home of civilization were clear on the identities of their adversaries and launched a fight against them. Now liberated, contemporary Afrocentrists question the theoretical movement of Afrocentrism. With the existence of discrimination, segregation and marginalisation in Africa as a result of the continued practice of some traditional customs and social structures, as identified in the current project - the Osu caste system, the Oro festival/ritual suicide and gender inequality, amongst others - one wonders how Afrocentrists are defining their adversaries. In *The Case Against Afrocentrism*, Adeleke questions clearly how the 'Afrocentrists are defining their adversaries with the existence of corruption in African governments and the persistent killings which have occurred as a result of tribalism...' in countries like Nigeria and others.⁴⁸ 'In its contemporary exploration', Chowdhury argues, 'Afrocentrism has to interrogate vigorously not only the structures of knowledge that have reproduced racist oppressive practices, but also to oppose and call for a dismantling of all

⁴⁸ Tunde Adeleke, *The Case Against Afrocentrism*, p. 88

dominant hierarchies whether they be classist or sexist.⁴⁹ In contemporary African society, there is no doubt that there are a number of traditional practices that are still upheld and practiced with great reverence despite their continuous oppressions and marginalisation of the African peoples in the twenty-first century. As Chowdhury argues, it is the responsibility of Afrocentrism to criticise such dominant forces of oppression in Africa. The goal of Afrocentrism in the contemporary period, I argue, then, should not only criticise external systems of oppression but internal systems as well. A critical Afrocentrism, like the one forwarded here, must not merely look outward as Africa's problem but have its focus and attention inside Africa to identify Africa's adversaries. This study as a contemporary Afrocentric exploration, builds upon this Afrocentric paradigm in situating the criticism of three social/cultural practices in Nigeria: gender inequality, Osu caste system and the Oro festival/ritual suicide as discourses subject to the 'new' Afrocentric perspective for the renaissance of Africa.

One text which has been critical of the idea of an African renaissance is *African Renaissance*. On 28 and 29 September 1998, 470 people gathered at the Karos Indaba Hotel, Johannesburg, South Africa, to deliberate at an historic conference on the theme of the African renaissance. The theme of the conference was structured around 'culture and education, economic transformation, science and technology, transport and energy, moral renewal and African values, and media and telecommunications.'⁵⁰ The proceedings of the conference were later collected to form the book, *African Renaissance*. *African Renaissance* is a collection of essays 'which strongly contributes towards a larger process of African history, consciousness, roots and realities. It is about Africans being agents and master of their own history and destiny; and a continuation of a long process in a long journey of conscientization, re-

⁴⁹ Kanishka Chowdhury, 'Afrocentric Voices: Constructing identities, [Dis]placing Difference.' *College Literature*. 24.2 (1997), p. 39

⁵⁰ Malegapuru Makgoba, 'Introduction', *African Renaissance*. P ii.

evaluation and introspection.⁵¹ As Malegapuru Makgoba says in the Introduction to the text, ‘it is a humble contribution to our struggle for freedom; to free humanity and us.’⁵² While these are objectives which my idea of Afrocentrism shares, my research questions the critical strategies to achieve a new Africa as outlined in the various critical essays that make up the text. In the text, the strategies for a rebirth of Africa are to condemn colonization, criticise neo-colonialism, oppose dictatorship, whatever form it may assume, challenge the endemic feature of corruption in private and public sectors in the continent, and to preserve African traditions and values which Pityana argues has been ‘suppressed under the weight of Western cultural hegemony.’⁵³ Whilst these are great steps towards a renewed Africa, they do not solve the problems of many Africans who are literally ravaged, marginalised and discriminated by African traditional practices. My thesis thus suggests we cannot speak of an African renaissance without an internal critique of our traditional systems.

Rationale for this Thesis:

While there have been numerous explorations of Afrocentrism as a theory that attempts to ‘rewrite Western histories, challenge external forces of domination, and to re-establish Africa’s cultural heritage, a heritage that includes the oldest known civilization’, only a few critics recognise the need to re-theorize Afrocentrism as a challenge to both external and internal forces of oppression in order to address Africa’s challenges in the twenty-first century.⁵⁴ Of the few critics who share such contemporary view of Afrocentrism, none has given critical attention to situate the challenge of African insidious traditional practices as a discourse of Afrocentrism. What has taken precedence for the contemporary Afrocentrists has been to situate and challenge one of Africa’s twenty-first century’s ‘adversaries’- corruption

⁵¹ Malegapuru Makgoba, p. vii.

⁵² Malegapuru Makgoba, p. viii.

⁵³ Barney Pityana, ‘The Renewal of African Moral Values’, *African Renaissance*. p. 148.

⁵⁴ Chinweizu, et al. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. p. 52

and bad governance- as a discourse of Afrocentrism. This project thus explores not just areas the early Afrocentrists ignored, but aspects the contemporary Afrocentrists have yet to investigate.

In the opinion of Hunter Deborah Atwater, ‘Afrocentric discourse has a primary target audience for whom Afrocentricity is a discourse of resistance that offers an important discursive space to rupture the culture of dominance ...’⁵⁵ In this research, I shall argue Afrocentrism is a discourse of resistance that offers a space to eradicate dominance of any kind within Nigerian society. For example, Afrocentrism offers a radical discursive critique of the subjugation of women in Nigeria. Such a critique is the only way to subvert male privilege and correct the marginalisation of women in the country. Afrocentric discourse challenges the practice of the Osu caste system in Nigeria and it criticises the backward practice of the Oro festival and the tradition of ritual suicide. These three negative cultural practices encourage domination and instigate a new era of slavery in Nigeria by the Nigerian traditionalists who uphold traditional practices at the expense of the well-being of their fellow countrymen. It is worth reiterating that, historically, as James Conyers puts it, ‘Afrocentric knowledge emerged as a critical, political, and academic discourse to respond to a specific problem: the devaluation of African identities.’⁵⁶ In this research, I extend the scope of Afrocentrism to challenge the above social systems in Nigeria that create specific problems in the country: the devaluation of women in Nigeria, the downgrading of humans historically labelled as untouchable, sub-human and outcaste in Nigeria, and the act of murder and suicide to fulfil backward traditions. When I argue Afrocentrism is a theory of social change that seeks to liberate Africans from internal domination in Africa, in the case of Nigeria, for instance, I have a specific academic

⁵⁵ Deborah Atwater, ‘The Rhetorical Challenge of Afro-centricity.’ p. 243.

⁵⁶ James Conyers, ‘The Evolution of Africology: An Afrocentric Appraisal.’ p. 642

project in mind: to assist in redefining the corpus of Afrocentrism in a pluralistic form to address the present challenges of Africans. This research will ask the following questions:

- I) If the goal of Afrocentrism for the early Afrocentrists was to break what they saw as a vicious cycle of racist oppressive practices, what should be the focus of the Afrocentric theory for contemporary Afrocentrists in the twenty-first century? Should they continue to conceptualise Afrocentrism as a historical response to years of colonial oppression or a challenge to oppressive systems inherent in African traditions?
- II) To what extent should Afrocentric theory protect and promote African traditional practices? In what ways does a critique of Nigerian traditional cultures and practices undermine the external critique embedded within Afrocentrism?
- III) How have contemporary Nigerian writers improved/hindered what should be the new focus of the Afrocentric enterprise?

I will like to state clearly that the term 'Eurocentrism' as will be seen throughout this research is a derisive and pejorative word. That is, there isn't a group calling themselves the Eurocentrics, as we know of the Afrocentrists. It is not, therefore, a direct pairing with Afrocentrism.

Methodology:

This project is a literary study and not a sociological enterprise. However, what the sociological details provide for this research is highly important. The study thus draws upon the three previously outlined sociological phenomena in its selection and interpretation of the literary texts. To critically analyse the marginalisation of women in Nigeria, this study engages with the first and second novels of Nigeria's first female novelist, Flora Nwapa: *Efuru* and *Idu*, respectively. In *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), Nwapa attempts to criticise the Nigerian

traditional system of patriarchy and the subjugation of women. Her resolve to challenge such internal force of oppression and marginalisation, through her literature, positions her as a contemporary Afrocentrist. Chinua Achebe is the second writer chosen for this study. His widely read *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), challenge in clear terms the second sociological problem which this study intends to criticise, the Osu caste system. Although most critics, Biodun Jeyifo, Margaret Turner and Stanley Macebah to list a few argue, that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is primarily a rebuttal to colonialism in Africa, this study, in its re-reading of the novel, shows Achebe's concern to liberate Africa not just from external forces of oppression but from internal oppressive practices like the Osu caste system. For the third sociological challenge, the Oro festival and ritual suicide, this study examines how Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) engages with the tradition of ritual suicide. It also considers Duro Ladipo's *Oba W'aja* (1964) which many argue, is the inspiration for Soyinka's play. To explore and criticise the Oro festival as a discourse of Afrocentrism, this study analyses Adaora Ulasi's *Many Thing You No Understand* (1970), a text which has been completely overlooked by African critics.

To achieve the objectives of this research and to clearly answer the research questions posed earlier, this research will evaluate, study and interpret the selection of literary texts outlined above through philosophical and sociological viewpoints and through the application of close textual analysis. I have chosen these texts because they do not only speak against these three practices that create inequalities in Nigeria but because they create 'new ways of seeking understanding in the light of traditional values as they are confronted with the impact of modern ideas.'⁵⁷ I have decided to focus on them because they, like many other contemporary Afrocentric texts, are critiquing what has become the status quo and are offering alternatives

⁵⁷ G.D. Killam, ed. *African Writers on African Writing*. p.4

for an egalitarian Nigerian society. By delimiting the texts for this study to these chosen literatures, I hope to arrive at a more detailed, direct and comprehensive analysis of Afrocentrism, with specific attention to the stated propositions of this research. This will help reduce overgeneralizations and sweeping analyses.

Of all the literary texts written in the 1990s and the twenty-first-century on the Nigerian society, one may wonder why this study chose the literatures of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to address compelling social problems facing Nigerians in the twenty-first century. The response to this is clear: that there are no Nigerian literary texts in the twenty-first century that critically challenge these traditional practices. When the search for Nigerian literary texts of the twenty-first-century was futile, this study thus had to explore the Nigerian literatures of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The limitation faced by this study as a result of this is that new forms of marginalising women, the discrimination against Osu and the practice of ritual suicide and Oro in the twenty-first century are not captured in these twentieth-century texts. So, it was difficult to analyse the literary dimensions of these new trends. However, to critically account for these new dimensions in the above discriminatory practices, this study evaluates a couple of secondary texts that critically analyse these problems.

It is, however, a pity that twenty-first century Nigerian literary writers have abandoned this theme even though it continues to affect many Nigerians. Their attention is on the politics of economic gain. They have refused to look back into the African culture ‘to find out where the rain began to beat us.’⁵⁸ It is important to develop a literature that addresses the whole needs of Africans; a literature that criticises both internal and external forces of oppression upon Africa, not a literature that indulges in highlighting only the wrongs of external practices upon Africa while preserving Africa’s insidious traditions, to achieve national recognition,

⁵⁸ Chinua Achebe, ‘The Role of the Writer in a New Nation.’ *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. p. 15

local acceptance, economic and political gains. As Femi Osofisan argues, ‘in the age of the naira (Nigeria’s currency) in which the total responsibility of literature to the society is constantly subsumed in the mad rush for material wealth, there will always be a market for biased literature and deprived publishers.’⁵⁹ Nigerian writers as the conscience of the society should criticise without favour, fear or bias any system that affects human conditions. While this research serves as a call for a collective criticism and rejection of a vile tradition, it calls for a return to ‘Africanness’, that is, writing about Africa; challenging what needs to be challenged in our tradition, and appraising what demands appraisals. This is rationale of Afrocentrism, a theory which, as I argue throughout this thesis, should not only challenge external forces of oppression but internal forces as well.

Approaching the Case Studies:

It is my contention that apart from the rise of extreme Islamic fundamentalists [Boko Haram], the chosen case studies, the marginalisation of women, the Osu caste system, the Oro festival and ritual suicide, are the most compelling social problems in twenty-first century Nigeria. These case studies have been selected based on how they have affected Nigerians and portrayed the image of the country, at least in part, in a negative way. Despite the constant displacements, deaths and sufferings caused by these traditional practices in Nigeria, one wonders why Nigerian intellectuals have yet to strongly reject and condemn these practices. While it could be said in clear terms that the challenge against the marginalisation of women has received popularity and critical attention, the fight against backward practices like the Osu caste system, the Oro festival and ritual suicide have not been given critical focus. Given the less critical attention to these three practices, it is however not so surprising how abstruse these systems are to most Nigerians. In fact, most twenty-first-century urban Nigerian youths have

⁵⁹ Femi Osofisan, *The Nostalgic Drum: Essays on Literature, Drama and Culture*. p. 169

no idea what these practices are. Karade baba-Ifa puts this clearly: ‘To Nigerians of the urban class, the Osu caste system and Oro which still affect Nigerians especially in rural communities, belong to the Nigerian past.’⁶⁰ What then is the Osu caste system, the Oro festival and ritual suicide?

In Chapter Two and Three of this project, I describe, explain and define the Osu caste system and the Oro festival/ritual suicide, respectively. But let me present short introductory descriptions here: the Osu caste system is a practice of the Igbo traditional religion and system of worship in Nigeria. It is a hereditary social status passed from generation to generation. The most direct definition of Osu is captured in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*: ‘Osu is like leprosy [...], a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcaste, and his children, and his children’s children forever.’⁶¹ An Osu is a person who has been dedicated to an idol and like other caste systems in Africa and South Asia, he is a living sacrifice, a non-person, an outcaste, untouchable and sub-human, with limited opportunities or acceptance, regardless of his ability or merit. It is such discriminatory system that Afrocentrism in the twenty-first-century should criticise. While the Osu caste system is attributed to the Igbos, the Oro festival is a Yoruba cultural practice. According to Yoruba tradition, a deceased king is not expected to be buried alone. For this reason, the Yoruba tradition provides a religious festival called ‘Oro’ which is ‘the traditional ceremony where humans are captured to be buried with the deceased king to complete the rite of passage.’⁶² Not only is the Oro festival a means of acquiring human heads to bury a dead king, it is shocking to note that, in Yoruba culture, the deceased king’s chief-servant is expected to perform ritual suicide, that is, to kill himself, at the burial of the king.

⁶⁰ Karade Baba-Ifa, *The handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*. p. 10

⁶¹ Chinua Achebe, *No Longer At Ease*. p. 256

⁶² Pius Abisoye, *African Traditional Religion*. p. 50

While Adaora Ulasi's novels challenge the practice of Oro, Soyinka and Ladipo's texts will be the focus for the critique of ritual suicide as a discourse of Afrocentrism.

Although most critics argue that the tradition of ritual suicide has been abolished and that no king's chief-servant kills himself to bury a dead king in the twenty-first-century, there has been a renewed interest on Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* in the wake of the growth in number of suicide bombers in Northern Nigeria. In an interview granted *The Guardian* in 2009, Soyinka compares the situation of ritual suicide to suicide bombers: 'The situations are totally different, but still there is that commitment to a final act,' he says.⁶³ 'Maybe there is something about the proliferation of suicide bombers that, consciously or unconsciously, is making people ask questions of that defining moment.'⁶⁴ While the act of ritual suicide is committed to Yoruba tradition, suicide bombing is attributed to an extreme fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. As Nigerians continue to witness a significant rise in suicide bombings, many literary critics have re-visited Soyinka's text to unravel the ideology behind the act of suicide, whether for ritual or religious purposes. One such critic is Marko Stamenkovic. Stamenkovic in his essay 'Are so-called suicide bombers our ritual others?' argues that 'ritual otherness' a rationale which is 'understood as an alternative space is the obscure and hidden place within which 'suicide bomber' theoretically resides and behaves according to different epistemic rules.'⁶⁵ Stamenkovic who interprets the event of ritual suicide in Soyinka's text suggests that ritual suicide, which is the first form of suicide, is the platform upon which other forms of suicide develop. In his argument, 'the issue of ritual self-sacrificial behaviour and the religious behaviour of suicide bomber should be addressed from a particular point,' the particular point of ritual suicide.⁶⁶ Even as some critics argue that ritual suicide is

⁶³ Andrew Gumbel, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 8 April 2009. p. 15

⁶⁴ Andrew Gumbel, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 8 April 2009. p. 15

⁶⁵ Marko Stamenkovic, 'Are so-called suicide bombers our 'ritual others?' *estrema: Interdisciplinary Review for the Humanities*. 5.1 (2014), p. 6

⁶⁶ Marko Stamenkovic, 'Are so-called suicide bombers our 'ritual others?.' p. 10

no longer in practice, the new trend in suicidal missions continue to show the need to re-examine and continuously challenge the practice of ritual suicide and all its ‘ritual otherness’ and forms.

Chapter Outline:

The study is divided into three broad perspectives. The first chapter examines and situates the discourse of Womanism in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and *Idu* as an Afrocentric discipline. It exposes the sufferings and marginalisation of women in patriarchal Nigerian society. Through a critical evaluation of Nwapa’s use of myth, meta-fiction and, borrowing from Siga Jajne’s study, what I call ‘voice-throwing’, I demonstrate how Nwapa creates a new world and an escape route for Nigerian women. If Afrocentrism is a discourse that offers a space to eradicate inequality of any kind within the African community, the critique of the subjugation of women in Nigeria, I argue, might be understood as a part of Afrocentric theory. The second chapter attempts to critically analyse Chinua Achebe’s challenge of the Igbo tradition of the Osu caste system in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* as an Afrocentric discourse. It analyses Achebe’s use of the literary technique of dualism and his manipulation of ‘form’ in his challenge of the Osu system. Through a close reading of these texts, I analyse Achebe’s position of the role of the intellectuals, the ‘voiceless’ situation of the Osu in *Things Fall Apart*, and the ‘voice-consciousness’ of the Osu in his short story, ‘Chike’s School Days.’ From the outset, this chapter maintains that Achebe’s first and second novels contain the kinds of varied and original position to challenge the Osu caste system. This is what makes these texts Afrocentric. The third chapter analyses Afrocentric interventions into the debilitating traditions of the Oro festival and ritual suicide in Adaora Ulasi’s *Many Thing You No Understand*, Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Waja (The King is Dead)*.

Chapter One:

Womanism as an Afrocentric Discourse: Reading Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*.

To many Afrocentric critics, Afrocentrism challenges colonial oppression in Africa and promotes and celebrates African culture. This 'fight against racial oppression', Kalenda Eaton argues, 'ignored internal gender [, statutory and other domestic] oppression[s] within the black community.'¹ Afrocentrism, as I argue, should not only challenge external but also internal forces of oppression in Africa: Its aim is to criticise any system of oppression within Africa. According to Ibrahim Sundiata, any theoretical move directed at erasing inscriptions of inequality, marginalisation and subjugation of any kind among African peoples could be classified as a version of the Afrocentric impulse.² Womanism, a theory that challenges masculine authority in African communities, is one such theory that is directed at erasing the marginalisation of women in Africa. For this reason, I have decided to situate womanism as a discourse of Afrocentrism and a version of the Afrocentric impulse. This idea is widely informed by Patricia Hill Collins who argues, and I agree, that 'Womanist ideology contributes to Afrocentric discourse.'³ In this study, I have chosen womanism, instead of feminism, for a number of reasons.

1.1 The reasons for the rejection of Feminism:

The theory of feminism which originated in France but was not widely used until the 1890s, advocates the rights and equality of women.⁴ Feminism, according to Jane Bryce, is 'the struggle for the liberation of women, and encompasses epistemologies, theories, and

¹Kalenda Eaton, *Womanism, Literature, and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), p 1.

²Ibrahim Sundiata, 'Afrocentricism: The Argument We're Really Having', *American Historical Review*, 30, 1996, p. 203.

³ Patricia Hill Collins, 'What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond,' *The Black Scholar*, (26), 11, 1996, p. 10

⁴ Chris Beasley, *What is Feminism? An introduction to feminist theory*, (London: Sage Publications, 1999), p. xiii

modes of activism that seek to bring an end to the oppression and subordination of women by men.⁵ Such modes of engagement may include education, industrialisation and the realisation of self. In the opinion of Alice Walker, feminism is ‘a political theory that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women.’⁶ However accurate these definitions might be, many African women writers like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Modupe Kolawole to list a few, reject the term ‘feminism’. In a detailed study of feminism, Mary Mears argues that ‘a number of African writers reject the term ‘feminism’ because of its negative connotations, its identification with western individualized philosophy, and its exclusion of men.’⁷ Taking Mears’ argument into consideration, and for easy identification, I have grouped the reasons for the rejection of feminism by African women writers into four categories: the western origin of feminism; the ideology of feminism identifying with western philosophies, and appealing to western women’s conditions, and not to African women’s specificities; the conception of feminism as an imperialist attempt to recolonize Africa; and lastly, the misconception that feminism discourages family ties and encourages the exclusion of men. I shall deal with each in turn.

(A) The western origins of feminism.

Most African critics reject feminism because of its ‘Westerncentric’ origin. *In African Voices: Interview with Thirteen African Writers*, Emecheta, on the question of the refusal to be called a feminist, says:

I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that, I just resent that. Otherwise, if you look at everything I do, it is what the feminists do, too; but it is just that it

⁵ Jane Bryce, ‘A Feminist Study of Fiction by Nigerian Writers.’ Ph.D. Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 1989, p.16.

⁶ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983), p.xii.

⁷ Mary Mears ‘Choice and discovery: An analysis of women and culture in Flora Nwapa’s fiction.’ PhD Dissertation, University of South Florida, 2009, p. 22.

comes from Europe, or European women and I don't like being defined by them. But in almost everything, except perhaps the question of the family, my books have the same ideas as they do. It is just that it comes from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African kind of feminism. They call it womanism [...]⁸

From Emecheta's argument, it is obvious that many African critics are not comfortable with the theory of feminism simply because it originates from the West. Daphne Ntiri, an African critic, uses a troublesome term to describe her rejection of feminism. She argues that African women on public platform have rejected feminism because 'they are perplexed over the "racist origin" of the feminist movement [...] there is unquenchable need to reclaim African women [...] and] they have found little solace in the doctrine and mission of the feminist movement.'⁹ Describing feminism as having a 'racist origin' conjures up images of cultural preferences, clashes and strife. 'Racism' is a significant term which should be used carefully. Although pejoratively used here, Ntiri's expression of feminism as having a 'racist origin' seems to suggest her opinion, and by no means tallies with Emecheta's that feminism is rejected because it is of a western origin. In this case, she equates 'racism' with 'westerncentrism'.

(B) The ideology of feminism identifying with western philosophies, and appealing to western women's conditions and not to the specificities of African women's experiences.

Given the two contrasting conditions of women, namely, Western women and African women, many African critics argue that feminism does not appeal to African women's typical conditions and situations. Bessie Head, Mariama Ba and Nwapa, are just some of the African critics who reject feminism because the term is thought to be too Western in its application.¹⁰ These women cannot explain the theory of feminism which is completely strange to their

⁸ Raoul Granqvist and John Stotesbury, *African Voices: Interview with Thirteen African Writers*, (Michigan: Dangaroo Press, 1989), p. 19.

⁹ Daphane Ntiri, 'Introduction to Clenora Hudson-Weems' *Africana Womanism*', p. 10.

¹⁰ Mary Mears, p. 35.

culture; a theory that addresses ‘western realities and not African women’s peculiar situation’ where millions of women are struggling with more fundamental problems relating to poverty and starvation.¹¹

Lauretta Ngcobo, one of Africa’s leading cultural commentators, provides a detailed distinction of the situations and challenges facing both Western and African women, which, she argues, are the reasons for the rejection of feminism by an African-centred theory. Ngcobo asserts that ‘European feminist struggle is not the same as that of an African woman.’¹² She argues that although their struggles may be similar, they begin from two different positions. In contrast to African women, Ngcobo argues, western women are well protected in their enslaved position. They do not produce food; they provide what services they have to, and are well looked after for that service.¹³ I disagree with Ngcobo’s representation of western women’s situation in this manner. Her description does not accommodate western victims of domestic violence, or women from communities that are traditionally more patriarchal than others within western societies. However misleading Ngcobo’s analysis is, I understand that the situations of western women in general are not as harsh as that of African women. Whilst this is the situation of the western woman, Ngcobo laments that the African woman is supposed to offer a tremendous service to society, over and above the mothering of her children. She has to provide food; she has to work hard for it. She remains an outsider at the home of her in-laws. She is alienated.¹⁴ As a result of this distinct objectified position of women in Africa, African critics ‘quest for a different terminology that more adequately addresses the specificity of African women’s yearnings.’¹⁵ Like Ngcobo, Kolawole argues that ‘African women are more interested in a womanist ideology that addresses their specificity [...]’¹⁶ However, she

¹¹ Modupe Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, (Trenton: African World Press, 1997), p. 37.

¹² Raoul Granqvist and John Stotesbury, p.50.

¹³ Raoul Granqvist and John Stotesbury, p. 51.

¹⁴ Raoul Granqvist and John Stotesbury, p. 51.

¹⁵ Modupe Kolawole, p. 22.

¹⁶ Modupe Kolawole, p. 19.

suggests that ‘western feminism is too uncompromising to apprehend the African cultural peculiarity.’¹⁷ Put simply, she argues that ‘the West cannot speak for Africa.’¹⁸

(C) The conception of feminism as an imperialist attempt to recolonize Africa.

Many African women, as Kolawole observes, resist subscribing to feminism as a means of gesturing their rejection of imperialist hegemony by which their own needs and specificities are not met.¹⁹ They reject the term ‘feminism’ because ‘[...] African women’s reality has been inscribed from the West [...].’²⁰ To them, this is another form of imperialism.

To support this point, I return to Kolawole’s argument that, ‘A new wine in an old wineskin will only heighten existing scepticism [...] In recent years, our sisters in the diaspora have become so prolific in writing back that a new direction has been charted. Inevitably, being on the frontline of racism has accelerated the scope of response.’²¹ Just like Ntiri, Kolawole’s use of ‘racism’ here draws our attention to colour discrimination, colonialism and the era of imperialism in Africa. In the above quotation, she argues that feminism as ‘a new wine’ in an ‘old wineskin’ of imperialism will increase scepticism and the discourse on colonialism and imperialism in Africa. It is her opinion that feminism in Africa is an attempt to bring back the ‘old wineskin’ of domination in Africa. She argues that African women will continue to reject feminism and write back to chart a new direction to liberate African women. This trajectory of Kolawole and other African thinkers is well summed up in Leila Ahmed’s argument: ‘feminism [...] serve(s) as an instrument of colonial domination, [...] vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interest.’²²

¹⁷ Modupe Kolawole, p. 19.

¹⁸ Modupe Kolawole, p. 22.

¹⁹ Modupe Kolawole, p. 20.

²⁰ Modupe Kolawole, p. 10.

²¹ Modupe Kolawole, p. 28.

²² Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 21.

(D) The misconception that feminism discourages family ties and encourages the exclusion of men.

The argument that feminism encourages the exclusion of men and supports women to work alone is a popularly held belief amongst many African scholars. This notion has raised a lot of controversies and debates in gender studies. I will briefly state the debates on this notion as well as showing where I stand in the argument. I recognise that feminism is a complex and diverse theory having different strands: liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism/socialist feminism, gynocentric feminism, and black feminism, to list just a few. These strands sometimes take opposing positions on the feminist agenda. While liberal feminism focuses on the public sphere, on legal, political and institutional struggles for the rights of individuals - male and female - to compete in the public marketplace, radical feminism is interested in the welfare of women and the separation of men from the affairs of women.²³

In the argument of Sonia Johnson, quoted in Chris Beasley's *What is Feminism?*, '[o]ne of the basic tenets of Radical Feminism is that any woman [...] has more in common with any other woman - regardless of class, race, age, ethnic group, nationality - than any woman has with any man.'²⁴ Many African thinkers confuse the radical feminists' thought with 'feminism' in its entirety. They have rejected feminism because of the agenda and approach of the radical feminists which is contradictory to African culture, Nigerian in particular. In African culture, African women operate on binary complementarity of the sexes - male and female - rather than binary opposites. In this way, they reject Johnson's feminist agenda which advocates the separation of men from women's affairs. The African woman believes in family-centredness, community building, mothering and nurturing as well as assisting spiritually. As Kolawole points out, 'the centrality of the family is important to Africans [...] Women in particular see

²³ Chris Beasley, p. 51-52.

²⁴ Chris Beasley, p. 59.

the family as the nucleus of social development, growth, moral sustenance as well as cultural continuity.²⁵ They totally reject the radical feminists' agenda [which they confuse with feminism] that 'the family is a tool for entrenching capitalist oppression and individualism.'²⁶ Ama Ata Aidoo adds her voice to African women's rejection of feminism: 'Feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African homes.'²⁷ Aidoo's opinion is not far from Merle Woo, an Asian-American who has this to say concerning feminism:

There is feminism where all the problems in society are seen as caused by men. I don't believe in that. I don't believe men are the creators of the problems in society... I do believe that men and women have to work together to solve the problems in society.²⁸

Both Aidoo and Woo reject feminism because, feminism, they argue, breaks up the unity between women and men in the family.

Although radical feminism divides men and women, Beasley argues that other strands of 'feminism consider the sexes as different but complementary.'²⁹ In line with Beasley, Simone de Beauvoir, as early as 1972, classifies feminists as 'those women or even men who fight to change the position of women [...]'³⁰ In view of this, it could be argued that feminism is not against family-hood, neither does it encourage the exclusion of men. Men and women, in the discourse of feminism, need to work together to eradicate women's oppression. This position of Beasley and de Beauvoir, contradicts the criticism of most African thinkers that feminism encourages men's exclusion. Beasley argues that such criticism is 'a straightforward

²⁵ Modupe Kolawole, p.25.

²⁶ Modupe Kolawole, p. 30.

²⁷ Ama Ata Aidoo, 'unwelcomed Pals and Decorative Slaves- Or Glimpses of Women as Writers and Characters in Contemporary African Literature,' ed. Ernest Emeyonu, *Literature and Society: Selected Essays on African Literature*, (Oguta, Nigeria: Zim Pan African Publishers, 1989), p. 11.

²⁸ Jill Johnson, *Feminist Dictionary*, p. 50.

²⁹ Chris Beasley, p. 7.

³⁰ Rosalind Delmar, *What is feminism?* P. 27.

result of either limited knowledge or prejudiced misrepresentation.’³¹ It is therefore, in my opinion, not a crucial reason for the rejection of feminism.

However controversial most African critics view feminism, Abena Busia, a Ghanaian scholar, feels sufficiently satisfied with feminism and will identify with it as a concept for African women’s liberation. In a recent interview, she affirms her commitment to feminism:

I am comfortable with the term ‘feminism.’ If we concede the term feminism, we’ve lost a power struggle. As a strategy, we might be conceding grounds that we shouldn’t [...] Feminism is an ideological praxis that gives us a series of multiple strategies and what those strategies have in common is that the woman matters.³²

Busia seems to stress that feminism accommodates the centrality of women’s problems. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, a Nigerian scholar, also condemns ‘African women’s persistent rejection of feminism.’³³

The centrality of the arguments I have provided so far for the rejection of feminism, I argue, is based on cultural differences. If the culture of the European is very different from the African, then I agree with Head, Kolawole, Aidoo and Ntiri, who argue that feminism cannot be totally applied to all countries in the world since the theory did not make provision for the multiplicity of cultures in the world. It becomes ‘inadequate for expressing the yearnings of all women at all times [and in all places].’³⁴ In the opinion of Sandra Harding, ‘feminism as a [...] movement for the emancipation of women must foreground cultural issues.’³⁵ Since the experiences and beliefs of women differ, it becomes problematic to generalize the discussions of women within a single theory. This cultural diversity suggests the varying theories of women’s liberation such as: Womanism, Motherism, and the most recent theory - Stiwanism, an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa, amongst others. As bell

³¹ Chris Beasley, p. ix.

³² Abena Busia, Personal Interview, 22 Feb. 1995.

³³ Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformation*, (Trenton: African World Press, 1994), p. 11.

³⁴ Modupe Kolawole, p. 39.

³⁵ Sandra Harding, ed. *Feminism and Methodology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 30.

hooks argues, 'Black women need to construct a model of feminist theorizing and scholarship that is inclusive, that widens (their) options, that enhances (their) understanding of Black experience and gender.'³⁶ In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins agrees with hooks that black women must place their thoughts, experiences, and consciousness at the centre of their interpretations. They must create their own realities.³⁷ Critics and other proponents have taken note of this, while shaping theories with cultural consciousness and understanding, having a far-reaching effect on the dignity of women. For this reason, the theory of womanism, Africa's alternative to feminism, is constructed to accommodate the culture of the African people.

1.2 What is Womanism?

The discourse of womanism first appeared in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* in 1983. Womanism manifests and enhances 'African women's collective grouping, and positive bonding as opposed to ideological bondage.'³⁸ By 'collective grouping', Walker argues that womanism promotes unity amongst African women in their fight for freedom. Womanism, as Kolawole puts it, is 'an explicit denomination of the totality of (African women's) ... collective self-assertion.'³⁹ According to Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Womanism is:

a prophetic voice concerned about the well-being of the entire African ... community [...] It attempts to help black women see, affirm, and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith [...] It challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and families' freedom and well-being. [Womanism] opposes all

³⁶ bell hooks, *Talking Back*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 58.

³⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 20.

³⁸ Modupe Kolawole, p. 27.

³⁹ Modupe Kolawole, p. 30.

oppression based on [...] sex, class, sexual preference [and]
physical ability [...]⁴⁰

Williams categorises womanism as a distinctive theory that argues for a positive position of African women. She upholds womanism as an aid to African women's affirmation and confidence to enable them to challenge all oppressive forces affecting women's struggle for survival and space.

To Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'Womanism is a philosophy that celebrates Black roots, the ideas of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom.'⁴¹ This emphasizes cultural wholeness and self-assertion which concurs with Williams' position above. The term womanism, Madhu Kishwa argues, '[...] may be interpreted as an attempt to integrate Black nationalism into feminism, to articulate a distinctively Black feminism that shares some of the objectives of Black nationalist ideology.'⁴² This, no doubt, suggests the cultural dynamism in women's discourse. In my opinion, womanism can be termed an Afrocentric theory that reconceives the conditions of African women by challenging some traditions, beliefs and systems in Africa that are demeaning to womanhood. Like feminism, it fights to regain the dignity of women, but from a specifically African perspective. It is a version of the Afrocentric discourse that aims to eradicate the culture of dominance placed on African women. Such negotiation, redefinition and extension of Afrocentric discourse shows that the need to renew and revalidate African traditions is distinct from the attempt to preserve debilitating cultures in Africa. Womanism brings to the forefront the 'role of African women as leaders' in the struggle to regain and reconstruct society.⁴³ I have chosen womanism, not feminism, since it is more relevant to an understanding of the culture of Nigerian women, the area of focus for this study.

⁴⁰Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p 12

⁴¹ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,' *Signs*, (11), 1, 1999, p. 50.

⁴² Madhu Kishwa, *Gandhi and Women* (New Delhi: Manushi Prakashan, 1986), p. 60.

⁴³Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 30.

This chapter extends the scope of the Afrocentric paradigm by examining the subjugation and displacement of women in Nigeria. It introduces the theory of womanism as a strategy of female liberation through the reform and reconstruction of African belief systems. It will therefore discuss Afrocentrism from a womanistic perspective in the literature of Flora Nwapa, Nigeria's 'First Lady of Letters', particularly her first two novels *Efuru* and *Idu*.⁴⁴ My position on Afrocentrism does not divorce itself from the focal point of any Afrocentric approach that is linked inextricably to the challenge to oppression and alienation. However, I do not collapse colonial oppression with gender oppression: I argue that Afrocentric discourse is born out of colonial conquest, and womanism, as an emancipatory discourse, might be understood as a version of the Afrocentric enterprise. Whilst repelling male dominance, and the debilitating Nigerian traditions, *Efuru* and *Idu* present stories of social dysfunction and psychic damage of Nigerian women that are inflicted by a patriarchal Nigerian society. They rewrite the place of African and Nigerian women within African traditions in the interest of African peoples.

1.3 *Efuru* and *Idu*

Often placed together as companion works because of their similarities, Nwapa's first and second novels *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), reveal Nwapa as a 'mother-figure in novel writing in Africa.'⁴⁵ Born in Oguta, Nigeria, on 13 January 1931, Florence Nwanzuruahu Nkiru Nwapa is a Nigerian author known as Flora Nwapa. Nwapa is well known for writing about life and traditions from a woman's viewpoint. *Efuru* is the first internationally published novel in English by an African female novelist. For this reason, she is popularly referred to as 'the mother of African novel by women,' the doyenne of African female writers,' and 'ancestor and

⁴⁴ Ada Egbufor *African Profiles International*, March/April, 1993.

⁴⁵ Teresa Njoku, 'The Mythic World in Flora Nwapa's Early Novels,' *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Marie Umeh (Trenton: African World Press, 1998) 111-25, p. 111.

literary foremother’’ which still stands today, several years after her death in October 1993.⁴⁶ Before the break-through by Nwapa in the mid-1960s, African literature has been written from a predominantly male point of view where women are represented as marginal characters. Modupe Kolawole corroborates this view: ‘Male writers continue to fictionalize women as objects or minor characters that are vehicles for fostering a world of male heroism. At other times, women are objects of admiration.’⁴⁷ In the early phase of the Nigerian literature, male writers like Amos Tutola in *The Palmwine Drunkard* (1952), and Achebe in *Arrow of God* (1964) have routinely portrayed their female characters in the stereotype as subjected wives who have little say in shaping their destiny. While *Houseboy* (1956) by Ferdinand Oyono, a Cameroonian, portrayed women as opportunist, weak, sexual objects and lacking sufficient will-power, Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959) makes a caricature of women as foolish in spite of their age. Femi Ojo-Ade recognises this in his argument that ‘African literature is a male-centred and chauvinistic art, with colonialism having energised traditional views in which the male is thought to be the master, the woman to be the flower, not the worker [...]’⁴⁸ This marginalisation opens to Nwapa a strong desire to create a positive location and position for African women in literature. As observed by Kolawole, Nwapa’s *Efuru* ‘is arguably the first instance in African literature where women are created as subjects and positive protagonists.’⁴⁹ Nwapa’s novels; *Efuru*, *Idu*, *One is Enough*, *Women are Different* and her Biafran war novel, *Never Again*, have evolved in direct correlation with the level of awareness shaped by socio-political exigency. They depict the deplorable socio-economic situation of Nigerian women in particular and African women more generally. In the words of Marie Umeh, her creativity seems to suggest that ‘the days are gone when Nigerian women [are] looked upon as mere

⁴⁶ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, ‘Introduction: The Invalid Dea(r)th, and the Author: The Case of Flora Nwapa, aka Professor (Mrs.) Flora Nwanzuruahu Nwakuiche,’ *Research in African Literatures*, 2 (26), 1995, p.5.

⁴⁷ Modupe Kolawole, p. 79.

⁴⁸ Femi Ojo-Ade, ‘Female Writers, Male Critics,’ *African Literature Today*, 13, 1983, p.164.

⁴⁹ Modupe Kolawole, p. 81.

objects for decoration.’⁵⁰ ‘As the materfamilias of [African] Women’s fiction, she has launched a comprehensive wo/man palava and bequeathed a rich literary legacy to [African women] by prominently featuring characters drawn from the collective psyche.’⁵¹ Her literatures ‘are modes of gender self-expression and self-assertion with her heroines created to identify with the Nigerian women’s plight as she saw them.’⁵² She claims in an interview that ‘Efuru is representative of the determination and resourcefulness of women from her home town, Oguta [in Nigeria].’⁵³ As Obioma Nnaemeka puts it, her ‘work[s] captures the complexity, ambiguities, and contradictions of her environment.’⁵⁴ Even though labelled as ‘an inferior novelist’ by Eustace Palmer and excluded in the list of top African writers in Gerald Moore’s *Twelve African Writers*, the critical reception of Nwapa’s construction of women in *Efuru* and *Idu* continue to revise prevalent gender notions and humanistically reflect on the nature of life and society.⁵⁵

Set in traditional Nigerian society in Oguta where Nwapa grew up and began her education, *Efuru*, is Nwapa’s titular heroine’s tragic experience in Oguta, a Nigerian society, as a woman. She is a beautiful young woman who, unfortunately, is mistreated by men. She is an industrious, successful ‘and remarkable woman [...] from a distinguished family.’⁵⁶ Yet, she is caught in the web of traditional bigotry. Barren for several years, she eventually gave birth to a child who dies in infancy. This heightens her problems. She is left unconsolated. Her first marriage to Adizua is affected by polygamy; her ‘second attempt at marriage [to Eneberi] ends

⁵⁰ Marie Umeh, ed. *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, (Trenton: African World Press, 1998), p. 9.

⁵¹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, ‘Introduction: The Invalid Dea(r)th, and the Author: The Case of Flora Nwapa, aka Professor (Mrs.) Flora Nwanzuruahu Nwakuiche,’ *Research in African Literatures*, 2 (26), 1995, p. 9.

⁵² Modupe Kolawole, p.81.

⁵³ Flora Nwapa, Personal Interview, 23 March, 1990.

⁵⁴ Obioma Nnaemeka, ‘Feminism, Rebellious Women and Cultural Boundaries: Reading Flora Nwapa and Her Compatriots,’ *Research in African Literatures*, 2 (26), 1995, p. 104.

⁵⁵ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of African Novel*, (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 61.

⁵⁶ Flora Nwapa, *Efuru*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1966), p.3.

on the rock too.’⁵⁷ People around her acknowledge her distinction and generosity but cannot help in her tragedy. Her father, her only source of happiness, dies when she needed him. As Kolawole argues, Efuru is ‘a lone fighter [...] a victim or scapegoat of one bigotry or another [...] a woman caught in the periphery of social change.’⁵⁸ Ultimately, she returns to her father’s house, where we first encountered her.

Many critics question *Efuru*’s accomplishments in the context of feminist criticism. In Eustace Palmer’s *The Growth of the African Novel*, Palmer argues that Nwapa does not treat real issues that are relevant to the lives of the people.⁵⁹ According to Nadine Gordimer, Nwapa does not know enough about her own creation [Efuru], so she fills in the vacuum with rambling details of daily life which are ... irrelevant.’⁶⁰ ‘Nwapa’, Gordimer argues, ‘only dimly senses the theme of her novel; all she has seen is the disparate series of events in the life of Efuru.’⁶¹ Eldred Jones is another critic who supports Palmer and Gordimer’s view. To Jones, ‘Nwapa’s novel lacks a strong overall conception [...] It is like a manual on how young brides are treated in an Igbo village.’⁶² I support Mears in disagreeing with Palmer, Gordimer and especially Jones on this. *Efuru* as a novel focuses on much more than brides: it focuses on how women-married, divorced, widowed, single, childless, and with children- are treated in Igbo culture, especially if they seem to step outside traditional roles.

In contrast to Palmer, Gordimer and Jones, Ojo-Ade argues that ‘Flora Nwapa’s novels are quintessential examples of the ironies and contradiction rampant in Africa, and womanhood is part of the whole syndrome.’⁶³ He sees the character Efuru as a mouthpiece for Nwapa’s

⁵⁷ Modupe Kolawole, p. 83.

⁵⁸ Modupe Kolawole, p. 83.

⁵⁹ Eustace Palmer, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Nadine Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters: Notes on African Writings*, (Johannesburg, South Africa: SPRO-CAS/Ravan, 1973), p. 20.

⁶¹ Nadine Gordimer, p.21.

⁶² Eldred Jones, ‘A Review of *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi and *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 3(10), 1968, p. 130.

⁶³ Femi Ojo-Ade, p. 165.

personal notion of life and believes she creates empathy for her heroine. In terms of question of style, Elleke Boehmer asserts: ‘What distinguishes her writing from others are the ways in which she has used choric language to enable and to empower her representation, creating the effect of a woman’s verbal presence within her text, while bringing home her subject matter by evoking the vocality of women’s everyday existence.’⁶⁴ Although critics like Jones who describe Nwapa’s novel as ‘manual’ complain about the lack of traditional novelistic plot and structure in her texts, other reviewers like Boehmer appreciate Nwapa’s conversational narrative method which is aimed at breaking patriarchal structures and giving voice to women. In my reading of the novel, as will be discussed in detail below, *Efuru* carefully displays traditional life and utterances of maltreated Nigerian women who seem to advocate a need for change. It stresses important themes like marriage, traditions, the importance of children, abilities in business, the abject suffering of women, and the need to change traditions that affect women, amongst others. To achieve this change, Gay Wilentz, like Boehmer, argues that ‘Nwapa focuses attention upon the sounds and voices of women’, a theme I will examine in my analysis of ‘voice-throwing’: a concept conceived by Senegalese writer Siga Jajne which suggests that women should force their voices out to disrupt the culture of dominance.⁶⁵

Like *Efuru*, *Idu* is another attempt by Nwapa to depict the unfortunate tragic situation of Nigerian women in Nigerian society. Endowed with great beauty, intelligence and business acumen, Idu is presented as a ‘near-perfect character’ full of innate goodness and benevolence.⁶⁶ Her life is bound up with Adiewere, her husband, that when he falls ill and dies, she chooses to seek him out in the land of the dead, refusing the traditional rights of levirate to marry Ishiodu, her brother-in-law. She experiences several years of barrenness; she gives birth

⁶⁴ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, p. 92

⁶⁵ Gay Wilentz, ‘Afracentrism as Theory: The Discourse of Diaspora Literature,’ *Passage: Journal of Transnational and Transcultural Studies*, 2 (1), 2000, p. 40.

⁶⁶ Yemi Mojola, ‘The Works of Flora Nwapa,’ *Nigerian Female writers: A Critical Perspective*, ed. Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo (Oxford: Malthouse Press, 1989), p. 21.

to a boy-child, Ijoma, and is pregnant with another child before joining her late husband in the land of the dead. She seems to show that children are not the only thing she wants from life. In Ogunyemi's critical account of *Idu*, she identifies three significant readings in the novel: the 'child bearing problem [of Idu reflects] the barrenness of society [...]; Adiewere's sickness [...] indicates a sick society; and [the location of] the stream as a meeting point but an unexploited spiritual (palliative) for a society in disarray.'⁶⁷ She went further to say that Nwapa's novels address 'communal and national rehabilitation.'⁶⁸ For Kolawole, '*Idu* reveals feminine consciousness effectively at varying degrees of commitment.'⁶⁹

When considering the close similarities between the protagonists of the two novels, *Efuru* and *Idu*, it is no doubt that 'they resemble each other in several moral and physical traits.'⁷⁰ Both *Efuru* and *Idu* are reputed for excellence as wives who face almost the same problem of infertility. Each has a confidant, Ajanupa for *Efuru* and Nwasiobo for *Idu*, as well as a little girl ward living with them, Anamadi with *Idu* and Ogea with *Efuru*. Both *Efuru* and *Idu* are set in rural Oguta where life is slow, and the river and market are prominent in the lives of the people. *Efuru* and *Idu* both have economic fulfilment but lack personal or family happiness. Submerged by societal traditions, they both meet tragic ends. The only clear difference between Nwapa's titular heroines, *Efuru* and *Idu*, is that, while *Efuru*'s two marriages fail, *Idu* enjoys a harmonious marriage with Adiewere. *Efuru* and *Idu* represent African fiction from the African world-view with a 'well balanced womanist consciousness'.⁷¹ They paint the burden and nervous conditions of Nigerian women in the Nigerian society. In

⁶⁷ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,' *Signs*, (11), 1, 1999, p. 58.

⁶⁸ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,' *Signs*, (11), 1, 1999, p.34.

⁶⁹ Modupe Kolawole, p. 199.

⁷⁰ Yemi Mojola, p. 21.

⁷¹ Modupe Kolawole, p. 143.

short, they are a treatise on Nigerian womanism. As a summary to these novels, it is worthwhile reading the author's perception of the novels under study:

In my first two novels, I tried to recreate the experiences of women in the traditional [Nigerian] society [...] [T]he two novels (I hope!) give insight into the resourcefulness and industriousness of women which often made them successful, respected, and influential people in the community. In these two novels, therefore, I tried to debunk the erroneous concept that the husband is the lord and master and the woman is nothing but his property. I tried to debunk the notion that the woman is dependent on her husband. [...] I tried in *Efuru* and *Idu* to elevate the woman to her rightful place.⁷²

My critical analysis of these novels goes beyond presenting them as mere manifestos for Nigerian women's liberation. I bring a certain understanding to Nwapa's novels, arguing for a transformation of social orders that exploit women. In my analysis of these novels, I will argue that women contribute to their problems in Nigerian society. While it aims to show men's attitudinal oppression of women through traditions and social structures, it will show Nigerian women oppressing fellow women. This is what I term women against women. I will also endeavour to show Nwapa's criticism of debilitating Nigerian traditions that affect women, while working with cultural structures that are liberating and ennobling. A critical evaluation of Nwapa's use of myth, meta-fiction and voice-throwing to positively position women and create a new world for them will be discussed here. I will then proceed to analyse her ideas on marriage, motherhood and the complementarity of man and woman to eradicate female oppression. I will conclude this chapter by exposing the flaws in these creative oeuvres of Nwapa as she tries to liberate the Nigerian woman.

⁷² Obioma Nnaemeka, *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power from Africa to the Diaspora* (Trenton: African World Press, 1998), p. 13.

I would like to make clear that the Afrocentric discourse on womanism in Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu* is a critical discourse of the Igbo ethnic cultural group in southeast Nigeria, since the novels are set in Oguta, south-east Nigeria. Nigeria is a very diverse country with several regions and ethnic groups like the Yorubas in the south-west, the Hausas in the north, and the Igbos in the south-east. I do not claim that *Efuru* and *Idu* represent the complete cultures and experiences of all women in Nigeria. What I intend to argue is that these novels might be a platform to understand and study the marginalisation and liberation of women in Nigerian society.

There is no doubt that 'African women', as Kolawole suggests, 'are products of multiple subjugation[s]. Patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and gender imperialism all combine to act against the African woman's self-assertion.'⁷³ All these means of women's marginalisation have been adequately addressed in the critical works of many African critics except tradition. This is because scholars uphold the traditions of men with positivity but condemn colonialism, patriarchy and other forms. However, this does not erase the fact that 'traditions play major role in the marginalisation of African women.'⁷⁴ According to Ada Uzoamaka Azodo in her recent study on African tradition, 'Tradition favours men over women in all spheres of life.'⁷⁵ Most Nigerian beliefs favour men but 'break women's backs.' As enshrined in African traditions, men receive chauvinistic lessons on society's expectations of them in the public and in households to effectively control their wives. Women, on the other hand, are tutored to be submissive to all males, including their husbands and brothers. In both *Efuru* and *Idu*, the reader is introduced to several traditions and beliefs that demean the woman: the tradition of female circumcision; a culture that permits men to have as many wives as possible, while women as objects and property, compete among themselves for a position; a

⁷³ Modupe Kolawole, p. 25.

⁷⁴ Modupe Kolawole, p. 60.

⁷⁵ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, 'Efuru and Idu: Rejecting Women's Subjugation,' *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Marie Umeh, (Trenton: African World Press, 1998), p. 170.

culture where women do not speak but remain silent; a culture that classifies women as objects and property meant to be acquired; a tradition where the education of a woman is considered a waste of time; a belief system that supports men on adultery counts but punishes any woman who engages in such behaviour; and last but not least, a culture which places more importance on giving birth to a boy-child. I next show how Nwapa challenges each of these discriminatory practices in turn.

The tradition of the ‘Surgical invasion of women’s bodies,’ popularly known as female genital mutilation or circumcision, is what I choose to describe as ‘domestic abuse of female bodies’.⁷⁶ In the customs of Nigeria, particularly amongst the Igbos, the operation of circumcision is seen as a ‘bath’, which all adult women need to take, in order to be clean and ready for marriage and child-bearing. Efurū goes through this painful traditional practice, exposing on one hand the pain and sorrow women undergo under this belief system, and on the other, a rejection and failure of such a practice. In describing the pain resulting from this practice, Ugwunwa, the woman who carries out the circumcision for Efurū tells her: ‘I will be gentle with you. Don’t be afraid. It is painful no doubt [...] Where is my razor?’⁷⁷ She uses her razor to carry-out the mutilation on Efurū’s genital parts: ‘Efurū screamed and screamed [for] it was so painful.’⁷⁸ After the mutilation, ‘Efurū lay on her back with her feet apart. She was [...] crying [...] it was still very painful.’⁷⁹ As explained by Ugwunwa, the performer of the circumcision, it is believed that this dreadful exercise helps to keep women’s children alive and protect them from any misfortune. She narrates a story of a lady who refuses to have this mutilation done to her body and ends up losing her boy-child as a consequence of her rebellion: ‘‘You know Nwakaego’s daughter?’’ ‘Yes, I know her.’ ‘She did not have her bath [circumcision] before she had that baby who died after the dreadful [circumcision]’ [...] The

⁷⁶ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, p. 171.

⁷⁷ *Efurū*, p. 14.

⁷⁸ *Efurū*, p. 14.

⁷⁹ *Efurū*, p. 14.

dibia [traditional doctor] had already told me that the baby died because she did not have her bath.’⁸⁰ Qualifying circumcision as the act of ‘bath’ taken brings three things to mind: firstly, it suggests that, as a bath cleanses and refreshes, circumcision is believed to cleanse a woman from any misfortune or mishap. Secondly, it suggests that she is dirty or contaminated, and could only be made clean through the process of circumcision. Thirdly, it justifies circumcision as a common practice in society, since ‘bath’ is a day-to-day routine.

To a Nigerian man, and perhaps a woman, the success of women’s circumcision means the protection and provision of life. They believe that the child of any woman who embraces this tradition will live long. Nwapa, however, seem to disagree with this belief. Her presentation of Efuru, who had this circumcision before the birth of her baby but still experienced sorrow, having lost her child at a tender age, constitutes a complete rejection and failure of this belief. ‘Ogonim’, Efuru’s baby, ‘had another attack of convulsion’.⁸¹ The circumcision of her mother could not save her. ‘She was dead’ before Ajanupu, her mother’s confidant, arrived.⁸² Through her account of Efuru, Nwapa criticizes the practice. She reveals the superstition underlying the practice. For Nwapa, It is an absurd practice designed to torture the bodies of women.

According to John Mbiti, a renowned theologian and philosopher aptly referred to as the father of African philosophy and theology, blood is a sacred thing which has significant meaning in African society.⁸³ Mbiti recognises the power in the blood which he says binds the individual to the land and consequently to the soul of the departed of the society. In the case of female genital mutilation, I argue that the circumcision blood is like a covenant or a solemn agreement between the woman and her people or society to remain loyal. Through this act, the woman is perceived to be loyal to her societal traditions and accepts all forms of subjugation,

⁸⁰ *Efuru*, p. 14.

⁸¹ *Efuru*, p. 68.

⁸² *Efuru*, p. 68.

⁸³ John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1969), p.40.

servitude, marginalisation and pain which come with it. By the shedding of Efurú's blood at her circumcision, Efurú is bound to the society. She is bound to pain and sorrow. This perhaps suggests why she seems to move from one sad situation to another in the course of the novel. This is the sad fate of women in *Efurú* and in Nigerian society at large. Until every woman has gone through this mutilation and pain, the society considers her an outsider, foolish and stupid. This is revealed in the novel when the few women and their mothers who hesitate or refuse to embrace this tradition are seen as foolish and stupid: 'She did not have her bath before she had the baby who died after the dreadful flood [...] Foolish girl. She had a foolish mother, their folly cost them a son, a good son.'⁸⁴

Based on Mba's account of the Nigerian belief that circumcision prepares a woman for child-bearing, one wonders why most women in *Efurú*, and in real-life situations, having gone through this system, still find it a challenge to conceive and bear children. To Nwapa, a woman is a woman by birth and not by going through certain rules prescribed by traditions. She has allowed Efurú, her heroine, to go through this 'dreadful' tradition to depict the emptiness of such a belief which oppresses women in Nigeria.

Discussing female genital mutilation, Ayako Mizuo argues that the relevance and tangibility of maternal bodies require negotiation and re-dress.⁸⁵ Borrowing from this understanding, the perception of women's bodies in terms of sexuality, commodification and the tradition of the mutilation of genital parts needs re-dress. I have discussed how Nwapa shows the emptiness and painfulness of this act. From Efurú's sorrows, Nwapa creatively instils in the minds of her readers the need for a change in this belief, which according to the World Health Organisation, as recorded by Boyle Elizabeth, is an 'injury on female genital

⁸⁴ *Efurú*, p. 14.

⁸⁵ Ayako Mizuo, '(Post)Feminism, Transnationalism, the Maternal Body, and Michele Roberts,' *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 3(4), 2001, p. 19.

organs for non-medical reasons.⁸⁶ I should note here that a number of countries in the northern half of sub-Saharan Africa practice FGM. As observed by Bettina Shell-Duncan, ninety-two million girls over the age of ten in Africa are living with this domestic ritual of female genital mutilation.⁸⁷ There is no doubt that these alarming figures were in Nwapa's mind as she scripts '*Efuru*, the ever first female English novel from Africa.'⁸⁸

Not only in *Efuru* does one notice the challenge to the tradition of female circumcision, Alice Walker, arguably the first womanist writer, rebukes this practice in her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), a semi-sequel to her earlier novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). The novel is about a young African-American woman Tashi who goes mad after passing through a circumcision process in Olinka, her home town. It explores what it means to have one's gender culturally defined and emphasizes that, according to Walker, 'Torture is not culture.'⁸⁹ Like *Efuru*, Tashi's body is tortured by the traditions of her society. *I Learned Love* and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi are other works which criticise this practice in Africa. Having analysed Nwapa's criticism of the tradition of female circumcision, I next will examine her condemnation of the tradition of polygamy.

The tradition of polygamy is one belief that Nwapa criticises in her literary oeuvre. In the Nigerian system, it is by right that a man can have as many wives as he chooses, but tradition forbids a woman having extra-marital affairs or taking a second husband without divorcing the first. According to Mbiti, 'in African ethics, theft is one of the worst crimes a person could commit, second to a woman's infidelity [...]'⁹⁰ Men enjoy the privilege of sexuality and their misconducts are glibly dismissed as one of those things men do: 'That is

⁸⁶ Boyle Elizabeth Heger, *Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Conflict in the Global Community* (John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 60.

⁸⁷ Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund, eds. *Female 'Circumcision' in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2000), p. 6.

⁸⁸ Theodore Akachi Ezeigbo, p. 100.

⁸⁹ Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, p. 50.

⁹⁰ John Mbiti, p. 43.

how men are'.⁹¹ The Nigerian woman like Efuru accepts this tradition with the perception that only a foolish woman would want to have a man all to herself. 'What is wrong in his [Adizua's] marrying a second wife', Efuru says, 'it is only a bad woman who wants her husband all to herself. I don't object to his marrying a second wife.'⁹² Women seem to have accepted this tradition. All they fight for, as Efuru says, is 'to keep [their] position as the first wife.'⁹³ They have so cheaply accepted the belief that '[the man] is the lord and master, if he wants to marry [...] [they] cannot stop him.'⁹⁴ Efuru's father's advice to her strengthens the position of a man having the authority to marry as many wives as possible, while the woman is left competing for her position within the home: 'Did he [Adizua] bring a woman into the house? [...] It does not matter my daughter if Adizua wants to marry another woman.'⁹⁵ The fact that all Efuru fights for is the position of a first wife, shows how low she has fallen. The full implication of Efuru's shallow reaction to the tradition of polygamy depicts the powerlessness of a woman with regards to marriage in a typical Nigerian society.

In almost the same words, and to picture the helpless situation of women in the case of polygamy, Ajanupu encourages Efuru with her [Ajanupu's] story of similar circumstances which reaffirms the position that it is by right that a man can have as many wives as he wants: 'I had to recommend a girl for my husband when I saw that I was too busy to look after him and my children, and at the same time carry on with my trade. So there is nothing wrong in his wanting to marry a second wife.'⁹⁶ These women have gone beyond accepting their fate in the tradition of polygamy to recommending and searching for women for their husbands. Ajanupu is explicit in the role she plays in securing a second wife for her husband. She assists Efuru in the search for a second wife for Eneberi, Efuru's second husband, after her failed

⁹¹ *Efuru*, p. 69.

⁹² *Efuru*, p. 53.

⁹³ *Efuru*, p. 53.

⁹⁴ *Efuru*, p. 54.

⁹⁵ *Efuru*, p. 63.

⁹⁶ *Efuru*, p. 57.

marriage with Adizua, Efuru's first husband. Here are Efuru's words to her mother-in-law: 'Ajanupu and I saw her [Nkoyeni] today and we thought we would recommend her for Eneberi.'⁹⁷ Her mother-in-law replies: 'You are taking keen interest, my daughter, in getting a wife for your husband. It is good. I am happy.'⁹⁸ By this reply of Efuru's mother-in-law, one can argue that women are beginning to accept their fate and are living comfortably with such a demeaning tradition. However, they recognise the pain and sorrow attached to such a tradition. Nwapa admits that, as a result of polygamy, women are relegated to mere objects. Efuru's lamentation tells it all:

'Adizua is not going to Ndoni alone' [...] 'I am quite sure a woman is in this. His every movement suggests this. Adizua must be in the influence of some woman. He is still pleasing to my eyes, but I am not pleasing to his own eyes any more, and I cannot explain it [...] how long will this last? [...] I am a human being. I am not a piece of wood [...] God in heaven knows that since I married Adizua I have been faithful to him. Our ancestors know that since I ran away from my father's house to Adizua's that nobody, no man has seen my nakedness. But Adizua has treated me shabbily. He has treated me the way that only slaves are treated. God in heaven will judge us.'⁹⁹

This passage seems to debunk the erroneous representation of women as mere objects 'with no feeling and rationality.'¹⁰⁰ It demonstrates the pervasiveness and presentation of marriage as the loss of self of women. From the last words of Efuru, it is clear that women in *Efuru* have given up all hope by calling on God to judge the deeds of man and tradition. As long as women continue to accept the tradition of polygamy, 'men will continue to take advantage of women's biology to oppress them.'¹⁰¹

If in *Efuru* one notices the presentation of women submerged under the unfortunate tradition of polygamy in Nigeria, *Idu* might be read as Nwapa's response to, and criticism of, this belief system. In *Idu*, Nwapa extends her critique of the practice of polygamy. In the

⁹⁷ *Efuru*, p. 180.

⁹⁸ *Efuru*, p. 180.

⁹⁹ *Efuru*, pp. 53, 58.

¹⁰⁰ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pergamon, 1985), p. 30.

¹⁰¹ Teresa Njoku, p. 117.

opinion of Lord Raglan, a British anthropologist and folklorist, 'marriage is an event of profound emotional significance, with love as the centrality.'¹⁰² With love and understanding in a marriage, Nwapa believes that the structure of polygamy will be dismantled and rejected. Nwapa uses the relationship between Idu and Adiewere to define marriage and reject polygamy. The marriage between Idu and Adiewere is one that remains unique. People all over the village speak of their uniqueness:

'Sometimes when I see them, I am filled with happiness. Have you ever seen two people so happy before?' 'No, I never have. God created them as good people and God gave them to each other. You never see them quarrel. Don't they ever quarrel?' [...] 'They understand each other so well. So when they quarrel, they make up before anybody hears [...]' 'That is how it should be [...]'¹⁰³

Through this characterization of Idu and Adiewere, Nwapa describes what a marriage should be like. With Adiewere, she goes further to show her ideal picture of a loving, caring husband. Adiewere respects Idu and does not confine her to the kitchen; rather, he cooks and serves her: 'Her husband cooked for himself.' '[...] You mean her husband cooked!' 'Cooked, I say. He split the firewood, he fetched the water and he cooked and took some to his wife to eat.'¹⁰⁴ The character of Adiewere is a direct contrast to Francis in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) who treats his wife as slave, and Adizua in *Efuru* who victimizes Efuru. They are representatives of Nigerian 'men who oppress women through rigid social structures, and unwarranted stifling of women's potential.'¹⁰⁵ As a man with a difference and respect for women, Adiewere advises his younger brother, Ishiodu and his peers to quit drunkenness, take responsibility and treat their wives with love and respect. For example, he condemns the

¹⁰² Lord Raglan, ed. 'Myth and Ritual', *Myth: A Symposium*, p. 125.

¹⁰³ Flora Nwapa, *Idu* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ *Idu*, p. 197.

¹⁰⁵ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, p.167.

drinking habits of his peers who come home drunk and, for no reason at all, begin to beat their wives.

Not only does Adiewere condemn the beating of wives and other ill-treatments of women, he criticises polygamy as well. Despite the fact that he is married to Idu for a couple of years with no child, he is unwilling to do what most men do: take a second wife, and if possible, a third or fourth. Rather than taking another wife who would bear him a child, he encourages Idu whenever she thinks of her barrenness and believes that children will come in time: ‘Adiewere, when do you think my own baby will come?’ he replies: ‘There you go again. I don’t want you to start crying tonight because you have no child. I am your husband, do you hear?’¹⁰⁶ Through his attitude and increasing love for Idu, even in her childless situation, he refutes the assertion that when, after marriage, ‘procreation does not happen, that woman has failed an essential life goal.’¹⁰⁷ As Nwapa puts it, ‘he [Adiewere] was not at heart a polygamist [...] he loves his wife and did not want to marry another wife.’¹⁰⁸ Adiewere’s position on polygamy is as clear as his love for Idu. In spite of the fact that the members of his age-group tease him, he does not worry. The short conversation below shows his determination to remain with Idu:

‘Come leave your wife and let’s go and drink,’ he said to Adiewere. ‘You have only one wife and yet you won’t leave her alone. What do you expect people like us [polygamists] to do?’ ‘That’s your problem,’ Adiewere replied.¹⁰⁹

Adiewere seems convinced of his love for Idu and his position on polygamy. Nwapa re-emphasizes his point of view again: ‘[...] he was not at heart a polygamist. All he wanted was

¹⁰⁶ *Idu*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ Gay Wilentz, ‘Not Feminist but Afracentrist: Flora Nwapa and the Politics of African Cultural Production,’ *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Marie Umeh (Trenton: African World Press, 1998), p. 146.

¹⁰⁸ *Idu*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ *Idu*, p. 102.

one good wife and children [...]’¹¹⁰ Even when he finally succumbs to his wife’s pressure to take another wife, as a result of her childlessness, he sends the new wife away a few months afterwards: “Adiewere married a girl about three months ago,’ [...] [he] has already sent her away, it is for us to be telling you how he sent her away.”¹¹¹ To Nwapa, if Nigerian men can take the courage and behaviour of Adiewere, the marginalisation and predicament of women under the tradition of polygamy will be committed to the past.

Since the burden of the womanist is to lay bare the old debilitating culture for the common good of women, Nwapa continues to expose these harmful traditions. One such tradition which she critically condemns is the belief that women should not speak but remain silent. In the Nigerian culture, as recorded by Azodo, women are taught early in life that they are a sensual class of human beings, created for the erotic pleasure of men, tutored to be submissive to all males.¹¹² Part of being submissive is to keep quiet and silent while men talk.

In her recent work, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*, Irene D’ Almeida problematizes the silence of African women. Her position is thus a good starting point in discussing Nwapa’s criticism of the voiceless nature of Nigerian women, as tradition suggests:

Silence represents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social organisation in which males assume power and create for females an inferior status.¹¹³

This argument of D’ Almeida suggests that African women have long been silenced by tradition. John Warner agrees with D’ Almeida. He argues that African women have survived without a voice with which to speak their complaints. Warner provides an example of the

¹¹⁰ *Idu*, p. 51.

¹¹¹ *Idu*, pp. 43-44.

¹¹² Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, p.167.

¹¹³ Irene D’ Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville: Florida University Press, 1994), p. 1.

‘silence of women’ in Africa. In his argument, the typology of male definitions of women as undervalued humans, commodities, and objects of domestic violence, as well as societal traditions, silence women in society.¹¹⁴

According to Azodo, the task of the African woman is to procreate, carry out domestic chores, support the man in family work, and serve as an object for his erotic pleasure.¹¹⁵ Such a woman does not contribute in decision making; she has no say in matters about the family as she is to watch like an object when the man talks and takes decisions. Efurú tells her maid’s parents: ‘My husband has just gone to the back of the house. He will soon be here. A woman has no say [...]’¹¹⁶ In the dowry payment of Efurú by Adizua and his family, one notices another case of silencing the woman. Adizua goes to Efurú’s house with his uncles and mother to beg Efurú’s father that he might take Efurú as his wife without paying the bride price. Everyone speaks, except Adizua’s mother: ‘Adizua’s mother was there, no doubt, but what can a woman do?’¹¹⁷ Any woman who attempts to speak her mind is accused of being a ‘male woman’. Nwabata who tries to criticize Nwosu, her husband, for his wrong attitude, puts it clearly: ‘I put my mouth in a bag and sewed it up. I don’t want to be accused of being a ‘male woman’.’¹¹⁸ The silencing of women in this regard reduces the status of women and contributes to their representation as mere objects, like property, to be inherited. Nwashike Ogene, Efurú’s father, tells his guests: ‘Efurú is my dear daughter. The only child of my favourite wife. As you know I inherited all the wives of my father.’¹¹⁹ To the male folks, ‘women are nothing.’¹²⁰ In my subsequent discussion of the traditional right of levirate, we shall see more of this marginalisation of women as property to be inherited.

¹¹⁴ John Warner, ‘The Silence of Women, The Voices of Women’ p. 16. cf. Carole Boyce-Davies and Mineke Schipper.

¹¹⁵ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, p. 168.

¹¹⁶ *Efurú*, p. 39.

¹¹⁷ *Efurú*, p. 22.

¹¹⁸ *Efurú*, p. 104.

¹¹⁹ *Efurú*, p. 23.

¹²⁰ *Efurú*, p. 178.

Nwapa totally condemns this belief that women are to be silent. It is her opinion that women should break this cultural yoke of silence which subjects them. To show how she attempts to break this tradition by giving women voice, I shall draw extensively from Siga Jajne's notion of 'voice-throwing'. According to Jajne, a Senegalese scholar, "Voice-throwing' or '*sani-baat*' is the Senegalese concept of intrusion by expressing one's view point."¹²¹ It suggests that women should force their voices out to disrupt the culture of dominance. As Jajne puts it, women should be articulate and voice-throw their feelings in an active form, thereby mobilizing themselves to reject all forces that oppress them.¹²² What Jajne implies is that through direct confrontation in speech or in written form, women can be liberated of the systems that oppress them. This is important because, as Kolawole argues, 'African women have emerged from 'silence', transcending the many limiting borders imposed on them by [...] traditional [...] structure[s].'¹²³ To show the significance of 'voice-throwing' as a challenge to the culture of silencing African women, Jajne writes:

I would like to offer an alternative reading and locate myself with the concept of 'voice-throwing'. I believe that by 'throwing' in one's voice, a disruption [...] can take place. The act of 'throwing' one's voice can create an epistemic violence [...] that will create a space for hitherto unheard voices.¹²⁴

Through the characterization of Ajanupu, Efuru and Nwabata in *Efuru*, and the description of Idu and Ogbenyanu in *Idu*, Nwapa identifies with Jajne's concept of 'voice-throwing'. Ajanupu, Efuru's confidant is an outspoken woman who rebukes the wrong of both men and women. Whenever Efuru is maltreated by both Adizua and Eneberi, she confronts the man involved. An example is her response to Eneberi who accuses his wife, Efuru, of adultery:

¹²¹ Siga Jajne, 'African Women and the category 'WOMAN' in Feminist Theory,' *Proceedings at the Annual Conference of the African Literature Association*, Ohio, March, 1995. , p. 18.

¹²² Siga Jajne, p.20.

¹²³ Modupe Kolawole, p.6.

¹²⁴ Siga Jajne, p. 21.

‘Ajanupu, [...] my wife is guilty of adultery. The gods are angry with her and will kill her if she does not confess. So [...]’ [...Ajanupu replies] ‘Eneberi, nothing will be good for you henceforth. [...] Our ancestors will punish you. Our Uhamiri will drown you in the lake. Our Okita will drown you in the Great river. From henceforth evil will come to visit you. What did you just say? My god, what did you say? That Efuru [...] the good, is an adulterous woman. [...] Eneberi what happened at Onicha? [...] You don’t know that we know that you were jailed. And here you are accusing Efuru [...] of adultery.’¹²⁵

Such confrontation and ‘throwing of voice’ will help position women in their rightful place as subjects not objects in society. Ajanupu has a firm voice and she is not afraid to speak. On a different occasion, she calls ‘Adizua’, Efuru’s first husband ‘a fool.’¹²⁶ She further likens him to ‘a man who was asked to eat on a plate and he preferred to eat on the floor.’¹²⁷ This criticism comes after Adizua abandons Efuru for another woman. Even to her sister, Ossai, she throws her voice at her for her decision to stay with Adizua’s father, a man with a bad record:

‘Didn’t my mother and I tell you to leave that wretched husband of yours? You would have married a better husband and had children. Instead you remained in your husband’s house and shut yourself out from the world. You wanted to be called a good wife, good wife when you were eating sand, good wife when you were eating nails. That was the kind of goodness that appealed to you. How could you be suffering for a person who did not appreciate your suffering, the person who despised you. It was not virtue, it was plain stupidity. You merely wanted to suffer for the fun of it, as if there was any virtue in suffering for a worthless man.’¹²⁸

This is worth quoting at length because it depicts a shift in Nwapa’s representation of women from the liminal voiceless Nigerian woman who has no say, to the ‘voice-throwing’ woman, who, as a human being, has the right to express herself and her feelings as well as challenging outdated attitudes.

¹²⁵ *Efuru*, pp. 216-17.

¹²⁶ *Efuru*, p. 128.

¹²⁷ *Efuru*, p. 134.

¹²⁸ *Efuru*, pp. 79-80.

To further explore the voice throwing of Ajanupu, we might consider her response to Nwasobi, one of Efurū's cousins who has come to sympathize with Efurū on the death of her only daughter, Ogonim. It is clear that Nwasobi lacks the wisdom in sympathising with the bereaved. In her attempt to console Efurū, she recounts Efurū's mishaps, bringing Efurū's misfortunes afresh to her memory. Ajanupu takes no time to intercept her speech:

‘That will do’, Ajanupu shouted from the room. ‘That will do, I say. What nonsense. Nwasobi, if you don't know how to sympathize with a woman whose only child has died, say you are sorry and leave her in peace, and don't stay here enumerating all her misfortunes in a tone that suggests that you enjoy these misfortunes.’¹²⁹

Reading Ajanupu's voice throwing to Nwasobi and Ossai, it is clear that Nwapa gives women voice to challenge not only traditions and patriarchy, but any attitudes, both male and female, that are demeaning to women.

Ajanupu is not the only character with a defined voice In *Efurū*. Nwabata, who once refused to condemn her husband's wrong behaviour for fear of being called a ‘man woman’, is another character who refuses to be silent. She confronts her husband, who uses the little money they realised by giving their daughter, Ogea, as maid to Efurū, to pick a ‘village title’: ‘And let me tell you, I am not going to pawn my children again. I will rather starve with them than do that. If you have scraped your eyebrows, I have not scraped mine [...] You think you know everything when you know nothing.’ This voice-throwing of Nwabata suggests that women are no longer at ease with the tradition of ‘keeping-quiet’. They are actively confronting the situation.

Ogbenyanu is the most obvious character in *Idu* who throws her voice, refusing to be marginalised and subjected. Married to a ‘never-do-well’ husband, Ishiodu, who depends on Adiewere, his brother for his survival, Ogbenyanu seems to have had enough of the continuous

¹²⁹ *Efurū*, p. 73.

beatings to which she is subjected by him.¹³⁰ She tells Idu: ‘[...] Ishiodu, the foolish one. He is a bag of foolishness. [...] I am going, I am going to my mother’s house. I won’t return to Ishiodu again. I have had enough. Ishiodu the broken one, the stupid one.’¹³¹ Even in Nwapa’s *One is Enough*, Amaka, her heroine, condemns the wrong of her husband. She openly criticises him through ‘voice-throwing’. She leaves him for a better life in the city of Lagos.*

By this act of ‘voice-throwing’, Jajne argues, ‘one’s voice can create an epistemic violence that will create a space for hitherto unheard voices.’¹³² With reference to Jajne’s concept of ‘voice-throwing’ as promoting ‘epistemic violence’, I am reminded of Edward Said’s *Representations of the Intellectual*. According to Said, an intellectual is

an individual with a vocation for the art of representing, whether [...] talking or writing [...] It involves both commitment and work, boldness and vulnerability [...] Intellectuals are individuals endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude [...] They] confront orthodoxy and dogma [...] They] cannot easily be co-opted by government or co-operations [...] Their] *raison d’être* is to represent all the people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rugs. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice.¹³³

It is interesting how Said defines intellectuals. To him, what we might call ‘voice-throwing’, or speaking publicly, is the toolkit of an intellectual. He argues that ‘nothing disfigures the intellectual [...] as much as [...] silence.’¹³⁴ He supports Jajne’s argument that ‘voice-throwing’ is a key factor ‘to advance human freedom and knowledge.’¹³⁵ Like Jajne, he is of

¹³⁰ Idu, p. 14.

¹³¹ Idu, p. 71.

* Not only in Nwapa’s novels do we see clearly the boldness and confidence of women to break the culture of silence, Tsitsi Dangaremba’s *Nervous Conditions* presents to us the boldness of little Tambu, who directly confronts Babamukuru, the bread winner of the family, whom every one fears, when he takes a decision that is unfavourable to women in the family.

¹³² Siga Jajne, p. 21.

¹³³ Edward said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 13,14.

¹³⁴ Edward Said, p. xii.

¹³⁵ Edward Said, p. 10.

the opinion that intellectuals challenge systems of injustice.¹³⁶ As he puts it, they ‘provocatively disturb the monumental calm and inviolate aloofness of the traditions.’¹³⁷ This ‘distortion of monumental calm’ which Jajne describes as ‘epistemic violence’ does not mean violence in the physical sense. If I understand Said and Jajne correctly, they refer to the revolutionary change that takes place as a result of the awareness and the universalism of the conditions of the disadvantaged. Said argues: ‘the intellectual is to universalise the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular [group of people,] race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others [... This] guards against the possibility that a lesson learned about oppression in one place will be forgotten or violated in another place or time.’¹³⁸ Through universalising the suffering of a group of people, a lesson is learnt, and it is such a lesson that gives rise to necessary revolutionary change. According to Pierre Bourdieu, this act of ‘universalism is what makes intellectual practice *intellectual* practice.’¹³⁹

Nwapa does not advocate violence but the throwing of voice. She applies this concept of ‘voice-throwing’ in her novels to show that ‘voice-throwing’ can create consciousness, strength and confidence for women to refuse being silent or silenced. Her ‘intellectuals’ are, in Said’s words, ‘unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés’ that marginalise women.¹⁴⁰ ‘Nwapa’s women not only have a voice, but their voice is loud and clear.’¹⁴¹ Through this concept of ‘voice-throwing’, Nwapa has shown that women are moving away from any imposed, condescending ideology which negates the process of self-inscription, self-retrieval, and self-healing for Nigerian women. With this idea, Nigerian women can intercept

¹³⁶ Edward Said, p. 20.

¹³⁷ Edward Said, p. 37.

¹³⁸ Edward Said, p. 43-44.

¹³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Are Intellectuals Out of Play?’ in *Sociology in Question*, p.40.

¹⁴⁰ Edward Said, p. 23.

¹⁴¹ Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, ‘Myth, History, Culture, and Igbo Womanhood in Flora Nwapa’s Novels, *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Marie Umeh, (Trenton: African World Press, 1998), p.53.

existing norms which are unfavourable to women and ‘recreate themselves’.¹⁴² It seems to support Ogunyemi’s findings that ‘*Efuru* and *Idu* focus on developing selfhood and finding empowerment.’¹⁴³ Moving on from Nwapa’s rebuttal of the culture of silence on Nigerian women, the collective African culture of the right of levirate which pawns women as property meant for inheritance is another tradition which Nwapa condemns in her literary oeuvre.

In the culture of Nigeria, a woman whose husband dies is obligated to marry her husband’s brother to continue the family line.¹⁴⁴ In almost all parts of Nigeria, as observed in *Efuru*, a man is by tradition free to marry his late father’s wives by way of inheritance. This is the levirate act. However, as Elimelech Westreich notices, ‘if the brother-in-law refuses to perform the levirate commandments, he is obligated to sever the matrimonial connection between himself and the widow.’¹⁴⁵

In both novels under study, Nwapa depicts this tradition and how she breaks away from it. As earlier quoted, Nwashike Ogene, *Efuru*’s father makes it clear to his guests: ‘As you know I inherited all the wives of my father.’¹⁴⁶ By the choice of the phrase ‘As you know’, one thing comes to mind: it suggests that this tradition is a well-accepted practice in the society. Even the word choice ‘inheritance’ reduces women as mere objects and property for inheritance. Nwapa rejects this culture in *Idu*.

When *Idu*’s husband, Adiewere dies, Ishiodu, his brother puts a thread round *Idu*’s neck, to claim her as his wife because it is the custom of the people:

‘Ishiodu came to put the thread round my neck this morning [...] I just looked at him, he put the thread and left. [...] He is the only

¹⁴² Modupe Kolawole, p.9.

¹⁴³ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, ‘Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,’ *Signs*, (11), 1, 1999, p. 64.

¹⁴⁴ John Mbiti, p.51.

¹⁴⁵ Elimelech Westreich, ‘Levirate Marriage in the State of Israel Ethnic Encounter and the Challenge of a Jewish State,’ *Jewish Law Association Studies*, (New York: Jewish Law Association Studies, 2002), p. 120.

¹⁴⁶ *Efuru*, p. 23.

brother of Adiewere. He should marry me,' and she laughed again.¹⁴⁷

This act of Ishiodu supports Elimelech's position that a certain obligation has to be fulfilled before a widow becomes the wife of her brother-in-law. From a close reading of these lines of Idu, it is clear that Nwapa mocks this culture as Idu was not going to marry Ishiodu. Idu laughs this culture off and decides rather to die than become Ishiodu's wife. She concludes: 'What I am saying is that it will not happen.'¹⁴⁸ When advised by her cousin, Nwasobi to be strong and 'have heart', Idu replies: 'heart, so that I would be Ishiodu's wife [...]? I don't understand what you are saying. I don't understand at all.'¹⁴⁹ This is clear: Nwapa through Idu, 'rejects the inheritance of women as a piece of property.'¹⁵⁰ This case of Idu is similar to Zulu Sofola's Ogwoma in *Wedlock of the Gods*, who, having lost her husband shortly after marriage, is expected to marry her brother-in-law. Rather than marrying her brother-in-law, she dies in a more complicated situation.

The last but not least Nigerian practice which I will examine here is one that has received a great deal of criticism in the discourse of womanism. It is gender preference: a situation where a male-child is considered more important than a female-child. In Nigerian culture and in Africa in general, a female-child is considered inferior, 'falsely grandified [...] discriminated against, [...] exploited at all levels and derided most of the time in the society [...]'¹⁵¹ Like the woman, she is 'the national scapegoat. The cause of the nation's decline.'¹⁵² According to Doyin Adebunsi, 'girls continue to endure discrimination and violence in the home, in the workplace and in the community, being a female often means being vulnerable.'¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Idu, p. 216.

¹⁴⁸ Idu, p. 217.

¹⁴⁹ Idu, p. 215.

¹⁵⁰ Teresa Njoku, p.120.

¹⁵¹ Modupe Kolawole, p.132.

¹⁵² Modupe Kolawole, p. 132.

¹⁵³ Doyin Adebunsi 'Female-Child Discrimination in Nigeria,' *Daily Trust* 9 March, 2012, P.22.

While the female-child is relegated in society, the ‘male-child is elevated and placed with importance.’¹⁵⁴

In *Efuru* and *Idu*, Nwapa presents and attacks this system that indiscriminately elevates the importance of boys and encourages the inferiority of girls. We notice in *Efuru* a group of young girls, who, after enjoying Nwabata’s story, ‘shouted with joy and thanked him’, saying: ‘Thank you very much. Your wife will give birth to a baby boy.’¹⁵⁵ This statement reveals that a boy is perceived better gift than a girl. Although one would expect these girls to promote their gender, it is clear why it is not so: They recognise that in their culture, boys are of more value than girls. This is why, having received an interesting story from the storyteller, they thought of no other good wish than to wish him the birth of a boy. To situate this point more clearly, I will consider the conversation between Omirima and Amede:

‘Ajanupu has many children’. Omirima replies: ‘She is blessed. She has several boys and girls. That’s good. What is annoying is when some women have six children and all of them are girls. What one will do with six girls I don’t know.’¹⁵⁶

Nwapa’s attacks this system by presenting Amede with this reply: ‘But it is nobody’s fault. When God gives you a girl, you don’t throw it away.’ Omirima accepts: ‘You are right [...]’¹⁵⁷ By Omirima’s acceptance, one can deduce that women are beginning to reject the gender preference of boys over girls. While expecting her first child, Idu turns around the culture and preference for boys over girls. She seems to break the tradition of her people by preferring to have a girl:

She [...] wanted to have a girl. Girls [...] give their parents luck [...] A girl was very useful to her mother. She would help with the house when her mother went to the market. She would look after her subsequent sisters and brothers. It was an asset to have a girl [...]¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Modupe Kolawole, p. 154.

¹⁵⁵ *Efuru*, p. 103.

¹⁵⁶ *Efuru*, p. 184.

¹⁵⁷ *Efuru*, p. 184.

¹⁵⁸ *Idu*, p. 79.

As noted in this quotation, Nwapa tries to state the usefulness and importance of a girl child as she advocates putting a stop to elevating boys above girls. The conversation between Adiewere and Idu is another example: ‘If you give birth to this baby and it is a boy again [Adiewere says], my heart will be filled with gladness.’¹⁵⁹ Idu replies: ‘We are not God. Anything provided it is a human being is welcome.’¹⁶⁰

There is no doubt, as Kolawole observes, that many women are still contending with a situation in which many place a high premium on boys’ education; when the resources cannot stretch to all the children, the girls are denied education. She adds that in many rural areas, the ratio of literate adult females to males is 1:5¹⁶¹ In *Efuru*, Nwapa gives a clear picture of this discrimination. In the conversation between Eneberi and his good friend, Sunday Eneke, the opinion of society on female education is made clear. Sunday sends his sister Nkoyeni to school; the conversation below tells it all:

‘It is a good thing that you are sending her to school. But it is a waste of time sending them to school you know.’ ‘[...] boys should be given the preference if it comes to that. If you had a little brother for instance and there is just enough money for the training of one, you wouldn’t train Nkoyeni and leave the boy.’ [Sunday replies:] ‘You are right.’ ‘Sometimes these girls disappoint one, you know? [...] ‘They get married before the end of their training and the money is wasted [...] in the kitchen.’¹⁶²

By this, we are reminded of Dangaremba’s little girl heroine, Tambu, in *Nervous Conditions* whose right to education is deprived and delayed as a result of her younger brother, Nhamo.

Tambu’s bitterness for gender injustice is evident in the passage below:

The needs and sensibilities of women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate. That was why I was in Standard Three in the year Nhamo died instead of in Standard Five as I should have been by that age. In those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ *Idu*, p. 204.

¹⁶⁰ *Idu*, p. 205.

¹⁶¹ Modupe Kolawole, p.52.

¹⁶² *Efuru*, pp. 191-92.

¹⁶³ Tsitsi Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* (London: The Women Press Fiction, 1988), p. 12.

Like Sunday and Eneberi in *Efuru* who believe that female education ends in the kitchen and is thus a waste of time, Tambu's father, Jeremiah, tells her: 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.'¹⁶⁴ This opinion of Sunday, Eneberi and Jeremiah can be likened to 'Kinder, Küche, Kirche,' a German slogan used in the early 1890s to confine German women to the Children, Kitchen and Church respectively. Akin to Nwapa and Dangaremba, Ama Ata Aidoo captures this situation in her 'Certain Winds from the South' which focuses on her home country, Ghana, a close neighbour to Nigeria. Her heroine says:

[...] we hear such women usually go to their homes to die [...] I had told myself when you were born that 'it did not matter you were a girl'. All gifts from Allah are good and anyway he was coming back and we were going to have many more children, 'lots of sons'.¹⁶⁵

Afrocentric novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* continue to promote Nwapa's primary task, which is to lessen the institutional pain inflicted upon women in Nigeria by dismantling the structures of traditions that give rise to the marginalisation of women in Nigeria. As one who positions herself as a public intellectual, Nwapa in an interview with Marie Umeh claims that her 'mission is to de-emphasize traditions that stigmatize women.'¹⁶⁶ She advocates the eradication of any existing tradition that oppresses, exploits, degrades or endangers Nigerian women. Changing these traditions is the core of her call for a transformation of the conditions of women.

Nwapa creatively breaks through communal beliefs to reposition women. Using Nigeria as a paradigm, I shall analyse how Nwapa constructively adopts Nigerian myths in *Efuru* to reflect women's consciousness in a very pragmatic manner and to challenge the

¹⁶⁴ Tsitsi Dangaremba, p. 15.

¹⁶⁵ Ama Ata Aidoo, 'Certain Winds from the South,' *No sweetness Here*, (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1971), p.56.

¹⁶⁶ Marie Umeh, 'The Poetics of Economic Independence for Female Empowerment: An Interview with Flora Nwapa', p. 28.

culture that elevates boys above girls. I shall argue that Nwapa's use of myth serves as a form of resistance to male hegemony in cultural Nigeria. According to Northrope Frye, 'a myth is [...] a cultural model, expressing the way in which [people] want to shape and reshape the civilization that [they have] made.'¹⁶⁷ To Geoffrey Preminger, 'myths are implicitly symbols of certain deep-lying aspects of human and transnational existence. It is a specific mode of consciousness that occupies a central space in African thoughts.'¹⁶⁸ Both Frye and Preminger see myth as a human construction based on cultural ethos. It is no doubt that Nigerian tradition victimises women. Myth, since it is derived from the culture of a people, contributes in several ways to women's marginalisation. Helen Nabasuta Mugambi explains: 'myth [...] subverts women's roles and has become an explanation for patriarchal domination [...]'¹⁶⁹ Kolawole contextualises it more clearly: 'several kinds of proverb [myth, folklore and orature] have elicited negative images of Nigerian women [...]'¹⁷⁰ She argues that 'women's resistance and achievements have been heavily mediated by several myths, some of which are traditional while others are utterly imposed.'¹⁷¹ Nigerian men, through tradition, have shaped various myths to condemn and debase the woman. Myth is a tool for instilling certain values on humans, here, the subordination of women in African society. Myth in African society could take the form of a folklore, orature, proverb or story. One such myth is the popular Yoruba proverb from Nigeria: 'Obinrin L'eke, obinrin l'odale', which means: 'The woman is a false person, The woman is a traitor.' and, 'Obinrin o se finu han', to mean 'A woman cannot be trusted to keep secrets.' When a delicious food is served, the Yorubas say: 'O s' okurin', to mean 'the food is masculine.' Yet the food is prepared by a woman.

¹⁶⁷ Northrope Frye, *Spiritus Mundi, Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 21.

¹⁶⁸ Geoffrey Preminger, *African Mythology* (New York: Peter Bedrick, 1982), p. 30.

¹⁶⁹ Helen Mugambi, 'Intersections: Gender, Orality, Text, and Female Space in Contemporary Kiganda Radio Songs,' *Research in African Literature*, 25(3), 1999, p.51.

¹⁷⁰ Modupe Kolawole, p.56.

¹⁷¹ Modupe Kolawole, p.53.

Although I argue that myths in Nigerian culture typically subject women, Nwapa, rather than accepting such myths that reduce women, constructs a kind of myth in *Efuru* to shape women's self-evaluation and rightly position the girl-child. In *Efuru*, Nwapa creates a myth of female strength through Mbadee, the story teller, to break the custom of male hegemony and paint a clear image of girls. Her use of a man, not a woman, as the story teller, suggests that even among the men of the community, some of them still believe in, and love women. It is important to quote Efuru's father here: 'Efuru is my dear daughter. The only child of my favourite wife [...] Efuru was my only source of happiness.'¹⁷² I would suggest that Nwapa uses a male character as the folk teller to present a positive image of girls for two reasons: firstly, to divulge the bias a reader might have, should the tale be told by a female character, and, secondly, to represent Nwapa's hope for a change in the ways Nigerian men value women and perceive a girl child. Such hope is seen in the portrayal of Efuru's father, Mbadee the story teller, Difu the medical doctor, and Adiewere in *Idu*.

In the myth and folklore of female strength, which Mbadee tells a group of young and old people at a moonlight session, Nwapa describes the strength, will and cleverness of a girl. Mbadee's folklore has it that a beautiful girl went out with a couple of other girl friends to 'pick some udara fruits' and a spirit pursued them.¹⁷³ The girls ran into the beautiful girl's house 'and entered one of the rooms and locked the door. The spirit waited outside.'¹⁷⁴ As the tale goes, the beautiful girl was reluctantly given to the spirit, since that was the choice of the spirit, following the 'udara fruits' belonging to the spirit, which they plucked. Here is the point which I find interesting: As the spirit took the beautiful girl away to the spirit world, the girl suggested to the spirit that they should go to her sisters and say goodbye to them before she went away to the spirit world with him. The spirit agreed.¹⁷⁵ When they got to Nkwo, the fictitious last

¹⁷² *Efuru*, p. 23.

¹⁷³ *Efuru*, p. 106.

¹⁷⁴ *Efuru*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁵ *Efuru*, p. 108.

sister of the beautiful girl, Nkwo strategized a plan with her sister to set her free from the spirit husband. 'Nkwo [...] cooked for the spirit [... She] prepared the room for her sister and her spirit husband.' At night, 'She got up, woke her entire household and with their help, she removed all their valuable property from the house [...] She went to the room where her sister and the spirit were sleeping. Her sister got up immediately [...] Nkwo used the banana leaves, putting them on the feet of the spirit, so that he would think that his wife was still lying with him. She bought kerosene, poured it on the roof and set the house on fire. The house burnt to ashes and the spirit was killed.

This myth is worth highlighting to explore the following: Firstly, Nkwo and her beautiful sister's cleverness is Nwapa's call to Nigerian women to know that they are endowed with wisdom. Secondly, their brave act is Nwapa's way of encouraging Nigerian women to face their negative situation and make it positive. Lastly, the beautiful girl's decision to visit her sisters, not her brothers, suggests that Nwapa is challenging the belief that a girl, by tradition, is protected by her brothers. This reconstructed myth reverses traditional, patriarchal perceptions of femininity. For Nwapa, women are brave, clever and strong. One can therefore see how she 'wants to shape and reshape' Nigerian society through myth/folklore which she has 'manipulated to vindicate women's disempowerment.'¹⁷⁶ I am reminded of David Bidney's argument that 'myth is not a conscious creation or invention of an individual but [...] a product of man's spontaneous expression of emotion and feeling [...]'¹⁷⁷ Nwapa expresses her feelings through myth. She generates a new tradition in which women are the point of focus. From her mythic reservoir, she seems to say that now is the 'time for a rethink and recreation of new myths, legends, proverbs, and other orature [...] to delineate an authentic image of [...Nigerian] women.'¹⁷⁸ Her re-construction of myth seems to support Asante's

¹⁷⁶ Modupe Kolawole, p.54.

¹⁷⁷ David Bidney, 'Myth, Symbolism and Truth,' *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas Sebeok, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), p. 23.

¹⁷⁸ Modupe Kolawole, p. 65.

argument that myth ‘constitutes a productive force [...] and an explanation for the human condition and an answer to the problem of psychological existence in a recent society.’¹⁷⁹ Nwapa’s reconstruction of myth, I would suggest, explores the marginalisation of women in Nigeria.

As Nwapa’s *Efuru* and *Idu* illustrate, traditions and patriarchy are not the only factors that oppress women. It is interesting to note that women, as I shall argue, contribute to their marginalisation in Nigerian society through self-hatred and envy. This is what I call ‘women against women’. My argument here is in support of Azodo’s perception that ‘women effect and perpetuate their own subservience and dehumanisation.’¹⁸⁰

In *Efuru*, one of Efuru’s friends comes insincerely to persuade Efuru from taking a child-care assistant to look over Ogonim, her only daughter. Although this woman has so many house helpers who assist her in taking care of her children while she goes out in her usual trade, she gives selfish advice to Efuru, so that Efuru cannot return early to her trade:

‘What is money? Can a bag of money go for errand for you? Can a bag of money look after you in your old age? Can a bag of money mourn you when you are dead? A child is more valuable than money. So our fathers said.’¹⁸¹

By making reference to the myth of their people, this friend tries to magnify her selfish advice with the hope that Efuru would quickly adhere to it, and remain out of business, while she goes about her normal trade. Since they are both of the same trade, one could read this as her attempt to take Efuru off the market to attract more customers for herself, without Efuru’s competition. Nwapa condemns such people through Efuru’s decision: ‘When she went away, Efuru laughed at her. ‘Who does she think she is fooling? [...] the very next day, she told her mother-in-law to get her a maid to help her with Ogonim.’¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Molefi Asante, *The Afro-centric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 95.

¹⁸⁰ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, p.178.

¹⁸¹ *Efuru*, p. 37.

¹⁸² *Efuru*, p. 37.

As observed by Nwapa, Nigerian women play a significant role in victimising and displacing childless women from their families, homes and husbands. In *Idu*, for example, Onyemuru, the tale bearer, moves from one person to the other to condemn Idu's infertility and encourage Adiewere to take more wives: 'If Idu can't have a child, let her allow her husband to marry another wife. [...] There are many girls around.'¹⁸³ Nwapa further captures the profane behaviour of women to childless women: '[...] the women of her town had long concluded that she was not going to have a baby. [...] No baby could be accommodated in that stomach, they argued.'¹⁸⁴ Onyemuru is seen again having a one-to-one confrontation with Idu with regards to her childlessness and finding a wife for her husband:

Onyemuru was returning from the market one day when she met Idu who was returning from the beach. 'Come, my daughter,' [...] 'Come, did you say that your husband should not marry another woman. Come did you say that? I never believe all I am told.'¹⁸⁵

Like Onyemuru, Omirima is another tale bearer. She propagates sorrow to barren women with advice to their mother-in-laws to pick another wife for their sons: 'The chances of your daughter-in-law ever getting a baby are very remote now. You must marry a girl for your son whether he likes it or not [...] he cannot remain childless. His fathers were not childless.'¹⁸⁶

In both novels, Nwapa recognises this challenge as she continues to call for a change in the attitude of women if liberation will be achieved. Women are, problematically, presented as backbiters and gossips in *Idu*: 'I just wonder what men see in her.'¹⁸⁷ Even in *Efuru*, women as backbiters condemn the happiness of Efuru and Eneberi:

'Nonsense, why should they swim together? Are they the only happy couple in the town? I see them every time I come to the stream. It is disgusting. [...] 'They are simply showing off. I bet

¹⁸³ *Idu*, p. 33.

¹⁸⁴ *Idu*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁵ *Idu*, p. 90.

¹⁸⁶ *Idu*, p. 162.

¹⁸⁷ *Idu*, p. 96.

they are not as happy as they look. You give them two years, and we shall see what will happen.’ ‘Seeing them together is not the important thing,’ another said. ‘The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it if it is not fruitful. Of what use is it if your husband licks your body, worships you and buys everything in the market for you and you are not productive?’¹⁸⁸

In *Efuru* and *Idu*, women lead the way in showing preference for a boy child: ‘[...] what one will do with six girls I don’t know.’¹⁸⁹ They go as far as taking charge in searching for wives for their husbands: ‘You are taking keen interest, my daughter in getting a wife for your husband. It is good. I am happy.’¹⁹⁰

One could find numerous examples in the texts to show women’s maliciousness to fellow women and their act of effecting and perpetuating traditions that oppress women at large. As a conclusion to this section, it is my contention that Nwapa carefully depicts this attitude of women in order to inscribe a new message of love, affection and solidarity amongst women. It is her belief that women’s emancipation is only possible when women come together to fight a common goal: the liberation of women.

As a womanist Afrocentric writer, rather than a feminist, as I have argued, Nwapa underscores the power of Nigerian women working in complementarity with men. Nwapa shows that men are important for the well-being of women in Nigeria. Whilst in *Efuru* and *Idu* she skilfully portrays her heroines with quintessential qualities, in *Idu*, she gives the same quality to her ideal patriarch, Adiewere. We notice in *Efuru* that Nwapa presents Efuru as one whose hands make fortunes: ‘[...] since her son married Efuru things had moved well for him. Any trade she put her hand to was profitable.’¹⁹¹ In *Idu*, she gives the same quality, not to Idu,

¹⁸⁸ *Efuru*, p. 137.

¹⁸⁹ *Efuru*, p. 184.

¹⁹⁰ *Efuru*, p. 180.

¹⁹¹ *Efuru*, p. 136.

but to Adiewere: ‘She [Idu] married a man whose hands make money.’¹⁹² Nwapa’s ideal patriarch is ‘not at heart a polygamist.’¹⁹³ He loves his wife and is contented with her alone. He rejects any tradition that reduces women. Through these character descriptions of Adiewere and his all-round faithfulness to, and love for his wife, Nwapa, while writing against oppression and domination of any kind with the intent to liberate Nigerian women, seeks to strengthen the union between women and men in Nigeria. She is concerned with the genuine democratisation of the Nigerian state.

The ‘dog scene’ in *Idu* provides a good example of women and men working together to achieve a purpose. Ojiugo presents us with the case of a woman who dies as a result of a dog bite. This prompted a unanimous agreement that all dogs in the town should be killed. From Ojiugo’s account, young men went round the town killing all the dogs they saw. All owners of dogs co-operated. They brought out their own dogs and killed them. They sympathised with the dead woman.¹⁹⁴

I read this story as Nwapa’s call for co-operation between men and women for the good of society. From this short story, two points come to mind: Firstly, as the men in the town cared for women by taking the initiative to kill all dog to avoid further dog bites, it is Nwapa’s wish that men should extend this quality of love, care and affection for women’s welfare to all those aspects of society that contribute to the suffering of women. Secondly, by the attitude of those who brought out their dogs to be killed, Nwapa suggests that those (men and women) who still believe in traditions and practices that discriminate against women should ‘kill’ such belief and join the human race to eradicate women’s suffering and marginalisation. This dog scene emphasises Nwapa’s call for men and women to be partners in progress, not antagonists.

¹⁹² *Idu*, p. 3.

¹⁹³ *Idu*, p. 16.

¹⁹⁴ *Idu*, pp. 58-59.

Tess Onwueme is another writer whose novel reflects this message. In *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), men like Ozoma and the priests support women in the struggle for gender equality and women's liberation:

Now hear the manifesto. Henceforth [...] we all, man woman and children must be schooled. [...] for all with none posing an obstacle to another [...] Henceforth women will have equal representation in rulership.¹⁹⁵

Ifeoma Okoye, another Nigerian writer, extends this message in her *Chimere* (1992). Chimere, her titular heroine in the search for identity, hates men partly because she feels cheated by her father and boy-friend. At the end of the novel, however, she comes to the conclusion that men and women need to work together for a more progressive society. Thus, she reconciles with her father and boyfriend, living at peace with the male folks. Peace, unity and progress amongst men and women are Nwapa's messages for Nigeria. She takes a bold step to admonish women to love their husbands irrespective of their condition and situation. In *Efuru* for example, Ajanupu could not stop admiring a woman who loves and believes in her imbecile husband. This is how she puts it: 'She is a woman among women. [...] She still loves that imbecile husband of hers and she is going after him.'¹⁹⁶

However significant Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu* are in the struggle for Nigerian women's liberation, I agree with Brown that Nwapa never completely resolves the question of how a woman may achieve independence while supporting and functioning within a closelyknit communal system.¹⁹⁷ In all attempts by Nwapa to create a better life for women in Nigeria, *Efuru* her first heroine suffocates in the traditions of her town. She is unsuccessful and returns to her father's house, where she was born and grew up. She is left with no choice but to serve Ohamili, the water goddess. In *Idu*, *Idu* has a more tragic end as she dies unfulfilled. Being

¹⁹⁵ Tess Onwueme, *The Reign of Wazobia* (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 33.

¹⁹⁶ *Efuru*, p. 87.

¹⁹⁷ Lloyd Brown, p. 38.

choked by the traditions of her community, shortly after the death of her beloved husband, Adiewere, Idu, pregnant with another child, commits suicide. These tragic ends of Nwapa's Efuru and Idu contradict Nwapa's message of hope for a better Nigeria where women would live happily and joyfully in the society. As her heroines never achieve fulfilment, Nwapa seems not to have an answer to completely resolve the question of how a woman may achieve freedom and independence.

Considering the painful death of Adiewere, her ideal husband in *Idu*, one might read this as an end to the hope for sanity and sanctity among Nigerian men. By terminating Adiewere's life at the point when Idu begins to conceive to bear him children for which he has waited faithfully and patiently, Nwapa seems to have completely lost hope in the creation of a better Nigeria. By the death of Idu, she seems to suggest that death is the only means to escape the burden of women in a malevolent Nigerian society. Given this presentation of Nwapa, I am reminded of Kolawole's argument that:

[Women] writers problematize these issues [women at the centre of tension created by tradition and modernity, at the cutting edge of social conflicts] often without a resolution but rather leaving heroines in a tragic situation.¹⁹⁸

The tragic ends and loss of hope of heroines are not limited to Nwapa's works. One sees such dilemma and unfulfilled dreams in Sofola's Ogwoma in *The Wedlock of the Gods* (1973), Maraima Ba's Ramatoulaye in *So Long A Letter* (1981), Emecheta's Nnu Ego in *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and Rebeka Njau's Selina in *Ripples in the Pool* (1975), to mention a few. Whether these novels seek to emphasize the desperate plight of women, such presentation of unfulfilment and hopelessness however retards the fostering of a positive and dynamic change towards women's emancipation.

¹⁹⁸ Modupe Kolawole, p.79.

If change to women's position in the society is the core of women's literature, Nigerian and African women writers should endeavour to create texts with endings which have the capacity to foster hope for the upcoming generation with regards to women's liberation. A novel with an ending like *Efuru* and *Idu* can certainly leave the reader feeling frustrated. Zimbabwean Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is a good example of a text with a more empowering ending. She portrays Tambu's thought at the end of the narrative to mark the beginning of hope and the beacon of new life for African women. Here are Tambu's closing words:

Quietly, unobtrusively, and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion.¹⁹⁹

These words give hope and life to fellow women to see the brighter future ahead. This in my opinion is why *Nervous Conditions* remains one of the finest literary works in Africa. Nigerian women novelists should endeavour to subject themselves to an ethical imperative to present these more positive endings.

Considering other novels of Nwapa, Nwapa has done well to revisit the flaws of *Efuru* and *Idu*. In *One is Enough* (1981), her third novel, she presents her heroine, Amaka, as a woman 'refusing to be a scapegoat of social change, plucking attendant fetters, breaking loose and looking for new ways of relocation.'²⁰⁰ After experiencing failure in her marriage, Amaka retreats and re-evaluates her ideas about marriage and motherhood and begins a journey of self discovery and emancipation as she questions traditional values. She pursues economic success; becomes rich; helps the villagers; gives birth to male twins for Father McLaid and refuses his offer of marriage with a decision to maintain her freedom and happiness. The novel ends with

¹⁹⁹ Tsitsi Dangaremba, p. 204.

²⁰⁰ Modupe Kolawole, p. 160.

Amaka's happiness and self-fulfilment. In creating Amaka, Nwapa creates a new prototype different from Efuru and Idu. Since *Efuru* and *Idu* are Nwapa's earliest works and *One is Enough* her later work, one can see the growth and maturity in Nwapa's oeuvre. However, one still wonders whether there is any creative work in Nigeria and Africa that accommodates 'the portrait of normal happy conventional women who are successful in their profession or business without having their marriages or homes in jeopardy.'²⁰¹ Perhaps, when this is achieved by Nigerian women writers and Africans in general, we might then be able to say that the desired change has come.

I have argued in this chapter that Nwapa is concerned with the change in perception of women in Nigeria. It is this change - the liberation of women - that Afrocentrism through the discourse of womanism seeks to achieve. Since womanism as an evolving theory continues to devise means to set women free from marginalisation, all other oppressed groups in Nigeria should utilize avenues for augmenting their position and seek emancipation. Through the discourse of Afrocentrism, the search for self-realisation and emancipation of all oppressed groups in Nigeria becomes a possibility.

²⁰¹ Modupe Kolawole, p. 161.

Chapter Two:

The Critique of the Osu Caste System as an Afrocentric Discourse: Chinua Achebe.

The Osu caste system in Nigerian society is a considerable socio-cultural problem in the country. Often referred to as being subject to a ‘social apartheid’ and as ‘the Igbo social lepers’, Osu are the socially discriminated people exclusively reserved and sacrificed to propitiate the gods of the land to atone for the sins of the land.¹ Chinua Achebe puts it clearly: ‘Osu is like leprosy [...], a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcaste, and his children, and his children’s children forever.’² The position of Osu as a ‘thing’ and a ‘sacrificial lamb’ denotes a severe loss in the dignity of and respect for them as humans. Since to sacrifice someone is to kill him, an Osu is really a dead man who is still living. Put simply, he is considered to be the living-dead. As a ‘thing’, he is reduced to an object. What makes the Osu caste system most unacceptable as Igwebuike Okeke argues is that, it is an inherited social status, ‘the idea of passing this evil from generations to generations [...].’³ The nature of the Osu system as inherited only heightens the repugnant nature of this traditional practice. Osu is more than a social problem. It is rooted in the culture and traditions of the people and passed from generation to generation. This system is ‘deeply embedded in the social fabric and the religious culture of the Igbo society, like a cancerous growth.’⁴ Custodians of tradition like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and arguably Nwoye Isaac Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) uphold and preserve cultures whether debilitating or ennobling. The preservation of debilitating cultures like the Osu system which undermines the liberty and dignity of Nigerians is one example of what I consider Africans enslaving Africans.

¹ Jude Mgbobukwa, Alusi, *Osu and Ohu in Igbo Religion and Social Life*, [Nsukka, Nigeria: Fulladu Publishing Company, 1996], p.42

² Chinua Achebe, *No Longer At Ease*, [London: Penguin Classics, 1960], p. 256

³ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, *The Osu Concept in Igboland*, [Enugu, Nigeria: Access Publishers, 1986], p. 121

⁴ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, p. 71

It is worth stating that the Osu caste system is comparable in many ways to the caste system in South Asia. In India, for example, caste is commonly deeply embedded in modern life. The Jatis were historically grouped by the Brahminical texts under the four well known caste categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Viashyans, and Shudras. There is also a system of caste among South Asian Muslims and Christians. According to Yoginder Sikand, ‘castes among Muslims in South Asia developed as the result of close contact with Hindu culture and Hindu converts to Islam. In some parts of South Asia, the Muslims are divided as Ashrafs and Ajlafas.’⁵ While the Ashrafs claim a superior status derived from their foreign ancestry, the non-Ashrafs are assumed to be converts from Hinduism, and are divided into a number of occupational castes. As Ziauddin Barani observes, the qualities of the high-born Ashrafs are virtuous and the low-born, non-Ashrafs, are custodians of vice. These distinct groups are not permitted to intermarry or live in the same community as each other. Like the Osu in East Nigeria, the non-Ashraf do not have equal rights with the high-born. They suffer severe discrimination and marginalisation.

Despite the many similarities between the Osu and the caste systems in South Asia, there is one clear difference. While there are distinctions within non-Ashraf caste system and the Hindu caste system based on hierarchical structure, the Osu caste system has no clear distinction. The non-Ashraf caste is divided into lower-caste Muslim caste: Ansari, Kunjra, Dhobi and Halolkhor; and upper caste Muslim castes: Qureshi, Syed, Pathan, Turk, Sheikh and Malik. While this is the case with the caste systems in South Asian, the Osu caste system is totally different in structure. It is a unified practice in Igbo land with no internal classification or categorization. What many historians have termed ‘Osu classifications’ are the various ways people become Osu. I shall explain this subsequently. The consolidation and unification of

⁵ Yoginder Sikand, *Islam, Caste, and Dalit-Muslim relations in India*, [New Delhi: Global Media Publications, 2004], p. 50

the Osu system, no doubt, has a strong negative impact on the well-being of Nigerians. The Osu caste system is ‘a case of injustice or brutality against fellow Nigerians’ by Nigerians. It is such a debilitating tradition in Nigeria that Chinua Achebe seeks to challenge and, I argue, this challenge constitutes a form of Afrocentrism.

This chapter will explore how Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease* and his short story, ‘Chike’s School Days’, tackle the discriminatory system of Osu in Nigeria. It will discuss how his writings redirect attention to the unfortunate and silent survival of Osu as forms of chattel slavery in Nigeria. Although it is frequently argued that Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is a direct attack on Europe and an appraisal of African culture, I shall explain how Achebe uses the literary technique of dualism, and his manipulation of ‘form’ to challenge debilitating African cultural practices. *Things Fall Apart*, as I shall argue, does not only condemn Europe and colonialism but criticises negative African systems as well. Whilst many studies do analyse the novel as a critique of Igbo culture, there is still no robust analysis of Achebe’s criticism of the Osu caste system more particularly. I shall discuss how Achebe challenges the Osu system with his understanding of Christianity. Achebe grew up in a very strict Christian home. Having a catechist as father, Achebe imbibed the Christian doctrines. As a devout Christian, he believes in the Christian doctrine of equality and love. In his novels, as I shall argue, there are many instances where his Christian belief questions the Osu system and its discriminations against Osu. Achebe’s descriptions of characters is another key point which I will analyse. His representation of Ikemefuna and the virgin girl as dedicated Osu, I will argue, is strategic to his criticism of the Osu system. In *Things Fall Apart*, Ikemefuna and the virgin girl are dedicated to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves of Umuofia, following the murder of Ogbuefi Udo’s wife by the people of Mbaino. To appease the deity of Umuofia, Mbaino dedicates Ikemefuna and the girl to the deity. This makes both of them, in my opinion, Osu. The death of Ikemefuna and the displacement of the virgin girl, I will argue, led to the

fall of Umuofia. Although most critics do not classify Ikemefuna and the girl as Osu, my critical reading of these characters in this way hopes to fill the missing gap in the critical analysis of the ‘Africanness’ of *Things Fall Apart*.

I will then consider Achebe’s position on the role of the intellectual in Nigerian and African society to challenge such discriminatory system as Osu. With reference to Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, an essay which explores the ‘voiceless’ condition of the subaltern, this chapter will analyse the ‘voiceless’ state of the Osu in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, as well as the ‘voice-consciousness’ of the Osu in ‘Chike’s School Days’. Arguing that *Things Fall Apart* is an internal critique of the Nigerian social system, this chapter will underscore Achebe’s critique of progress. My analysis of his critique of progress is informed by Anne McClintock. In ‘The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’’, McClintock challenges the deceptive western connotations of ‘progress’ by dominant nations who adopt it as strategy to continually enrich their nations at the expense of the sufferings of ‘postcolonial’ nations. The ideology of ‘progress’ should move a nation forward in time, not backward. It is meant to advance the human condition of a people to a satisfying degree. To depict Achebe’s support for change and progress, I shall examine his criticism of Okonkwo his anti-hero as one who opposes progress or change to tradition. Okonkwo’s stubbornness and refusal to permit change in traditional culture is the cause of his tragic end. Achebe argues for progress and change to systems and beliefs, drawing inspiration from Yeats’s apocalyptic poem about the notion of progress ‘The Second Coming’, which is the source of the title of his novel. ‘The Second Coming’ emphasizes the cyclic progressive movement of history, the succession of gyres, of epochal cycles in which the pre-Christian era gives way to the age ushered in by Christ’s first coming.

Gender is a focal point in what I read as Achebe's critique of Osu. While it is known, as I will show, that Osu women suffer more than their male counterparts, Achebe reverses this in *Things Fall Apart* by preserving the life of the Osu girl but killing the Osu boy. Lastly, while it could be argued that in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* Achebe only presents the sorrowful and tragic situations of the Osu in the society, his short stories which are sequels to these novels would be interpreted as Achebe's creation of a utopian society where the Osu is free from oppression, victimization and domination. Reading Achebe's literatures in this way will open up suggestive ways to critically challenge the practice of the Osu system in Nigeria and Africa at large. I should like to note here that the reading of the Osu system in *Things Fall Apart* has been given little or no critical attention by Africanist literary scholars, even though Achebe explicitly refers to Osu in the novel. In their analyses, many literary critics concentrate on the colonial encroachment in Africa, while Achebe's condemnation and criticism of debilitating African beliefs is yet to be fully addressed. By reading the Osu caste system in *Things Fall Apart*, I bring a fresh interpretation to Achebe's first novel. Before the literary readings, this chapter will, firstly, present a comprehensive definition of the Osu system, secondly, discuss the origins of this system, thirdly, discuss the classifications of the Osu and, fourthly, highlight discrimination against the Osu.

2.1 Definitions of the Osu Caste System.

According to George Basden, a former Anglican Missionary who represented the Igbo people on the Nigerian Legislative Council between 1931 and 1937, 'Osu is an Igbo term to mean a 'slave', but one distinct from an ordinary slave [Ohu/Oru] who in fact is the property of a god, and when once devoted to a god, has no prospects of regaining freedom and must restrict his movements to the precincts of the shrine to which he is attached.'⁶ Basden is one

⁶ George Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: Travellers, Explorers and Pioneers*, [London: Frank Cass, 1966], p.62

of the most well-known anthropologists of the colonial period who arguably produced one of the fullest accounts of the Igbo people of Nigeria, having published the first comprehensive book on the Igbo people entitled, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* in 1912.

The Igbo people are an ethnic group of south-eastern Nigeria with a strong cultural heritage, belief and practice. It is amongst them that this custom of Osu, put simply as ‘outcaste’, is mostly practised in Nigeria. Like Basden, Charles Meek, a British anthropologist, defines Osu as ‘a religious cult slave under the practice of the Igbo traditional religion and system of worship.’⁷ He maintains that, ‘An Osu is a person who has been bought and dedicated to the service of the owner’s cult.’⁸ From the definitions of Basden and Meek, it is palpable that ‘Osu’ are slaves, and as such, possess low or no human dignity. In fact, at a meeting of the Nigerian Members of Parliament to abolish the system in 1956, ministers argued that, the Osu system is a ‘horrible system by which fellow human being is degraded and dehumanized, with his rights and liberties brutalized by abject non-recognition, as unethical as it was unchristian.’⁹ For Edmund Ilogu, Osu is a ‘slave of the deity dedicated to perform some menial functions, which may include sacrificial functions.’¹⁰ As a slave, he is bound by his society and tied to slavery by the traditions of the society. In the accounts of R.C. Arazu, quoted by Okeke, Osu is ‘a living sacrifice, something totally dedicated to a divinity.’¹¹ To classify a human being as ‘a living sacrifice’ is to equate him as mere object. S.N. Nwabara’s opinion is more direct: ‘an Osu [is] regarded as a degraded human being not fit for the companionship and association of decent and respectable men and women in the society, an outcast fit only to be sacrificed to the idols for the propitiation of the gods [...] An Osu, socially

⁷ Charles Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*, [London: Oxford University Press, 1937], p. 41

⁸ Charles Meek, p. 44

⁹ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, p. 112

¹⁰ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, p. 8

¹¹ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, p. 9

[is ...] a non-person sacrificed to a local deity or idol.’¹² Qualifying an Osu as a non-person is to strip him of not just his personality, but his life.

There is, however, one significant gap in the above definitions of Osu which is core of the Osu system. While the above mentioned critics relate Osu as slave, none discusses the hereditary nature of this system, which is clear in the above definition of Osu by Achebe. Without the concept of hereditary in the discourse of the Osu system, one misses a vital understanding of the system. For this reason, I return to Achebe’s definition above: ‘Osu is like leprosy [...], a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcaste, and his children, and his children’s children forever.’¹³ The hereditary attribute of the Osu system is a key point in this study. My focus is on the stigmatisation of the present Osu generation which, if not properly addressed, would be transferred to generations thereafter. Not only in Achebe’s definition is the hereditary nature of this system captured, the 1956 Eastern Nigerian Law on the Osu system also defines it as follows: ‘An Osu may be a person who [is] sacrificed to a shrine or a deity, and that person and his descendants are therefore regarded as social pariahs with no social rights which non-Osus are bound to respect.’¹⁴ As enshrined in the traditions of the Igbos, an Osu never regains his freedom but transfers his status to generations yet unborn.

2.2 Origin of the Osu Caste System.

When the practice of the Osu system began and how it originated remains a complex knot for historians and anthropologists to unravel and is as complex and intricate as the system itself. Another reason why its origins cannot be easily traced is the fact that ‘there is a glaring lack of literature on this aspect of the Igbo history.’¹⁵ However, as can be expected, some

¹² SN Nwabara et al, *African Indigenous Laws*, [Enugu, Nigeria: Government Press, 1975], p.107

¹³ Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, p. 256

¹⁴ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 112

¹⁵ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 13

specific claims or theories of its origins have been advanced by some historians and anthropologists. According to C.O. Dureke, the Osu caste system ‘was introduced in Igbo-land in the fourteenth century when the god *kamalu* or *Amadioha* informed a juju priest that the land had been defiled and needed purification.’¹⁶ While Dureke never mentioned the nature of the defilement, he claims that ‘kamalu’s instruction was that an able-bodied man was to be brought and in the market square on an Afo Ukwu day, publicly dedicated to the gods and the ancestors to atone for the sins of the living. Since the name of the man was Osu, his descendants, according to the custom in Igboland, have had to bear his name.’¹⁷

Also tracing it to the fourteenth century, Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke in his book, *The Osu Concept in Igboland*, argues that the *Nri*, the priestly class in Igbo-land, initiated the idea of the Osu caste system. As they realised that their role of spiritual cleansing was a source of power and influence, they began to make certain demands. A consequence of not meeting these demands was an ‘Nri curse’, which had the effect of ostracising the person, group or community. In the absence of propitiation or compensation payments, and especially as the passage of time made it impossible to locate those who had pronounced the original curse, such people remained outcaste; and in time, their descendants inherited the stigma.¹⁸

Based on these claims of Dureke and Okeke, two schools of thought emerged. While one group seems to favour and support Dureke’s proposition that the system started with the dedication and sacrifice of human beings to the god in order not to attract the god’s wrath; the other supports Okeke’s assertion that the overwhelming spiritual supremacy of the *Nri* people in Igboland in the very early days gave rise to the idea of the ‘pure and impure or clean and unclean’ people which, in turn, gradually led to the emergence of the Osu caste system.¹⁹

¹⁶ C. O Dureke, ‘Persistence of Osu Caste System in Igboland’, *Sunday Times*, Jan. 13, 1985, p. 5

¹⁷ C. O Dureke, p. 10

¹⁸ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 38

¹⁹ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 13

Although these two theories sum up the claims to the origin of the Osu system in Nigeria, it is worth stating that the theory of dedication is much more generally accepted in the Igbo world view, whilst the theory of *Nri* spiritual supremacy commands less acceptability and is 'best regarded as mere speculations and cannot be relied upon.'²⁰ The acceptability of the theory of dedication is supported by the definitions of Osu. Notice that all the definitions of Osu cited in this chapter view the Osu as a person dedicated and sacrificed to the idols for atonement; and not the mere isolation of a person by the *Nri* priests, as the *Nri* theory suggests. Following the dismissal of the *Nri* claim, I shall discuss one theory that supports the dedication theory and to clearly show the historical origins of the Osu caste system.

Tracing the origin of Osu around the Owerri and Okigwe areas of Igboland, Basden argues that the Osu cult was founded in the neighbourhood of Okigwe in the following circumstances. A chief was killed in war and his people sought revenge. Finding a way to achieve their aim, the 'long Juju' Oracle at Arochukwu was consulted. The advice given was that sacrifices prescribed by the Oracle be made on the grave of the dead chief. In order, however, to make them acceptable to 'Chukwu' [the god-head in Igbo tradition], and to be really effective, they must be performed by an Aro, taken as 'son of Chukwu.' There seemed to be a delay in securing the services of an Aro (man) and either because of this failure, and to expedite matters, it is alleged that 'Chukwu' gave sanction for a non-Aro to officiate. The only stipulation in respect of the man to be appointed was that he must not be a native of the town. So, a man was chosen as directed and dedicated to the god of the land. He was there upon given the name 'Osu', with authority to act as proxy for an Aro priest. He was to be venerated with honour and respect due to an Aro; to act as a mediator between the people and the 'Chukwu'.²¹ Beyond this credible if vague notion of Basden that the Osu must have

²⁰ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 37

²¹ George Basden, p. 18

originated in some sort of dedication to the god, Ezeokoli agrees with Basden that ‘there was a time when there were more privileges than disabilities being an Osu’²² Basden maintains that the Osu began by performing the role of an Aro priest, one who mediates between the gods and the people of the land. Occupying a respected position, he was ‘venerated and honoured’. He receives all the gifts and materials on behalf of the gods. Ezeokoli writes:

[Osu] had free access to materials such as food, drinks, and clothing materials offered as sacrifice to their patron deities. Since it was believed that petitions channelled through them received quick attention from the gods, some of them were usually approached to function as intermediaries between the society and the gods and were rewarded accordingly.²³

As time passed, some of the more unhappy consequences of their sacred and untouchable status became manifest. Ezeokoli further argues that ‘the motive of envy and jealousy by which many people resent the alleged endowments and achievements of Osu people’ led to their unfortunate position.²⁴ For easy identification, it was seen necessary to ‘make some kind of mark on them - commonly, a notch cut on the ear lobe. It also was seen necessary to keep them in one location [...] so that they could not mix easily with the dialas [free-born] and be mistaken.’²⁵ It is not certain at what point in time being an Osu began to carry a social stigma. What is known is that from the period of the seeming envy and jealousy towards the Osu, the victimization and discrimination against them began. ‘People no longer avoided the Osu but shunned them.’²⁶ Before addressing the discrimination against the Osu in the community, it is necessary to briefly discuss the classifications of Osu.

²² Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 37

²³ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 37

²⁴ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 41

²⁵ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 38

²⁶ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 38

2.3 Classifications of Osu

According to Okeke, ‘there are four distinctive classes of Osu – voluntary Osu, dedicated Osu, Osu by inheritance and Osu by infection or contact.’²⁷ I shall discuss them briefly in turn.

2.3.1 Voluntary Osu

In the historical theory of the Osu system, records show that people became Osu voluntarily. As noticed above that there was a time when there were great privileges in being Osu, Ezeokoli has it that ‘people began to offer themselves willingly as Osu to specific deities’ simply to partake in the benefits.²⁸ Such action is clearly a result of poverty. Even when Osu began to experience discrimination, people still offered themselves as Osu for livelihood. As observed by Okeke, ‘factors such as victimization and frustration, poverty, debt and laziness could make one also an Osu by voluntary action.’²⁹ As is the custom of the people that the deity is the protector of the people, Okeke argues that the lazy, victimized and frustrated people run to the deity for help and by so doing, give themselves as sacrifices and slaves to the deity. Amongst these factors mentioned, poverty seems the strongest force. Poverty can make a human being do the unexpected. Festus Iyayi, one of Nigeria’s finest novelists, captures this in his novel *Violence* (1979): ‘need could drive a human being to anything; it could drive a person insane. It could kill a person. It could even make a woman commit adultery with a man she had scarcely ever looked at.’³⁰ People voluntarily embrace the deity for means of livelihood, thereby placing the stigma of Osu on their lineage.

²⁷ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 29

²⁸ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 38

²⁹ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 29

³⁰ Festus Iyayi, *Violence*, [Michigan: Longman, 1987], p. 40

2.3.2 Osu by Dedication

Historically, many people become Osu by dedication. When an individual from a particular community or village commits a taboo, it is expected that the deity of the land is to be atoned to avert calamity. Depending on the situation and circumstances, as Ezeokoli argues, the deity in question could ask for a human being as sacrifice. Once a human being is demanded, the kindred, clan, village, or entire community on whom that collective demand is made dedicates a human being to the deity. This follows the general belief that ‘the wish of the deity must be carried out.’³¹ By this, I am reminded of Ikemefuna and the virgin girl in *Things Fall Apart* who were dedicated to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves of Umuofia, following the murder of Ogbuefi Udo’s wife by the people of Mbaino. I shall return to this in the course of my analysis.

2.3.3 Osu by Inheritance

Osu by inheritance is by and large what is operational today. Although the first generations of Osu no longer exist today, what we have is the latest generation of Osu who obtained their stigma through inheritance, carrying along with them almost the same suffering and discriminations of their fore-fathers. People become Osu by being born to a family with an Osu history:

[...] it is sufficient to say that this practice creates a caste person who by the accident of birth is denied certain elementary and basic human rights. Because they happen to be descended from persons whom our forefathers sacrificed to the gods or who became Osu by close contact with any person who belonged to this class, they [... carry upon them the same stigma.]³²[sic]

Although there is no mark placed on them by birth or as they grew older, their social status is easily noticed by tracing the family history. This to a large extent is still evident today and it

³¹ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 16

³² Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 111

is what makes this system repugnant, a practice which has refused to die off even in this modern age.

2.3.4 Osu by Infection or Contact

‘It is also true’, as argued by Okeke, ‘that the Osu caste is not only hereditary but also infectious, made possible by contact.’³³ Because the Osu are dreaded and isolated, any contact with them is perceived as an infection which could make a free-born an Osu immediately.

Okeke explains:

[...] a free-born could become an Osu by walking across the out-stretched legs of an Osu while he or she was sitting down. By the same token, if a nursing mother had left her child to run [an errand], and in her absence the child started crying, any nursing mother of the Osu class around who ventures to nurse the baby [...] renders the baby an Osu if her generous act to the baby was known to other free-born within the vicinity. If a free-born marries an Osu, the free-born becomes an Osu [...]³⁴

This quotation reveals the magnitude of the Osu system. It should be noted that a system that is both perceived infectious as explained above and hereditary as well, can easily plague an entire nation. The belief in the infectious and hereditary nature of the Osu system suggests why serious investigations are carried out before marriages are conducted, as is the case of Obi Okonkwo and Clara in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*.

2.4 Discrimination against Osu

The Osu system continues to blight Igbo culture today. Dureke writes on the rules and sanctions that inform the relationships between the free-borns called the *Diala* and the Osus:

Umuosu (descendants of or children of Osu) were sequestered from society and as such suffered total ostracism. They could not sleep under the same roof with the so-called free-born citizens called Diala sons and owners of the land. They neither ate from the same pots nor drank with the same cups with the citizens. Marriage between the two groups was a taboo eternally.

³³ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 115

³⁴ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 31

Children were forbidden to see the corpse of an Osu. An Osu could not be chief or leader of any village [...] If the corpse of an Osu was to be carried through the village of a Diala, palm fronds were placed everywhere to warn the people that evil was in the air and a bad event was to happen. If an Osu had sexual intercourse with the Diala woman, the offending woman was to be dragged to the Osu to marry for free. Under no circumstances would a Diala run into the compound of an Osu even if it were raining or he was being chased with a gun or matchet.³⁵

Dureke's account shows the huge discrimination against Osu in the community. Although he writes in the past tense, his choice of tense does not suggest that the discrimination against this class of people have been abolished. I would argue that by presenting it in the past tense, he hopes that the present generation and the generations thereafter would do away with this system and keep it where it belongs: in the past. From the above quotation, the discrimination against Osu in present-day Nigeria could best be grouped under three categories: marriage, civil-rights violations and the denial of other traditional honours and titles. I shall briefly discuss them in turn.

At the family level, no individual is permitted to marry an Osu. Borrowing the words of Dureke, 'marriage between the two groups was a taboo eternally.'³⁶ There are still far too many cases of engagements called off and marriages annulled. According to Jude Mgbobukwa, a renowned historian, there is a true story of a young man and a young girl in the early 1990s that are from the same town. The love between them grew, and they decided to seal it by getting married. The young man made this intention known to the parents of the girl in the normal traditional setting. During further investigations, the young man was said to be an Osu. The girl's umunna [kindred] came to know about this and were no longer interested in the marriage. The parents of the girl began to do everything possible to dissuade the girl from going ahead with the marriage. The girl, however, remained resolute in her decision to marry the young man. The umunna warned her parents that the family risked being outcast should

³⁵ C.O. Dureke, p. 14

³⁶ C.O. Dureke, p. 14

she marry the man. To save themselves of the embarrassment, they considered the child as lost to the family, while the umunna equally saw her as lost to the community. The verdict was that she was free to go to the man unceremoniously. The parents felt that they had a challenge on their hands and began to be very aggressive towards their daughter. Now, even though she still lives in her family house, she fend for herself. She no longer cooks for the family nor does anything for them.³⁷ She has, in other words, been already ostracised by the members of her family. She has been told that she is free to go to the man as a free gift to him. The implication is that if they continue in their determination to be husband and wife, nothing from the young man would be accepted by the girl's parents or by the umunna. Such is the case of Achebe's Obi Okonkwo and his Osu fiancé, Clara, in *No Longer At Ease*, which I shall analyse below. The case of this unfortunate young man and woman is the palpable situation of many young people in Nigeria, under the Osu system.

According to Mgbobukwa, experience has shown that most young men who are said to be Osu do not want to marry an Osu girl because of their hope to break out of such a status. Very often, they succeed in marrying the girls of their choice whether the girl is an Osu or not, and face the consequences of ostracism. The woeful consequence is that many of the girls who are known to be Osu never marry. Young men of the same caste, who are their only hope, are not known to be particularly interested in marrying them while they are yet being scrupulously avoided by the so-called free-borns. The looming hopelessness of the future which they see to be theirs has caused many of these girls to go into prostitution. It evidences the extent to which cultural practices can affect societal growth. The double discrimination against women in this case is interesting. I shall subsequently return to discuss this situation of women who suffer a dual 'curse' of being an Osu on the one hand, and being a woman on the other. I shall

³⁷ Jude Mgbobukwa, p. 34

interpret how Achebe tackles this issue by showing how he tries to reduce the burden of Osu women in *Things Fall Apart*.

Another discrimination against the Osu is the abuse of their fundamental human rights in the community. While the free-born have basic rights to life, freedom of communication, the right to embark on any business, rights to own lands and properties, freedom of movement, and freedom of association amongst many, Osu is deprived of such privileges. Okeke explains that the Osu do not have equal rights with the free-born: ‘the Osu are lesser humans with uneven rights with the free-born [...] they act as ‘watch dogs’ in the villages to the advantage of the [free-born] [...] they were also used during inter-tribal wars as frontiers [...].’³⁸ They do not share the same market with the free-born. ‘They could not take part in any discussion of matters concerning their town or village.’³⁹ As Dureke continues, ‘they cannot sleep under the same roof with the free-born. They neither ate from the same pots nor drank with the same cups with the [free-born].’⁴⁰ According to Okeke, ‘they could not therefore be given lands.’⁴¹ They are ‘untouchables’. As sacrificial lambs with no right to life, their blood is spilled to propitiate the gods of the land. Victor Uchendu sums it up: ‘[...] the Osu are hated [...], treated as if mean and discussed with the tone of horror and contempt.’⁴² Even at death, ‘[...] they are not buried around such places where free-borns are laid to rest, nor will free-born parents allow their sons to dig or fill the grave of an Osu [...] as is the case in certain communities in Aguata and Nnewi local government areas [in Nigeria.]’⁴³ One wonders why even at death, the marginalisation and discrimination against an Osu still persists. Perhaps the reason might be that the free born do not believe that an Osu has any soul to be saved. The free-born is sure that ‘an Osu has no

³⁸ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 43

³⁹ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 38

⁴⁰ C. O. Dureke, p. 22

⁴¹ Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, p. 39

⁴² Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria: Case Studies in cultural anthropology*, [Michigan: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965], p. 60

⁴³ Victor Uchendu, p. 61

business with life after death which the ancestors enjoy.’⁴⁴ Oliver Onwubiko expresses this view:

It was the traditional Igbo religious belief that a person on whom the right of segregation was performed, as was the case of the Osu, was bound to be lost in the life after death and therefore would not attain the ‘blissful state’ in the spirit world. This belief was very latent in the minds of the adult Igbo.⁴⁵

Nothing is believed to remain in the Osu. The tradition of his people kills him completely. While his body is completely ostracised, his soul, it is believed, has got no place in the life after death. This is total discrimination.

One major form of discrimination which the Osu face today is the denial of traditional and political titles in the community. As noted by Basden that in traditional Eastern Nigeria ‘a man may aspire to honours [...] open to him to pass through the various titular degrees to ‘Ozo’ itself, the highest and most coveted of all’, the Osu has no such right.⁴⁶ As Ezeokoli explains, ‘Osu could not therefore be given any sort of political or ritual authority, such as being made a traditional ruler, an Nze [the second highest traditional title] or Ozo.’⁴⁷ These titles are the exclusive preserve of the free-born. Any title the Osu might receive, Basden argues, is recognised by fellow ‘Osu’ only; not by the free-men. Even after years of conferment of a political or traditional title, one could still be stripped of one’s title upon the discovery that one is an Osu. On my visit to the national archive in Enugu, Nigeria, I read a case documented by an Owerri-based Association for Social Justice, headed by a lawyer who is dedicated to the abolition of the Osu caste system. This association had received thousands of specific cases of injustice or brutality against fellow Nigerians on no other grounds than that they are said to be Osu. In 1977, there was a particular case of a traditional ruler who had been duly elected and

⁴⁴ Oliver Onwubiko, *Facing the Osu Issue in the African Synod*, [Enugu, Nigeria: SNAAP Press Ltd, 1993], p. 32

⁴⁵ Oliver Onwubiko, p. 35

⁴⁶ George Basden, p. 51

⁴⁷ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 38

crowned by his people in Naze, near Owerri, and been recognised by Government, was dethroned by the community when it was found out that he had an Osu background. Although a panel was set up to investigate the matter, nothing eventually came out of it largely because the High Court Judge that headed the Panel saw the case as hopeless and described the law abolishing the Osu caste system as ‘an un-enforceable law’.⁴⁸ One thing that comes to mind as I read this statement is that the law is not totally capable of abolishing the traditions and culture of the people. One might wonder the relevance of citing a 1977 case in 2015. This is important because it informs us of the long suffering and marginalisation of the Osu, while justifying why up until now, ‘no title is given to a man without first checking his ancestral lineage to know whether he is an Osu or free-born.’⁴⁹ To Okeke, the discrimination against Osu is ‘an exploitation of full human resources, denial of personal freedom and liberty which infringes on one of the cardinals of fundamental human rights, denial of equal opportunity, perpetuation of slavery and servitude, deprivation of the rights to moral existence and suppression of the helpless in the society [...],’ to list just a few.⁵⁰

On 10 March, 1956, four years before the independence of Nigeria, the then Government of Eastern Nigeria passed a law abolishing the Osu system in Nigeria:

Notwithstanding any Custom or usage, each and every person who on the date of the commencement of this Law is Osu shall from and after such date cease to be Osu and shall be free and discharged from any consequences thereof, and the children thereafter to be born to any such person and the offspring of such person shall not be Osu, and the Osu System is hereby utterly and forever abolished and declared unlawful.⁵¹

It is now fifty-nine years and the discrimination towards Osu remains the same. At best, only a few successes have been recorded but the discrimination is evident in Nigerian society. It is

⁴⁸ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, p. 50

⁴⁹ Victor Uchendu, p. 15

⁵⁰ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, p. 128

⁵¹ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 34

baffling that nearly a century after embracing Christianity and a Western-style education, ‘a practice which questions the basic humanity of some people and denies them certain basic rights and freedoms’ has not only persisted but seems to be showing no signs of abating.⁵² It is truly a tragedy of great proportions for which the present generations in our society will be judged harshly by history. One wonders how ‘a people as progressive and dynamic, and as egalitarian and fair minded as Nigerians are reputed to be, can cling for so long to a blatantly oppressive and irrational system of prejudice.’⁵³

This practice of the Osu system and the custodians of such traditions that subjects fellow Africans are what I choose to term as Africans enslaving Africans. I argue that it is through literature that this system has, to date, been mostly effectively challenged and that novels by writers like Achebe, in so doing, present an *internal* Afrocentric critique. The development of Africa through the theory of Afrocentrism cannot be achieved by simply appraising the African culture and challenging Eurocentric notions of Africa, when African culture has an ‘even more insidious system of human oppression.’⁵⁴ Understanding the present challenge in Africa, I argue that Afrocentrism does not only look outward but inward. It takes a bold step to challenge such repulsive cultural practices that subject Africans. My next focus is to analyse Achebe’s literary critique of the Osu caste system.

2.5 *Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease*

Achebe was born in 1930 in Eastern Nigeria, at the era of British rule in Nigeria. He is known as one of Nigeria’s finest writers, ‘Africa’s best-known and most widely read author,’ celebrated for his unsentimental depictions of Nigerian/African social conditions.⁵⁵ He was

⁵² C.O. Dureke, p. 36

⁵³ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 40

⁵⁴ Victor Uchendu, p. 40

⁵⁵ Catherine Innes, *Chinua Achebe*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], p. 1

christened Albert Chinualumogu. His father, Isaiah Okafor Achebe, a catechist for the Church Missionary Society, had, as a young man, been converted to Christianity and had been an evangelist and church teacher in other parts of Eastern Nigeria before returning to settle in his ancestral village, Ogidi. His mother, Janet, had also been a convert to Christianity. When Isaiah and Janet Achebe were married in 1909, the service was conducted by Isaiah Achebe's teacher, supervisor and friend, the eminent missionary and anthropologist, George Basden, whom I have quoted earlier in my definition of the Osu system. Growing up in Ogidi, Achebe lived at what he calls the 'crossroads of cultures': born to an African culture but raised as Christian.⁵⁶ As he puts it, 'On one arm of the cross we sang hymns and read the bible night and day. On the other my father's brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols.'⁵⁷ Achebe had a balanced life, one that would shape his literary oeuvre. Catherine Innes argues that, as a small child, 'he moved between both sides of his family, finding himself intrigued by the differing rituals and tempted by the 'heathen' food.'⁵⁸ What Innes is arguing is clear: Achebe indeed grew up at the centre of two religious beliefs. Not only did he experience the coming together of traditional African religion and Christianity, he grew up studying the language and culture of his people as well as the language and culture of the English. Innes continues:

As a child in Ogidi, and later at Owerri, Achebe attended church schools. His first lessons were in Igbo [...] At about eight, he began to learn English; after the two years of Infants' schooling, all instruction was in English. There were a few books in his father's house, and Achebe read all of them—including an Igbo adaptation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, stories of missionaries in Africa and ecclesiastical exhortations in *The West African Churchman's Pamphlet*, a simplified version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [...] He also listened to stories in Igbo told by the old men in the village, his mother and his elder sister. Achebe writes that 'he had always been fond of stories and intrigued by languages'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Catherine Innes, p. 4

⁵⁷ Catherine Innes, p. 7

⁵⁸ Catherine Innes, p. 10

⁵⁹ Catherine Innes, p. 7

While many might see this situation of Achebe as unfortunate, neither here nor there, Achebe draws an optimistic way of life from it. He represents his experiences in his literary texts, educating and informing the wider readers in and of African history, culture and practices, while advocating change to systems of discrimination such as colonialism, the killing of twins and the Osu caste system, amongst others.

Achebe himself affirms the benefit of his dual experience, ‘giving him a slight distance from each culture’: ‘The distance becomes not a separation but a bringing together like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer might take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully’.⁶⁰ Standing at such an advantageous position, Achebe can see clearly. This is why he produced such balanced portrayals of Igbo culture: condemning abusive systems but upholding ennobling practices, whether of Africa or not, without bias or sentiment. Having such distance, ‘Achebe in his novel of traditional life combines the role of novelist [as social critic] and anthropologist [as social observer], synthesizing them in a new kind of fiction.’⁶¹ I shall later return to this historical fusion that characterizes Achebe’s life as I engage with his technique of dualism (the double level of action) and his position of Christianity in critiquing the Osu caste system.

In 1948, Achebe won a scholarship to study medicine at the University College, Ibadan which was an affiliate of the University of London at that time. After one year, Achebe decided to switch from medicine to a course in English literature, religious studies and history. The decision, it should be said, cost him his scholarship, but his older brother John generously supported him and Achebe was able to pursue his chosen course. This decision to forgo medicine, with all its benefits, for English literature and history is a testament to the cultural dynamism which he experienced while growing up, and he was determined to preserve the

⁶⁰ Catherine Innes, p. 5

⁶¹ Chinwe Okechukwu, *Achebe the Orator*, [London: Greenwood Press, 2001], p. 12

culture and history of his people through literature. Achebe gave everything to literature. To him, as he argues, ‘literature is the only tool with which to correct the wrongs and preserve the good of the society.’⁶²

Achebe indeed was prepared to take on the world with his literature. Writing *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe had not only decided to become a writer, but had also found the subject and the story that would preoccupy him as a result of his dual experiences. Having read ‘some appalling novels about Africa’ during his early school days, he decided that ‘the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted and well-intentioned’.⁶³ One of these novels was Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which Achebe dissected and accused of racism at its heart.⁶⁴ But it was Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939) which provided the chief starting point for *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe writes:

I know around ’51, ’52, I was quite certain that I was going to try my hands at writing, and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary’s novel, set in Nigeria, *Mister Johnson*, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture of – not only of the country- but even of the Nigerian character, and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside.⁶⁵

Drawing out both internal and external criticisms of Nigerian social systems, Achebe subsequently published *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and his prophetic novel *A Man of the People* (1966), which foretold the first military coup in Nigeria of that year. He also published a volume of poetry, *Beware Soul Brother* (1972), and a collection of short stories in *Girls at War* (1972). Achebe gave a number of important talks at conferences during this period, some of which are collected in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975). He published a political polemic entitled *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983) and *Hopes and Impediments*

⁶² Chinua Achebe, ‘The Role of the Writer in a New Nation’, p. 40

⁶³ Catherine Innes, p.12

⁶⁴ Catherine innes, p. 15

⁶⁵ Cosmo Pieterse et al, *African Writers Talking: A Collection of Radio Interviews*, [London: Heinemann, 1972], p. 31

(1988). In 1987, he writes what was to be his last novel: *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe published *Another Africa* (1998), ‘a collaboration with photographer Robert Lyons fusing photographs, poetry, and text to portray modern Africa.’⁶⁶ Listing all Achebe’s literary publications here is impossible. Achebe has written so many essays and delivered lectures and talks at so many conferences. His writing has contributed immensely to the development of African literature. With some justice, Achebe may be deemed the ‘father of the African novel in English’.⁶⁷ And, as Ernest Emenyonu puts it, ‘he is as much the [...] forerunner-theoretician of African literary criticism [...] for he] has bequeathed to critics of African literature a legacy of ideas and theories, which has helped to shape the trends in contemporary African literary criticism.’⁶⁸ His influence both as a creative writer and a critic has been considerable, not only on his fellow African authors but also on postcolonial novelists more generally. Sadly, Achebe died on 21st March, 2013. I shall next consider Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as it engages with the Osu caste system.

Things Fall Apart is set in Igboland, in the eastern region of present-day Nigeria, in the period between 1850 and 1900, that is, the period just prior to and after the arrival of the white man in this part of West Africa. The setting is the fictitious Umuofia and Mbanta, the two principal villages in a union called the ‘nine villages’. ‘The conflict in the novel’, Douglas Killam writes, ‘derives from the series of crushing blows which are levelled at traditional values by an alien and more powerful culture, causing, in the end, the traditional society to fall apart’ and showing at the end, the crushing of repugnant African cultural practices.⁶⁹ Killam’s argument here summarises the central theme of the novel. *Things Fall Apart* centres on the struggle between the traditional Igbo values and western culture. Through Okonkwo, the anti-

⁶⁶ Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, [New York: Borzoi Book, 2010], p. xx

⁶⁷ Catherine Innes, p. 19

⁶⁸ Ernest Emenyonu ed., *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* Vol. 2, [Michigan: African World Press, 2004], p. xv

⁶⁹ Douglas Killam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, [London: Heinemann, 1969], p. 13

hero of the novel, Achebe shows the defeat of traditional values by western culture. Okonkwo, a great wrestler in his youth, is, when we first encounter him, a renowned warrior and one of the most wealthy, powerful and influential members of Umuofia. He excels within the world he knows, but his failure lies in his impulsiveness, strict adherence to the customs of his people, whether good or bad, and in his inability to take considered advice, especially in the killing of Ikemefuna, whom, I argue, is an Osu by virtue of his dedication to the oracle of Umuofia. When Okonkwo oversteps clan rules, committing a sin against the feminine principles that his society holds sacred, he is exiled to his mother's home of Mbanta. Returning after seven years, he finds the 'falling apart' of traditions of his people. Even dedication to Igbo ritual is tempered by the effect of the Christian church. As Nahem Yousaf argues, 'Achebe demonstrates that it is the language, symbols and ritual that the Christians use that affords them a way to penetrate this traditional society and the converts they make to begin with [...] are the Osu or outcaste.'⁷⁰ If not for the repugnant practice of the Osu caste system which severely marginalises the Osu, Christianity would not have easily penetrated Umuofia and other villages. By this, Achebe shows that colonialism had an easy impact in Africa because of Africa's insidious practices which divide them. It '[...] emphasizes the weakness inherent in the traditional system that predisposed those disadvantaged in the existing order towards embracing the new order.'⁷¹ Such social classification alludes to the maxim: 'united we stand, divided we fall'. It is on this division that Okonkwo beheads a messenger sent to the clan by colonial administrators and commits suicide when his action prompts no further violent resistance on the part of the clan against the colonialists. He knows he stands alone, thus, his tragic end.

⁷⁰ Nahem Yousaf, *Chinua Achebe*, [Devon, Northcote Publishers Ltd, 2003], p. 4

⁷¹ Augustine Okere, 'Achebe and Christianity', *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Vol. 2 [Michigan: African World Press, 2004], p. 116

In a critical reading of *Things Fall Apart*, Yousaf writes that ‘Africa’s best-selling novel, *Things Fall Apart* casts back much further into the annals of pre-colonial history, imaginatively reconstructing African and Nigerian identity.’⁷² Achebe is a cultural nationalist whose fiction rests on a Fanonian belief that writing is a cornerstone of national culture.⁷³ He famously described his novel, *Things Fall Apart* as ‘an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return of a prodigal son.’⁷⁴ In this novel, Achebe recovers something of the dignity of pre-colonial ritual and custom through the telling of self-determining stories. He makes a serious attempt to capture the strains and tensions of the experiences of Igbo people under the siege of colonialism which, in ‘The Role of the Writer in a New Nation’, he calls ‘the devil’.⁷⁵ *Things Fall Apart*, Margaret Turner argues, details the first and crucial step in the process of cultural disintegration in the traditional Igbo society. The process, she continues, is begun by the arrival of the white colonizers, who have ‘put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.’⁷⁶ Turner interprets this novel as a critique of colonialism in which ‘the African personality had suffered a barrage of pernicious epithets.’⁷⁷ This arguably is Achebe’s main reason for writing this classic. Her argument chimes with Biodun Jeyifo’s, in which Jeyifo contends that ‘*Things Fall Apart* explores resistance to colonialism [...] with a melancholic sense of the falling apart of things with the collapse of pre-colonial societies and cultures’.⁷⁸ Stanley Macebah provides an elucidating reading of Achebe’s first novel: ‘Achebe began to give us a picture of traditional African society that made it quite clear that our cultures were as respectable, as noble, as substantively important as any other culture.’⁷⁹ *Things Fall Apart* is a

⁷² Nahem Yousaf, p. 1

⁷³ Nahem Yousaf, p. 2

⁷⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p.70

⁷⁵ Douglas killam, p. 4

⁷⁶ Margaret Turner, ‘Achebe, Hegel, and the New Colonialism’, *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, [Oxford: Heinemann, 2001], p. 34

⁷⁷ Naham Yousaf, p. 30

⁷⁸ Biodun Jeyifo, ‘For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika’, *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, [Oxford: Heinemann, 2001], p. 51

⁷⁹ Stanley Macebah, interviewed on the *South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television, January 1990.

ground-breaking African novel in its purposeful unsettling of whiteness.⁸⁰ As argued in the *Sun*, one of Nigeria's national dailies, it gave expression to Achebe's first stirrings of anti-colonialism and a desire to use literature as a weapon against the Western invasion of Africa. As if to shape it with irony, he borrowed from the Western canon itself in using as its title a line from Yeats's apocalyptic poem 'The Second Coming.'⁸¹

Moving away from the colonial critique and political intention of this novel, Emenyonu argues that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is seen as a classic study in character- the complex character of the hero, Okonkwo.⁸² While many critics would choose to attack colonialism and the Europeans in *Things Fall Apart*, Emenyonu exonerates the colonials: 'The colonial overlord is exonerated. The die-hard, one-track-minded missionary would deserve praise for being the link through which Western European techniques reached the Africans in a way that made sense and in an atmosphere of mutual trust.'⁸³ Rather than focusing attention on external forces of oppression in Africa, Emenyonu contends that the character foible of Okonkwo is a metaphor for things falling apart in Africa. In my opinion, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is both a critique of colonialism as well as the failure of Okonkwo to 'modernise'.

While many critics continue to appraise this novel, many dismiss it as an anthropological text with rambling historical detail. For the Nigerian literary critic Femi Osofisan,

Things Fall Apart is filled with anthropological data, which sometimes impedes the flow of the narration [...] customs and practices being explained again and again [...] the way you would do when talking to strangers. And of course, that was true: the reader that the writers aimed at in those days were mostly the white foreign audience in London or elsewhere. But if you

⁸⁰ Nahem Yousaf, p. 40

⁸¹ Femi Osofisan, p. 40.

⁸² Ernest Emenyonu, 'Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Classic Study in Colonial Diplomatic Tactlessness', *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*, ed. Kirsten Holt Petersen and Anna Rutherford, [Oxford: Heinemann, 2001], p. 83

⁸³ Ernest Emenyonu, 'Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Classic Study in Colonial Diplomatic Tactlessness. P. 83

are Nigerian, familiar already with these customs, you cannot but lose your patience at such moments.⁸⁴

In defence of Achebe, Killam writes:

Many commentators have reacted to his novels primarily as social documents [with] anthropological and sociological content. There is nothing wrong with having ‘anthropological’ or ‘sociological biases [...] The sociology and anthropology in Achebe’s work provides its background, and the background, carefully and convincingly evoked, is important to the success of his novels [...] and Achebe never allowed it dominate the human life the novels reveal.⁸⁵

Achebe is an interpreter of the cultural worth of his society. As a cultural writer, he finely blends anthropological and sociological details in his novels which enrich his literary works and depict his unique style of presentation. Like Killam, Yousaf criticises Osofisan’s position. He argues that Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* ‘has been described as anthropological by some critics who, in their myopic concentration on the Igbo aesthetic over all other facets of his work, miss the complex web of relations - literary and cultural, national and pan-Africa - that form part of the literary process of decolonizing that Achebe undertakes with subtlety and wit’.⁸⁶ Adding voice to this debate is Omar Sougou, who contends that Achebe’s ‘novels are both pieces of literature and useful anthropological and historical reflectors of Igbo experience which is to a large extent paradigmatic of the African predicament at some point in history.’⁸⁷

Having identified some literary criticisms on *Things Fall Apart*, the very point to begin my interpretation of *Things Fall Apart* as an internal critique of Nigerian social systems and the Osu caste system more particularly is Achebe’s use of the concept of dualism. Understanding this novel as a piece of art with a double-sided action is the best point of

⁸⁴ Femi Osofisan, p. 36

⁸⁵ Douglas Killam, p. 10

⁸⁶ Nahem Yousaf, p. 2

⁸⁷ Omar Sougou, ‘Didactic Aesthetics: Achebe the Griot and the Mbari Artist’, *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe Vol. 2*, p. 35

departure to analyse other literary techniques employed by Achebe to critique the Osu system in Nigeria at large.

Dualism, a term derived from the Latin word *duo*, meaning two, shows a clear-cut and decisive contrast and a well-defined boundary. This literary technique is clear in Achebe's fiction. Drawn from the popular Igbo proverb 'where something stands something else stands beside it', which Achebe quotes in his reference to dualism, Achebe advocates the need to examine an issue critically in order to reveal a second point of view.⁸⁸ This follows as a result of the misinterpretation given to *Things Fall Apart* by critics who see the text as an absolute challenge to colonialism, drawing meanings from 'historical and sociological data that are so apparent' in the novel.⁸⁹ Hence, as Emeka Nwabueze contends, 'they sometimes fail to recognise the importance of a more critical view from what the historical and sociological data reveal.'⁹⁰ Dualism appeals to Achebe because it offers him the opportunity to deliberate extensively on two positions in one literary proposition. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, criticism of colonialism (the external critique) on the one hand, and the Osu caste system (the internal critique) on the other, are Achebe's main focus. Fusing these two divergent views in one literary piece is only achieved through the careful use of the technique of dualism.

I do not have to prove extensively here that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* challenges colonialism in Africa, Nigeria in particular. It is clear from the discussions so far that this novel is Achebe's way of challenging the legacy of colonialism. Discussing the negative impact of colonialism which gave rise to *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe writes: '[Africa] suffered many terrible and lasting misfortunes. In terms of human dignity and human relations the [colonial]

⁸⁸ Clement Okafor, 'Igbo Cosmology and the Parameter of Individual Accomplishment in *Things Fall Apart*', p.87

⁸⁹ Emeka Nwabueze, 'Theoretical Construction and Constructive Theorizing on the Execution of Ikemefuna in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Study in Critical Dualism', *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 31. Issue 2, 2000, p. 163

⁹⁰ Emeka Nwabueze, p. 165

encounter was almost a complete disaster for the black race.’⁹¹ The need to critique colonialism is recognised by Achebe in an essay on the role of the African writer. He argues:

The role of the writer is to show that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.⁹²

Achebe’s assertion above is without ambiguity. For him, the first concern of African literature is to depose colonialism and consequently to regain the dignity of Africans and their culture. This is why his anti-hero, Okonkwo, for good or ill refuses to shift ground and to compromise his faith in an African, Igbo world-view. In a discussion between Okonkwo and Obierika, he reveals his rigid position of defending his tradition: ‘the law of the land must be obeyed.’⁹³ Obierika on the other, gives in to reason: ‘I do not know how we got that law.’⁹⁴ This statement of Obierika, a critical search-light on African traditions, leads me to the second interpretation of this novel: the internal critique of Africa’s social systems, which is the crux of this chapter.

While it is clear that *Things Fall Apart* is interpreted to depose colonialism in Africa, it should be made known that such a critique is a one-sided reading of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. It would interest many critics to note that Achebe in an interview with Robert Serumaga moderated his views on colonialism and thus on the role of African literature: ‘I am not one of those who would say that Africa gained nothing at all during the colonial period, I mean this is ridiculous- we have gained a lot.’⁹⁵ In one of his essays, he further affirms this position: ‘Colonialism in Africa [...] did create big political units where there were small scattered ones

⁹¹ Douglas Killam, p. 5

⁹² Chinua Achebe, ‘The Role of the Writer in a New Nation’, p. 158

⁹³ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, [London: Penguin Classics, 1958], p. 50

⁹⁴ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 50

⁹⁵ Robert Serumaga, ‘Interview with Chinua Achebe’ Transcription Centre, London 1967, p.1

before.⁹⁶ Killam agrees with Achebe: ‘Not only did colonialism unite many people who had hitherto gone their separate ways, it gave them a language with which they could talk together.’⁹⁷ It is to be noted, however, that Achebe’s second view at the effect of colonialism and his ‘contact with European culture and especially with European literary traditions and analytical critical attitudes’, brings a second role to African writers. In the same essay on the role of the writer, Achebe accords the writer a second duty:

The question is how does a writer recreate this past? Quite clearly there is a strong temptation to idealize it- to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed. This is where the writer’s integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those fact which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved. The credibility of the word he is attempting to recreate will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our [culture is] one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people’s [culture] ours had its good as well as its bad sides⁹⁸

In the above excerpt, no doubt, Achebe encourages African writers not to idealise the African culture but to condemn negative cultures in Africa. The quality of good African literature from Achebe’s understanding is one which is bold enough to conduct an internal critique of the African system not just on external critique. Thus, Achebe has given the African writer a second duty, that of the social critic. Studying Achebe’s literature, Kolawole Ogungbesan describes the double thematic concerns of Achebe’s writings: ‘While Achebe’s earlier duty is to give back to his people their dignity; his second task is to focus his gaze on the evils inflicted on African societies, not by an alien race, but by Africans themselves.’⁹⁹ African writers should

⁹⁶ Chinua Achebe, ‘The English Language and the African Writer’, *Insight* Oct/Dec. 1966, p 19

⁹⁷ Douglas Killam, p. 5

⁹⁸ Chinua Achebe, ‘The Role of the Writer in a New Nation’, p. 160

⁹⁹ Kolawole Ogungbesan, ‘Politics and the African Writer’, *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, [London: Heinemann, 1978], p. 38

‘expose and attack injustice’: the injustice on Africans by Africans.¹⁰⁰ Their duty ‘is to explore the depth of the human condition.’¹⁰¹

Speaking of the concept of dualism in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Arthur Ravenscroft makes a point worthy of note:

Many commentators have stressed the ‘charm’ of the evocation of the past, as if Achebe’s chief concerns were to make a genuflection to departed African glories, and show only that the coming of the white man and his paraphernalia destroyed a finely wrought indigenous culture. Such a view is too limited. It implies that Achebe has sentimentalized the setting of his story, whereas the greatest strength of *Things Fall Apart* is the tragic ‘objectivity’ with which Achebe handles a dual theme.¹⁰²

The position of Ravenscroft captures my argument so far. It reiterates Achebe’s dual positions on the role of African writers, while criticising scholars who uphold a single interpretation of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as a challenge to colonialism. In an essay on the novelist as a teacher, Achebe writes to the single-minded critics:

Needless to say, we do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our [culture ...] It is too late in the day to get worked up about [colonialism] or blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is look back and try to find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us.¹⁰³

In this statement, Achebe urges African critics to look inward; to evaluate the African traditions rather than an ‘out of Africa’ investigation as the problem of Africa. Looking inward, *Things Fall Apart* shows the vulnerable cracks in the Igbo tradition and culture by exposing and attacking the injustice on the Osu and other negative African systems which depict ‘where the rain began to beat us’. Omar Sougou puts it clearly in his argument that *Things Fall Apart* signals ‘recognition of Achebe’s objective outlook which exposes such aspects of tradition that

¹⁰⁰ Kolawole Ogungbesan, p. 3939

¹⁰¹ Douglas Killam, p. 11

¹⁰² Arthur Ravenscroft, *Chinua Achebe* [Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1997], p.9

¹⁰³ Chinua Achebe, ‘The Novelist as Teacher’, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, [New York: Doubleday, 1989], p. 43

harm the individual or affect the community in general.’¹⁰⁴ Achebe, he continues, ‘does not try to justify the killing of Ikemefuna, [whom I argue is an Osu] or the throwing away of corpses in the bush, and least of all the taboo about twins [...]’.¹⁰⁵ While Achebe’s early novels have been popularly received for their representation of an early African nationalist tradition that repudiates imperialist and colonialist ideology, the study of the internal critique of African tradition should be of great concern to African scholars. The failure of African scholars to criticise negative African culture opens a gap that my research intends to fill. As my deconstructive reading of Afrocentrism not only challenges Eurocentric notions of Africa but the internal discriminations within Africa, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is not simply ‘to counter the depiction of black Africa in Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* and other related texts written by European colonial and Eurocentric authors’ but to challenge internal cultural practices in Africa that breed discrimination.¹⁰⁶ It is for this reason that I consider this novel an exemplary Afrocentric text. Before embarking on my study of the form of the novel to depict Achebe’s criticism of the injustice towards Osu and other negative systems in Africa, I shall elaborate on my reading of Ikemefuna and the virgin girl as Osu.

As discussed earlier in my classification of Osu, Ikemefuna and the virgin girl are prototypes of unfortunate people who become Osu by dedication. A son of Mbaino kills a daughter of Umuofia and the oracle of the Hill and Caves demands two human beings from Mbaino for propitiation: a young man and a virgin damsel. Mbaino wilfully dedicates Ikemefuna and the virgin damsel to the deity of Umuofia to avert calamity on the land:

And that was how he came to look after the doomed lad who was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbour [Mbaino] to avoid war and bloodshed. The ill-fated lad was called Ikemefuna.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Omar Sougou, P 37

¹⁰⁵ Omar Sougou, p 37

¹⁰⁶ Francis Mogu, ‘Beyond the Igbo Cosmos: Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as a Cross Cultural Novel’, *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe Vol. 1*, p. 24

¹⁰⁷ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 8

The wilful decision of Mbaino to give in to the demands of Umuofia is because Umuofia is greatly feared by all neighbouring villages. In fact, it is the greatest and strongest of all, with the strongest deity: the Oracle of the Hills and Caves.¹⁰⁸ Hence, when ‘an ultimatum was immediately dispatched to Mbaino asking them to choose between war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation’¹⁰⁹, Mbaino, for fear of the deity of Umuofia and with the knowledge that ‘the wish of the deity must be carried out’¹¹⁰, honours and respects this wish ‘with a lad of fifteen and a young virgin. The lad’s name was Ikemefuna, whose sad story is still told in Umuofia unto this day.’¹¹¹ While in Umuofia, the girl and Ikemefuna assume a new social status: that of a sacrificial lamb. ‘As for the boy’, the narrator laments, ‘he was terribly afraid. He could not understand what was happening to him or what he had done.’¹¹² Ikemefuna can not comprehend what is happening to him: the loss of his freedom, loss of his fundamental rights as humans, and above all, the loss of his life in a strange land and in the hands of a strange father. As the virgin girl goes ‘to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife’¹¹³, the deity of Umuofia who owns Ikemefuna and the damsel orders the killing of Ikemefuna to complete the sacrificial process: ‘Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there.’¹¹⁴ On that day, ‘the men of Umuofia pursued their way, armed with sheathed machetes and Ikemefuna, carrying a pot of palm-wine on his head, walked in their midst.’¹¹⁵ As the story continues, when the man who clears his throat raises his machete, Okonkwo takes his machete and cut Ikemefuna down.¹¹⁶ When Okonkwo’s son,

¹⁰⁸*Things Fall Apart*, p. 11

¹⁰⁹ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 10

¹¹⁰ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 10

¹¹¹*Things Fall Apart*, p. 10

¹¹²*Things Fall Apart*, p. 13

¹¹³*Things Fall Apart*, p. 11

¹¹⁴*Things Fall Apart*, p. 42

¹¹⁵*Things Fall Apart*, p. 44

¹¹⁶*Things Fall Apart*, p. 45

Nwoye, tells his mother ‘that Ikemefuna was going home, [...] she folds her arms across her breast and sighs, ‘Poor child.’’¹¹⁷ While Nwoye is too young to understand Umuofia’s repugnant custom of Osu sacrifice, his mother knows that ‘going home’ means death.

As one with deep knowledge of the Osu system, who might have witnessed the executions of Osu as sacrifice to gods, Achebe offers a sympathetic narrative of the procession of ‘Ikemefuna as he is being marched through the forest to his death’¹¹⁸:

The sun rose slowly to the centre of the sky, and the dry, sandy footway began to throw up the heat that lay buried in it. Some birds chirruped in the forests around. The men threw dry leaves on the sand. All else was silent. Then from the distance came the faint beating of the *ekwe*. It rose and faded with the wind—a peaceful dance from a distant clan.¹¹⁹

This passage illustrates what one critic calls Achebe’s ‘terseness, which makes the horror more compelling.’¹²⁰ It increases the tension and modulated emotions in Ikemefuna. Achebe captures this moment to remind his native readers of the procession leading to the execution of Osu for sacrifice, and to inform his international readers of such tragic and painful processes. This narrative recalls Okeke’s rendering of the event leading to the execution of Osu, which I have discussed at the beginning of the chapter.

If one agrees with my earlier description of Osu as sacrificial lambs, the situation leading up to the life of the virgin girl and death of Ikemefuna become compelling cases of Osu by dedication. While the oracle decides to pawn the damsel to Ogbuefi Udo, it demands the killing of Ikemefuna. This follows Ezeokoli’s argument that ‘Osu are the properties of the gods and the gods alone determines the fate and future of them.’¹²¹ There is no mistaking, I am arguing, that Ikemefuna and the virgin girl are Osu. For one thing, they are lambs sacrificed

¹¹⁷ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 43

¹¹⁸ David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe: Novelist, Poet, Critic*, [London: Macmillan Press, 1990], p. 45

¹¹⁹ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 43

¹²⁰ Douglas Killam, p. 21

¹²¹ Igwe Ezeokoli, p. 30

to the deity of Umuofia and any human sacrificed to any deity in Igbo society is referred to as an Osu. However surprising it is that critics do not classify the position and situation of Ikemefuna and the girl as Osu, my contention to situate them as Osu would generate fresh debate on this point. Perhaps many such critics are ignorant of the concept of Osu in Igbo land. Since Achebe did not spell out that Ikemefuna and the girl are Osu, only a deeper reading and local cultural knowledge would reveal this. Achebe, from an insider's perspective, depicts Ikemefuna and the girl as Osu. As evidence of Achebe's rejection of the Osu system, I shall next analyse how Ikemefuna's death affects the plot of the novel.

I analyse the plot of *Things Fall Apart* in three stages: the first stage as the description of Okonkwo and Umuofia and the arrival of Ikemefuna and the virgin girl to Umuofia; the second as 'the death of Ikemefuna', which, arguably, 'is the turning point in the novel'; the third as the arrival of the colonizer, although as discussed above, the third stage is not my focus here.¹²² To show his clear rejection and condemnation of the Osu system, Achebe quickly introduces Ikemefuna and the virgin girl and the event leading to the boy's death. While the first few pages brings Ikemefuna to Umuofia as Osu and kills him, the rest of the novel, I shall argue, is filled with the repercussions of the death of Ikemefuna, leading to things falling apart for Umuofia. The death of Ikemefuna begins the personal tragedy of Okonkwo who kills him, and the public tragedy of Umuofia, who supports his death. As argued by David Carroll, 'the execution of Ikemefuna is the beginning of Okonkwo's decline, for it initiates the series of catastrophes which end with his death.'¹²³ Slowly but surely, Achebe opens up these catastrophes, one after the other. After Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo's next tragic error is to kill Ezeudu's son at Ezeudu's funeral. As a consequence, he is to be banished from Umuofia for seven years and seek refuge at Mbanta, his maternal home. During his time in Mbanta,

¹²² David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe: Novelist, Poet, Critic*. p. 44

¹²³ David Carroll, p. 45

Nwoye, his son, angry about the killing of Ikemefuna, abandons the traditional belief of his people for Christianity. On Okonkwo's return to Umuofia, things had "fallen apart", 'Christians have built a church and attracted not only the low-born and outcastes but even the men of titles.'¹²⁴ The climax is reached when Okonkwo kills a Christian messenger, and the people of Umuofia, instead of joining him to attack the Christians colonizers, rebukes his action. He then quietly walks away and hangs himself. I next will analyse these events in turn.

The death of Ikemefuna leads to a series of seemingly unrelated events that in fact Achebe shows are consequences of it. I begin with the situation when the priestess of Agbala comes to the village to take Ezinma, Okonkwo's favourite child, whom he had wished was a boy, to pay homage to her god. Okonkwo protests but his struggles is futile as the crying Ezinma is taken away to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves:

Okonkwo pleaded with her [...] But Chielo [the Priestess] ignored what he was trying to say and went on shouting that Agbala [the god] wanted to see his daughter [...] Okonkwo was still pleading [...] The priestess screamed. 'Beware, Okonkwo!'¹²⁵

It is strange how the character of Okonkwo, the custodian of tradition and a strong respecter of the wishes of the god, pleads to avert the decision of the god to take away his daughter, but never begs the Oracle to keep Ikemefuna. Instead, he is the first to strike the boy down for fear of being thought weak. In presenting Okonkwo thus, Achebe condemns him for his selfishness and for condemning Ikemefuna, the Osu, to death. The Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwuefi episode, the narrator tells us, destroys the domestic calm in Okonkwo's homestead. For the first time, we see Okonkwo uneasy with the decisions of the god, and for the first time, arguably, he becomes 'a victim of the harsh laws he had previously defended and administered.'¹²⁶ This tension and uneasiness introduces the scene of the death of Ezeudu's son at Ezeudu's funeral.

¹²⁴*Things Fall Apart*, p. 123

¹²⁵*Things Fall Apart*, pp. 70-71

¹²⁶ David Carroll, p. 47

When the announcement of Ezeudu's death comes to the attention of the village, Okonkwo remembers Ezeudu's warning at their last meeting: 'A cold shiver ran down Okonkwo's back as he remembered the last time the old man had visited. 'That boy calls you father', he had said: 'Bear no hand in his death.'¹²⁷ Okonkwo, as we discover, did not heed the advice of Ezeudu. He goes on to kill Ikemefuna. At Ezeudu's funeral, strong men give gun salutes. While it could be argued that the gods accept the salutes of other men, Okonkwo's is not. Shooting his gun salute, he accidentally fires at Ezeudu's son:

a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart.¹²⁸

Reading Okonkwo's unfortunate killing of Ezeudu's son, two things come to mind: firstly, it adds to the tragedy, given that it is Ezeudu who warns Okonkwo not to kill Ikemefuna. So, Okonkwo not only kills Ikemefuna but the son of the man who warns him not to have a hand in the boy's death. Secondly, it underscores Ezeudu's anger towards Okonkwo for his strict adherence to debilitating traditions, a crime for which he will be severely punished. 'The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman'.¹²⁹ I have struggled to explain why Okonkwo mistakenly shoots Ezeudu's son and not at any other clansman, for the latter would still have attracted the same penalty. This still baffles me. However, this may be Achebe's way of heightening Okonkwo's tragedy and to evoke a simplified sense of sympathy for a man who does everything to please his god but ends up desolate. Okonkwo thus goes into exile. 'He could return to the clan after seven years.'¹³⁰

¹²⁷*Things Fall Apart*, p. 84

¹²⁸*Things Fall Apart*, p. 86

¹²⁹*Things Fall Apart*, p. 89

¹³⁰*Things Fall Apart*, p. 87

On his return to Umuofia, Okonkwo sees new circumstances: the presence of the white man and his success in making Christian converts. The first sets of converts are the oppressed Osu, the victimized twins and their mothers, and other marginalized groups in a society which traditionally rejects, mocks and humiliates them. Achebe provides us with the situation of Nneka:

Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians.¹³¹

The case of Nneka conveys Achebe's condemnation of the discrimination against not just Osu but twins. In the past, the birth of twins was an abomination in some societies in Africa. As tradition demands, they were to be killed and thrown away. In *Things Fall Apart*, not only did the displaced twins and their mothers embrace Christianity, the Osu defects to Christianity as well. Achebe writes:

Osu, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received. And so one Sunday two of them went to church. [...] the two outcasts shaved off their hair, and soon they were the strongest adherents of the new faith [...] nearly all the osu in Mbanta followed their example.¹³²

No doubt, Achebe condemns the discrimination against Osu in traditional society. As Okeke argues, 'he emphasises the weakness inherent in a traditional system that predisposed those disadvantaged in the existing order towards embracing the new order.'¹³³ These marginalised people have been rejected as humans by Igbo tradition. It is this discrimination in Igbo tradition that pre-empts Nwoye's defection to Christianity; since he could find no answer for the reason for the killing of twins and the discrimination against Osu:

¹³¹ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 107

¹³² *Things Fall Apart*, pp.110-11

¹³³ Augustine Okere, 'Achebe and Christianity', p. 116

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captured him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in the darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul- the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul.¹³⁴

Thus, Okonkwo returns to meet an old son with a new belief and tradition. Christianity provides for Nwoye what his traditional belief could not. From the conversion of the Osu and other oppressed groups, Achebe 'makes it clear that it was the feeling of insecurity and the distress of such victims of traditional religious sanctions that predisposed them to embracing the new religion.'¹³⁵ What Okeke seems to argue here, and I agree, is that Umuofia did not give in to the European because of his wisdom and material gifts but because of the discrimination inherent in their tradition.

If Okonkwo was not shocked by the conversion of his son and other oppressed people in the society, it was a huge disappointment to him that 'worthy men had joined' Christianity.¹³⁶ The bond of Umuofia is thus broken; the flaws in their traditional system are clear. The fall of Umuofia is thus the public tragedy of Umuofia as it relates to the killing of Ikemefuna. Taken together, one can argue that it is the tradition of discrimination, not the coming of the Europeans, that breaks the unity that held Umuofia together and they have fallen apart. Understanding the plot of the novel in this manner, one sees how Achebe criticises the Osu caste system by positioning the victimization of Ikemefuna and his death as the beginning of things falling apart for Umuofia, Nigeria as presented in the novel and Africa at large. I shall next study the individual character of Nwoye, Obierika and Okonkwo to further explore Achebe's critique of the Osu system.

¹³⁴*Things Fall Apart*, p. 80

¹³⁵ Augustine Okere, 'Achebe and Christianity', p. 116

¹³⁶*Things Fall Apart*, p. 123

Abiola Irele argues that ‘the use of an individual character as a symbolic receptacle, the living theatres of a social dilemma, is what gives Achebe’s novels their real measure of strength.’¹³⁷ ‘Achebe’s characters’, Innes contends, ‘are complex individuals, types rather than archetypes, the resolution of whose conflicts is central to the plot.’¹³⁸ Achebe carefully uses individual characterization in this way to criticize debilitating traditions in Africa. First to be examined is Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son.

Nwoye is a peaceful and accommodating boy who is patient as well. While Okonkwo wishes Nwoye is like him, Nwoye, according to Okonkwo, is very much like his grand-father, Unoka. Unoka in his days, the narrator tells us:

was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow [... He] was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts [...] He was a failure [...] When he died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt.¹³⁹

Witnessing this, Okonkwo vows never to be like his father, nor to allow Nwoye to adopt his ways. He wants his son to be bold, hardworking and embrace the belief of his people. But Nwoye from his early days was neither interested in the ‘horrible’ traditions of his people, nor to take after Okonkwo’s ways. At twelve, he ‘was then causing his father great anxiety. [... Okonkwo] sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth.’¹⁴⁰ When Ikemefuna comes to Okonkwo’s homestead, the narrator tells us that Nwoye loves Ikemefuna so much. Having started developing a different life-style from that of his father, Nwoye’s final alienation from his father, ‘the breaking of the filial bond, is directly related to the killing of Ikemefuna’¹⁴¹:

¹³⁷ Abiola Irele, ‘The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe’, *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, p. 14

¹³⁸ Catherine Innes, p. 22

¹³⁹ *Things Fall Apart*, pp. 6-8

¹⁴⁰ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 12

¹⁴¹ Abiola Irele, ‘The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe’, p. 12

As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seems to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow.¹⁴²

Why should Ikemefuna be killed? What crime has he committed? These questions and more occupy his mind as he questions certain belief of his traditions which are debilitating. Something seems to give way in Nwoye and he comes to abhor the traditions of his people which torture unfortunate humans. On Okonkwo's return, after the knowledge of the death of Ikemefuna, Nwoye 'had the same kind of feeling not long ago; a sad feeling 'when he heard the voice of infant crying in the thick forest [...] He had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest.'¹⁴³ Hearing the voice of the innocent twins being thrown in the forest, 'a vague chill had descended on him and his head had seemed to swell.'¹⁴⁴ Nwoye, however, rejects traditions that discriminate against Osu and twins. Achebe presents Nwoye as, in Irele's words, 'a sensitive young man whose psychology turns against certain customs of the village, particularly the casting away of twins into the forest' and the killing of Osu.¹⁴⁵ For this reason, he leaves his traditional religion for Christianity. Nwoye's defection to Christianity has a double significance, as Irele argues, 'it is at the same time an act of revolt against his father as well as a rejection of the society that he embodied.'¹⁴⁶ Rejecting the negative traditions of his people, 'Nwoye thus stands as a symbolic negation for his father, the living denial of all that Okonkwo accepts and stands for.'¹⁴⁷ Through the character of Nwoye, Achebe reveals his rejection of the discrimination against the Osu and other victims of harsh African traditions.

¹⁴²*Things Fall Apart*, p. 45

¹⁴³*Things Fall Apart*, p. 45

¹⁴⁴*Things Fall Apart*, p. 45

¹⁴⁵ Abiola Irele, p. 13

¹⁴⁶ Abiola Irele, p. 16

¹⁴⁷ Abiola Irele, p. 13

Obierika is another character whom Achebe employs to challenge systems of domination. Like Okonkwo, he is respected in Umuofia for his wealth, hard work and traditional title. Achebe respects him also for his bluntness to rebuke wrong deeds in the community. In an argument that ensued between him and Okonkwo, Obierika wastes no time to condemn Okonkwo's participation in the killing of Ikemefuna:

‘I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy’, [Okonkwo] asked Obierika. ‘Because I did not want to’, Obierika replied sharply. ‘I had something better to do.’¹⁴⁸

In this swift rebuke, Obierika reveals his disapproval for the killing of Ikemefuna, stating that such an act was no ‘better thing to do.’ Obierika is against it and condemns Okonkwo for taking part, and worst still, for taking a central position in the execution of Ikemefuna. He rebukes Okonkwo:

And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.¹⁴⁹

Following this open condemnation, Okonkwo quickly defends himself: ‘The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her.’¹⁵⁰ Although the Earth goddess does not punish Okonkwo immediately, it leaves him with no protection, leading to his tragic end. Like Okonkwo, Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* suffers betrayal from Ulu whom he served faithfully. ‘He is a defender of the sanctity of his people's culture; one who is ready to destroy his people for neglecting their priest.’¹⁵¹ Yet Ulu abandons him and he ends in shame. Achebe here questions the sacrificing of humans and carrying out atrocities in favour of a god. If the custodians of tradition are not preserved but eventually become tragic figures, how then can one agree that the traditional deity can protect the people? I wish to stress that Achebe is not by this argument

¹⁴⁸*Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

¹⁴⁹*Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

¹⁵⁰*Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

¹⁵¹ Jasper Onuekwusi, ‘Archetypes and the Quest for Excellence in Chinua Achebe's Early Novels’, *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, vol. 2, p. 77

calling for the eradication of Igbo tradition, but an intuitive reasoning of the practice of African religion, one that challenges the barbaric demands of the gods. Okeke puts it clearly: ‘for Achebe the problem is not the question of believing or not believing in [gods], but of there being no need at all to believe in a God who is apparently unconcerned with the suffering of the people.’¹⁵² If it is a crime against the Earth to kill a clansman, why is the killing of unfortunate Osu and twins no crime at all? The simple answer that comes to mind here is that Osu are considered ‘low-humans’, meant for sacrifice only. The gods are not concerned with the sufferings of innocent and unfortunate people and Achebe admonishes traditional adherents to seek change. Even Ezeulu, after being neglected by the deity whom he serves, ‘challenges the very basis of his existence and that of his deity.’¹⁵³

As a response to Okonkwo’s defence above: ‘The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her’¹⁵⁴, the reply of Obierika is worth lingering over: ‘But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it.’¹⁵⁵ From this statement, it is clear that Obierika refuses to condemn the god for such demands. He rather takes a neutral position on the issue. He would neither condemn the god, nor be the one to carry out its terrible demands. From the character of Obierika, one would expect an outright condemnation of the wrongs of the god without fear. In this seemingly controversial position of Obierika, Achebe shows the fear and reverence many Africans have for the African gods. Such act of respect is what have hindered the open challenge and an end to the barbaric demands of the gods.

¹⁵² Augustine Okere, ‘Achebe and Christianity’, p. 132

¹⁵³ Jasper Onuekwusi, p. 77

¹⁵⁴ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

¹⁵⁵ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

Commiserating with Okonkwo for his banishment after the unfortunate killing of Ezeudu's son, Obierika thinks strongly on his twin children whom he had thrown into the forest. He questions himself as he criticises his action:

He remembered his wife's twin children whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed.¹⁵⁶

Something seems to give way in him. He cannot understand the calamity of Okonkwo after obeying the dictates of the god: 'why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently?'¹⁵⁷ Obierika turns to reason. He becomes uncomfortable with the practice of the killing of twins, challenging subtly the gods and their demands. Achebe employs this self-criticism of Obierika to criticise negative African beliefs. Although not like Obi Okonkwo, a fully developed intellectual character that I will study in my reading of *No Longer At Ease*, Obierika, however, reflects a position in the critique of debilitating traditions in Africa.

While through the portrayal of Nwoye, Obierika and Ezeudu Achebe criticises the abuse inherent in Igbo tradition, with Okonkwo, his hero, he advocates change and progress by exposing Okonkwo's flaws. It is clear so far that 'Okonkwo's tragedy lies in his lopsided development as a person.'¹⁵⁸ He is not open to change. Nothing about his tradition and culture, he believes, should change. As Kwadwo Osei-Nyame argues, 'Okonkwo's traditional belief and masculinist assertions converge to marginalise the women,[...] osus, and others within the community.'¹⁵⁹ He is quick to protect his tradition and challenge any opposition to his culture, and ever ready to work for his god just to show his strength: 'I cannot understand why you

¹⁵⁶*Things Fall Apart*, p. 87

¹⁵⁷*Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

¹⁵⁸David Carroll, p. 50

¹⁵⁹ Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, 'Chinua Achebe Writing Culture: Representations of Gender and Tradition in *Things Fall Apart*, p.151

refused to come with us to kill that boy,' he asked Obierika.¹⁶⁰ He further attacks Obierika: 'You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle, who said he should die.'¹⁶¹ Okonkwo continues: 'But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done.'¹⁶² Okonkwo shows a rigid code of adherence to his traditions with no sense of pity for the victims of such harsh culture: 'But the law of the land must be obeyed.'¹⁶³ He imposes, as Irele argues, 'a rigid code of aloofness upon his own generous human impulse and magnified it into a principle of right conduct.'¹⁶⁴ Such aloofness to respect and recognise humanity is noticed in his unsympathetic killing of Ikemefuna, a boy who calls him father.

What Achebe aims to achieve by Okonkwo's characterization is the need, in Afam Ebeogu's words, for a 'carefully ordered yet flexible African culture', one that is accommodating and susceptible to change and progress.¹⁶⁵ Achebe recognises the duality and flexibility of every situation and culture. He supports changing any tradition to suit the human condition. He gives us a tragic hero whose 'inability to recognise the duality and complexity of life situations', the fundamental lack of balance and change in his life, is his major problem.¹⁶⁶ As Okere suggests, 'he dies trying to prevent Christianity from taking root in the clan. At his death, he is alienated from the very tradition he had laboured so much to uphold.'¹⁶⁷ While it could be argued that Achebe shows through Nwoye and Obierika, the change to discriminatory traditional practices in Africa, Okonkwo stands in the way of Achebe and his mission of change and he is crushed for his extreme impulsiveness and stubbornness, by that same culture he upholds. In Okonkwo's tragic end, Achebe seems to suggest that 'anything

¹⁶⁰ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

¹⁶¹ *Things Fall Apart*, p.48

¹⁶² *Things Fall Apart*, p. 48

¹⁶³ *Things Fall Apart*, p. 50

¹⁶⁴ Abiola Irele, p. 34

¹⁶⁵ Afam Ebeogu, 'The Igbo Home in Achebe's Fiction', *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Vol. 2 p. 171

¹⁶⁶ Nicholas Pweddon, "Saturday Nights": Pidgin English as a Stylistic Element in Chinua Achebe's Fiction', *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Vol. 2 p. 89

¹⁶⁷ Austine Okere, p. 124

that cannot stand the force of change must be uprooted or blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new season.¹⁶⁸

In 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'', McClintock criticises the western conception of progress based around the linear development that is not relevant to African societies. She argues that many postcolonial nations are faced with some kind of intervention by former colonising nations which are designed to 'present the reverse: regression backward to a primordial black degeneracy.'¹⁶⁹ Progress is a journey forward and nothing else. It is an ideology which should connote, in Hegel's opinion, truth, not deception. If in McClintock's argument the ideology of progress as used by dominant nations connotes retrogression, deception and stagnation, Achebe's idea of progress is for a regenerating Africa. The ideology of progress for Achebe is a necessary step to move Igbo humanity away from slouching cultural practices.

The progress Achebe advocates, rather than being the western notion critiqued by McClintock as an idea of civilization, is that which would move Africans away from any inherent tradition that deprives fellow Africans of basic standards of living and human rights. Put another way, a 'progress [...] from primitive pre-history [and tradition] bereft of [...] light.'¹⁷⁰ Achebe contends that progress, if given a chance, will lead to the emergence of post-traditional era: an era where repugnant traditions will be a thing of the past. Achebe's idea of change, Stephen Criswell argues, is part of what he drew from W.B. Yeats's poem, 'The Second Coming' from whence comes the title: *Things Fall Apart*.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Angela Miri, 'The Survival of Oral Speech Patterns in Modern African Literature: The Example of Chinua Achebe's Fiction', *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Vol. 2, p. 108

¹⁶⁹ Ann McClintock, 'Angel of Progress: Pitfall of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'', p. 84

¹⁷⁰ Anne McClintock, p. 86

¹⁷¹ Stephen Criswell, 'Okonkwo As Yeatian Hero: The Influence of W.B. Yeats on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*', p. 3

Things Fall Apart, Lloyd Brown argues, announces Achebe's obvious debt to Yeats's poem, 'The Second Coming' (1921). In Yeats's work, the vision of human history projects a succession of gyres, of epochal cycles in which the pre-Christian era gives way to the age ushered in by Christ's first coming, and the Christian phase must be followed in turn by a new and terrifyingly unknown cycle- by the new 'cradle' and the new 'Bethlehem' of another era or 'coming.'¹⁷² Put simply, 'The Second Coming' signals progression and change from one era to another. In the poem, Yeats 'propounds his theory of the cyclic movement of history.'¹⁷³ What Achebe takes from this theory of Yeats is the idea of the inevitability of change. In *Things Fall Apart*, 'Achebe portrays the events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Igboland as marking the end of traditional Igbo civilization and the ushering in of another civilization, the Christian-oriented civilization of Western Europe.'¹⁷⁴ Put in the context of my argument, Achebe's nineteenth-century Africa thus witnesses the end of an era of superstitious and barbaric tradition and the beginning of a much more ideal culture that appreciates and sees all Africans and humans as equal, with no discrimination and segregation. Okonkwo's death, I argue, might be seen as representing the defeat of such debilitating culture and offering an opportunity for the beginning of a new tradition through the process of reflection and repentance. In invoking Yeats's theme, Achebe implies that the 'sense of history and tradition, the burden of cultural continuity', must give way to reason and change in order to serve humans, for whom it is made for.¹⁷⁵ Having buttressed Achebe's idea of change, another focal point which is critical of his criticism of Osu is, gender.

¹⁷² Abiola Irele, p. 24

¹⁷³ Augustine Okere, p. 116

¹⁷⁴ Augustine Okere, p. 118

¹⁷⁵ Abiola Irele, p. 25

Critics like Kristen Petersen, Modupe Kolawole and Rose Ure Mezu to name only three accuse Achebe of creating a masculine-based society and writing against women, with women playing very limited and suppressed roles in *Things Fall Apart*. Yet to my mind they are guilty of presenting an over-simplified interpretation of his novel. In my opinion, Achebe's writing is not masculinist. He is, in my view, a balanced writer. Rather than debase women, he writes to change women's condition in society. These critics refer to Achebe's presentation of women in *Things Fall Apart* as degrading whilst uplifting for men, for example, in his presentation of Okonkwo who beats his wives, tells 'masculine stories of violence and bloodshed' to his son, and demeans everything that is considered feminine.¹⁷⁶ I argue, however, that Achebe's portrayals of women's subjugation in his novels are representations of the true condition and situation of women in society. It by no means suggests that he supports such discrimination. Rather, he writes to reverse the case of women in Igbo society. I do not intend to repeat this argument of womanism here as the previous chapter has dealt with it in some detail. What I want to show here is Achebe's presentation of gender amongst the Osu.

According to Okeke, 'Osu women suffer more heavily than their male counterpart. While the male Osu sometimes break out of their status and are successful in life, the female Osu remain stigmatized with no husband and job.'¹⁷⁷ They suffer double discrimination: for being Osu on the one hand, and being a woman on the other. Achebe tackles this issue by showing how he tries to reduce the burden of Osu women who suffer more than their male counterparts. When Ikemefuna and the virgin girl were sacrificed to Umuofia, Achebe preserves the girl as the Oracle of the Hills and Caves decrees that she should be sent to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. While it is known that an Osu is stripped of dignity and life, Achebe provides for the girl at least a lasting home where she could live as a domestic servant

¹⁷⁶ *Things Fall Apart*, p.48

¹⁷⁷ Igwebuike Romeo Okeke, p. 70

to Ogbuefi Udo. In Ikemefuna's case, Achebe did not save him. He rather allows him to be killed painfully and horribly. While the girl's life was spared, Ikemefuna, the narrator tells us, only lived three years in Umuofia before his execution. His 'sad story is still told unto this day.'¹⁷⁸ This is Achebe's way of reducing the burden of Osu women.

Achebe shows his protection for Osu women not only in *Things Fall Apart* but also in *No Longer at Ease*. Although he presents Clara in the novel as an Osu and her suitor, Obi Okonkwo a free-born, Clara is preserved with little damage to her sense of self when her marriage to Obi was cancelled as a result of her Osu heritage. But as Irele claims, 'Obi is destroyed by simultaneous pressures from two incompatible worlds.'¹⁷⁹ In this way, Achebe passes the burden of Clara the Osu to Obi the free-born, a situation which defies societal expectations. The novel thus ends with Clara losing nothing, except a life with Obi which she had hoped for, but Obi losing everything: his dignity, societal respect, and his job. He thus becomes a misfit in society, bearing what one can argue is the position of Osu. This leads me to my analysis of Achebe's second novel: *No Longer at Ease*.

When *No Longer at Ease* was written, the stigmatization of the Osu had entered a different stage. It was not the stage of the outright sacrifice of Osu as I identified in *Things Fall Apart*, for modernization has helped to stop the killing of Osu. However, the discrimination against persons of Osu heritage has continued. One such is the case of Osu marrying a free-born. This is what *No Longer at Ease* captures: the continued discrimination against Osu wishing to marry free-born in Nigeria, particularly Igbo communities.

¹⁷⁸*Things Fall Apart*, p. 11

¹⁷⁹ Abiola Irele, p. 26

Irele argues that ‘*No Longer at Ease* is a sequel to *Things Fall Apart* not only in the fact that a later generation of Okonkwo’s family is involved but also in the theme.’¹⁸⁰ It continues with the discourse on Osu, capturing the current discrimination and situation of Osu in today’s society. It is the story of an individual, Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, and son of Nwoye, now called Isaac. The novel opens with Obi on trial for accepting bribes, and the novel takes the form of a long flashback. The effect of the flashback is to ‘concentrate attention on the causes for Obi’s conviction and the complexity of events, actions and decisions which lead up to it.’¹⁸¹

In the novel, there are two central themes. The first deals with corruption which begins with Obi’s return from England where he recently completed his B.A. degree. As Douglas Killam suggests, ‘filled with idealism, Obi is determined to rid his country of corruption and to create a new and better nation.’¹⁸² The second concerns Obi’s affair with Clara, a nurse whom he meets on the boat returning them to Nigeria and with whom he falls in love. Clara is Osu, ‘a descent of slaves within the Igbo community and she, according to tradition, must live apart from the free-born.’¹⁸³ Obi is also determined to rid his modern nation of such an old debilitating tradition. When Obi informs his parents of his desire to marry Clara, he fails to win their approval: ‘You cannot marry the girl.’¹⁸⁴ As a result he tells Clara that they must delay their marriage and she, now pregnant by him, agrees to an abortion and then leaves Obi. Now overcome by the harsh traditions of his people, Obi loses his dignity and morality and succumbs to many temptations around him, including accepting bribes, and is arrested and sent to trial, the outcome of which is shown in the opening passages of the novel.

¹⁸⁰ Abiola Irele, p. 15

¹⁸¹ Douglas Killam, p. 36

¹⁸² Douglas Killam, p. 45

¹⁸³ Douglas Killam, p. 44

¹⁸⁴ *No Longer at Ease*, p. 256

From a close reading of Obi's story, it is obvious that his failed marriage to Clara was the beginning of his tragedy. Killam argues that 'the climax of the novel is effectively reached at the point his marriage proposal to Clara breaks down.'¹⁸⁵ Obi, who has proved capable of resisting the pressures to which he is subjected in his professional life, cannot withstand a simple pressure to accept a bribe after his failed marriage with Clara. Understanding the plot of Obi's misfortune and tragedy, I argue that the focus of *No Longer at Ease* is not on corruption, as many critics argue, but on the Osu system. Obi's corruption in the novel is preceded by the disapproval of his parents and people to marry Clara, the Osu. Ultimately, what breaks Obi is not the bribe he takes but the system of discrimination against Osu; a system he struggles against and hopes to abolish with his acquired knowledge. Obi Okonkwo 'feels alienated from the old dispensation of his Nigerian background': a dispensation where culture that torture are upheld and a dispensation of rampaging corruption in the society.¹⁸⁶ He struggles with his new knowledge to change this old dispensation of his country but he fails. His end 'reincarnates the tragedy of his grandfather Okonkwo.'¹⁸⁷ While Okonkwo dies, preventing the encroachment of Christianity on local tradition, Obi's morality is compromised as he tries to prevent debilitating traditional beliefs from gaining ground in modern Nigeria. Thus, as Okonkwo fails in his mission but ends in what could be classified an 'Aristotelian tragedy', Obi fails in his mission as well and his end is that of a modern tragedy. With Obi's personal experience, Achebe criticises the repugnant cultures and corruption which damage society. He sympathizes with Obi who is shocked by the harsh traditions of his people.

¹⁸⁵ Douglas Killam, p. 48

¹⁸⁶ Lloyd Brown, 'Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe's Fiction', *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, p. 28

¹⁸⁷ Lloyd Brown, p. 26

Like *Things Fall Apart*, in which Achebe uses Yeats's 'The Second Coming' as an intertext, *No Longer at Ease* 'establishes an equally ironic relationship with T.S Eliot's 'The Journey of the Magi' from where he takes his title.¹⁸⁸ 'The Journey of the Magi' dramatizes the successive epoch of Christian history which seems to coalesce in the Wise Men's recollection of the Nativity. The birth of the Christ-child is the death of the pagan, pre-Christian order. His crucifixion heralds the birth of a new morality and the personal conversion of the magi implies that 'the transitions and conflicts represented by His birth and death will be repeated in future confrontations between the new faith and the old dispensation.'¹⁸⁹ The coming of Obi Okonkwo thus takes us back to the confrontations between the new faith, new world and the old dispensation. Obi's viewpoint, one I choose to call the position of the intellectual, confronts the old order. Achebe thus continues his debate on abolishing the Osu system of the old dispensation.

In my study of this novel, I would suggest there are two significant points which stand at the centre of Achebe's discourse on the Osu caste system. The first is the role of Christianity and the second is the position of the intellectuals. It is clear that the separate cultures of *Things Fall Apart* – traditional and Western cultures – are now knitted irrevocably in *No Longer at Ease*. In *No Longer at Ease*, Christianity, a western practice, has gained ground in modern Nigeria, attracting large numbers of converts and attacking those aspects of a culture it deems repugnant. The novel acknowledges Christianity's role in overturning some of these cultural practices. To show this, Achebe takes us back in time to Obi's departure to England. Obi, the narrator tells us, was selected by the Umuofia Progressive Union for a scholarship to study in England. The Union intends that on his return, Umuofia will 'join the comity of other towns in their march towards political irredentism, social equality, and economic emancipation.'¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Lloyd Brown, p. 26

¹⁸⁹ Lloyd Brown, p.27

¹⁹⁰*Things Fall Apart*, p. 177

For this reason, Umuofia contributes towards the sponsorship of Obi's education, which they hope 'must yield heavy dividends.'¹⁹¹ At Obi's farewell gathering, Mr Ikedi, the Christian pastor, makes a remarkable speech:

'In time past', he told [Obi], 'Umuofia would have required of you to fight in her wars and bring home human heads. But these were days of darkness from which we have been delivered by the blood of the Lamb of God. Today we send you to bring knowledge.'¹⁹²

What I interpret from this statement are the clear achievements of Christianity in abolishing systems that negatively affect the human condition. Set against African belief, the Christians claim that no one, as the bible says, is born slave or free. Achebe writes: 'in Christ there are no bond or free.'¹⁹³ In *Things Fall Apart*, he re-emphasizes this position again: 'Before God [Christians' Supreme Being],' he said, 'there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers.'¹⁹⁴ 'The brothers' made mention here are the discriminated Osu. By receiving the Osu, Christianity thus renders immoral what seems an integral part of the Igbo society and identity, redefining a repugnant cultural practice not merely as superstition, but as a crime against humanity. Achebe makes it clear that Christianity has contributed to the eradication of such practices in Africa. Although Achebe proclaimed, as Okere has it, that 'at his later years he [Achebe] renounced Christianity, he cannot divest of the internalized tenets which his birth, upbringing and education impose on him.'¹⁹⁵ Presenting Christianity in such a positive light is testament that Achebe argues 'that there is a need to retain what is best in both Christianity and traditional religion.'¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹*Things Fall Apart*, p. 177

¹⁹²*Things Fall Apart*, p.160

¹⁹³*No Longer at Ease*, p. 256

¹⁹⁴*Things Fall Apart*, p. 110

¹⁹⁵ Augustine Okere, p.120

¹⁹⁶ Augustine Okere, p. 133

Obi fits perfectly with Said's description of the intellectual in *Representations of the Intellectual*. For Said, 'the intellectual needs to be in exile in order to develop his critical capacities for and free from the poisonous effects of dogmatic partisanship.'¹⁹⁷ Reading Obi's story with an awareness of Said's description of the intellectual, we can see that Obi, like Said's intellectual, goes to 'exile' and attains the objectivity exile accords. He moves from his home country to England to acquire a critical perception of the systems of Umuofia and criticise any practice that affects the human condition. Exile for the intellectual is not the excommunication of a person from his home land as is the case of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, but as Said argues, 'a metaphysical sense of restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others.'¹⁹⁸ The period of exile is crucial. It 'is a paradigm for secular criticism' and internal criticism as well.¹⁹⁹ Achebe's intellectual moves to England, acquires knowledge and becomes accurately aware of 'a series of displacements' in his native land; and he heavily criticises it.²⁰⁰

Obi returns to Nigeria and begins to challenge corruption and the practice of the Osu caste system. As a true intellectual, whose duty is to criticise forms of human oppression, he wastes no time in engaging in a serious debate with his father over his disapproval to marry Clara, the Osu:

'You cannot marry the girl,' [Obi's father] said quite simply. 'Eh?' 'I said you cannot marry the girl.' 'But why father?' 'Why? I shall tell you why. But first tell me this. Did you find out or try to find out anything about this girl?' 'Yes' 'What did you find out?' 'That they are *osu*.' 'You mean to tell me you knew, and you ask me why?' 'I don't think it matters. We are Christians.' 'We are Christian,' [Obi's father] said. 'But that is no reason to marry an *osu*.' 'The bible says that in Christ there are no bond or free.' 'My son', said Okonkwo, 'I understand what you say. But this thing is deeper than you think.' 'What is this thing? Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man *osu*, a thing given to idols, and thereafter

¹⁹⁷ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, [New York: Vintage Books, 1996], p. 10

¹⁹⁸ Edward Said, p. 15

¹⁹⁹ Edward Said, p. 30

²⁰⁰ Edward Said, p. 31

he became an outcast, and his children, and his children's children for ever. But have we not seen the light of Gospel?' 'I know Josiah Okeke [Clara's father] very well.' [Obi's father says] 'I know him and I know his wife. He is a good man and a great Christian. But he is *osun*. Obi's father continues: 'Osun is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory. It is not for myself I speak; my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that, my son [...]' [Obi replies frantically] 'But all that is going to change [...]' What made an *osun* different from other men and women? Nothing but the ignorance of their forefathers. Why should they, who had seen the light of the Gospel, remain in that ignorance?²⁰¹

This heated argument suggests that culture is far deeper than the Christian religion. Nwoye tells his son: 'this thing [osun] is deeper than you think.'²⁰² Hence, Christianity cannot completely abolish negative traditions. Many African Christians like Nwoye are of the opinion that their new found religion should support the fulfilment of traditional expectations. Obi disagrees with this as he questions his father's faith: 'Why should they who had seen the light of the Gospel, remain in that ignorance?'²⁰³ He cannot understand why Christians still uphold debilitating systems. All he sees is the failure of Christianity to challenge the Osun caste system; for if his father, a well-known Christian and a catechist could support the practice of Osun which he once rejected, Obi wonders at the future of Christianity.

Umuofia's expectation for sending Obi to England is to strengthen the traditional belief of Umuofia and not to question their way of life or cultural practices. The people of Umuofia were so disappointed when they heard of Obi's intention to marry an Osun. The Umuofia Progressive Union chairman says to him: 'I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her.'²⁰⁴ Obi reacts sternly to such an act of discrimination against Clara: 'Obi leapt to his feet trembling with rage [...] don't you dare

²⁰¹*No Longer at Ease*, pp. 256-57

²⁰²*No Longer at Ease*, p. 256

²⁰³*No Longer at Ease*, p. 256

²⁰⁴*No Longer at ease*, p. 216

interfere in my affairs again. [...] And if this is what you meet about [...] ‘you may cut off my two legs if you ever find them here again.’²⁰⁵ Obi challenges without bias anyone who upholds the system of Osu in the community. He takes the challenge to Christopher, an educated young man who lacks the wisdom and boldness to challenge the wrongs of his tradition. Christopher says to Obi: ‘You may say I am not broad-minded, but I don’t think we have reached the stage where we can ignore all our customs. You may talk about education and so on, but I am not going to marry an Osu.’²⁰⁶ Obi’s response to Christopher suggests that now is the time to ignore oppressive systems, not tomorrow. Joseph, another educated friend, criticizes Obi’s intellectual role to challenge their tradition and marry an osu: ‘You know book, but this is no matter for book. Do you know what an *osu* is? But how can you know?’²⁰⁷ Obi replies immediately: ‘I know more about it than yourself’ [...] ‘and I am going to marry the girl.’²⁰⁸ Obi thought deeply about this system, one that needs to be challenged and changed:

it was scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god, thereby setting himself apart and turning his descendants into a forbidden caste to the end of Time.²⁰⁹

He knew better that his family and people would violently oppose the idea of marrying an Osu, but for him, he was going to revolt against such a practice, for ‘it was either Clara or nobody.’²¹⁰ His determination, like Said’s intellectual, is ‘to occupy nothing less than the moral high ground.’²¹¹ From the perspective of the intellectual Achebe crafts, ‘one is convinced that the Osu problem must be confronted boldly not hushed up.’²¹²

²⁰⁵*No Longer at Ease*, p. 216

²⁰⁶*No Longer at Ease*, p. 264

²⁰⁷*No Longer at Ease*, p. 208

²⁰⁸*No Longer at Ease*, p. 208

²⁰⁹*No Longer at Ease*, p. 208

²¹⁰*No Longer at Ease*, p. 210

²¹¹ Edward Said, p. 32

²¹² Jude Mgbobukwa, p. 36

Obi stands alone fighting for the redemption of Osu in society. Even Clara, the Osu whom one expects should be at the vanguard of the protest, gives up in the fight and abandons Obi. Achebe writes:

Clara said she was sorry to let him down at this eleventh hour. But she was sure it would be in everybody's best interest if they broke off their engagement [...] 'I have thought about this whole matter very carefully. There are two reasons why we should not get married: well, the first [and main reason] is that your family will be against it. I don't want to come between you and your family.'²¹³

The disposition of Obi's father, mother, Christopher, Joseph and perhaps Clara represents what Innes argues as 'the impossibility of reconciling Igbo and western values.'²¹⁴ I feel great sympathy for Obi as he finally stumbles in his position as an intellectual. His determination breaks as his mother presents him with a very stark choice: 'If you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself.'²¹⁵ Ultimately, Clara leaves him and he becomes a victim of harsh traditions. Torn apart by this, he loses his sense of morality and takes a bribe for which he is convicted.

While sympathizing with Obi, Achebe foregrounds the responsibilities of the intellectual. He is to persevere and never give up. This is Obi's problem: he gives up when he is supposed to fight on. *No Longer at Ease* foregrounds the failures of all movements towards abolishing the Osu system: the failure of Igbo society, the failure of Christianity, the failure of the intellectual, and also the failure of the Osu themselves to challenge the stigma placed on them by their culture. As Killam observes, 'none of the central characters escapes failure.'²¹⁶ In short, 'the society is seen to have failed.'²¹⁷ The novel stages not only the tragedy of Obi but the tragedy of a nation deeply rooted in destructive cultural practices.

²¹³*No Longer at Ease*, p. 250

²¹⁴ Catherine Innes, p. 44

²¹⁵*No Longer at Ease*, p. 258

²¹⁶ Douglas Killam, p. 36

²¹⁷ Douglas Killam, p. 36

Unlike the discourse of womanism where women fought against their marginalisation in society, it is quite unfortunate that ‘hardly has there been any worthwhile challenge of this humiliating subjugation by those who are Osu.’²¹⁸ Achebe captures this failure in his novels. Throughout the novels under study, neither Clara nor her father, Josiah Okeke, nor Ikemefuna and the virgin girl, nor any other Osu, rise to challenge their unfavourable treatment. The challenge is rather left to the free-born who, due to some level of education and sympathy and perhaps of Christian faith, reject the marginalisation against Osu. This view is well captured in the investigation conducted by a team of *Newswatch* reporters, published in November 18, 1989:

It is shocking that despite social and political advancement [...] the Osu system is perpetuated. And this is despite the fact that there are thousands of people who are branded Osu today who hold very high positions in government, in the professions, in industry and even in the military. For example, although nobody has any specific list of who is Osu[and all its different variations] and who is not, it is believed that among those branded Osu are: a state commissioner in one of the Igbo states, the wives of two men who have been governors in two of those states, a retired academic who later headed a big national media institution, a highly-renowned economist and a minister in the First Republic whose offspring have turned out to be highly reputable personalities in the country[...] But all these personalities without exception, are shy of making their identity known. Thus, in spite of all the deprivations they have suffered and which they see others suffer daily, they are quiet.²¹⁹

What is significant and shocking about the content of this report is the silence of these ‘well-trained’ Osu who are representative of an intellectual class in Igbo society. In Achebe’s account, Clara, a well-educated foreign-trained nurse and her Christian father, Josiah Okeke, are both ‘voiceless’. They seem to suffer in silence, failing to employ Siga Jajne’s idea of ‘voice throwing’ which, discussed in the previous chapter, suggests that the marginalised people speak out to disrupt the culture of dominance. Although they are educated, they are not

²¹⁸ Jude Mgbobukwa, p. 40

²¹⁹ Oliver Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion and Culture* Vol. 1, [Enugu, Nigeria: SNAAP Press, Ltd., 1991], p. 31

intellectuals. All one sees in them is the hopeless and helpless situation of the Osu. The blame may not be so much theirs since even the very idea of coming out in the open and admitting to being an Osu could be a cross too heavy to bear. The irony of it is that they are known by all who should know them. Obi's father says to Obi: 'I know Josiah Okeke very well [...] I know him and I know his wife [...] he is Osu.'²²⁰ To discuss further the lack of 'voice' of the Osu, I shall turn to Gayatri Spivak's essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'

In the essay, Spivak is concerned with the subaltern, a concept she adapts from Antonio Gramsci's definition of the subaltern as the landless peasant. She defines the subaltern as someone within 'the realm of the hegemonic umbrella, who has no means of access to upward mobility.'²²¹ Put clearly, the subaltern could be a victim of slavery or the completely powerless in the society. Spivak's argument is primarily one about the question of representation: the subaltern cannot "speak", or be represented authentically because those endeavouring to speak for the subaltern, as always already part of the elite, cannot have access to their consciousness. On this premise, I would classify the Osu as the Igbo subaltern.

Spivak describes a now outlawed cultural practice, Sati, where when a husband dies the wife is expected to immolate herself on the husband's funeral pyre. In the past, widows could inherit their husband's property, so it made sense from a patriarchal perspective to encourage this practice so that sons could directly inherit the properties meant for their mothers. The British colonials who outlawed the practice, Spivak argues, essentially used it as a pretext to impose their authority over a so-called 'uncivilized' society, hence her phrase 'white men saving brown women from the brown men.'²²² Even the anti-colonialists [the Indian intellectuals], according to Spivak, fails to represent the subaltern authentically. The subaltern

²²⁰*No Longer at Ease*, p. 256

²²¹ Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p. 95

²²² Gayatri Spivak, p. 93

is thus silenced by both the British imperialists and anti-colonial nationalists just as postcolonial and leftist critics today silence them. This leads Spivak to conclude that, in fact, the subaltern cannot 'speak'. From Spivak's thesis, I identify two problems that silence the subaltern: (a) The problem of ideology, one I would classify as the position of the intellectuals. Let us take the role of the anti-colonial nationalists as representations of the intellectuals. (b) The lack of agency. 'Agency' for this discussion refers to institutional validation.

It is quite clear that the voices of the oppressed are marginalised and silenced by the intellectuals. While the ideology of the intellectual holds that 'those with the power to speak should speak for those who cannot', it is wrong for the intellectuals to think that they can speak for the subaltern.²²³ The act of speaking for the subaltern effectively silences them. Stephen Morton alerts us to this fact: 'the benevolent impulse to represent subaltern groups effectively appropriates the voice of the subaltern and thereby silences them.'²²⁴ Many writers like Achebe are perhaps ignorant of this problem. They think that to 'voice' the intellectual is to 'voice' the subaltern. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Osu lack 'voice-consciousness'. While one never encounters the virgin girl's 'voice-consciousness' throughout the novel, Ikemefuna is presented with a 'voice' which is never heard. Rather than speak through the subaltern, Achebe chooses to speak through Obierika, Nwoye and other minor characters, which did not change the deplorable condition of the subaltern, but silences them. Arun Mukherjee identifies this problem in *Untouchable*: 'This caste and class distance between the writer and the people he represents results in the erasure in the novel of the voice of the untouchable community.'²²⁵ In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe's use of intellectuals to speak for the Osu thus erases the 'voice' of the Osu in the novel. The 'voice' of Obi Okonkwo, Achebe's intellectual, completely silences the voice of Clara and Josiah Okeke, the two Osus in the novel. While Clara has little

²²³ Stephen Morton, *Spivak*, p.62

²²⁴ Stephen Morton, *Spivak*, p. 56

²²⁵ Arun Mukherjee, 'The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable', p. 36

‘voice-consciousness’, her father, Josiah Okeke, completely lacks ‘voice’ in the novel. Inadvertently, while Obi thinks he speaks to give ‘voice’ to Clara and Josiah, his voice thus hampers their freedom to speak. At the conclusion of both novels, to answer Spivak’s question, the Igbo subaltern cannot speak.

What Spivak, Morton and Mukherjee are arguing is that subalterns should not be spoken for, but should be empowered to have self-agency or ‘voice-consciousness’. The role of the intellectual therefore is not to speak for the subaltern and silence them or to overwhelm their voice. They are to create agency which would empower subaltern groups. This brings me to the second problem I have identified that silences the subaltern - the lack of agency.

For the sake of this discussion, I take agency to mean ‘institutional validation.’ Subaltern groups are silenced as a result of the lack of institutional modelling which the intellectual is expected to establish. In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo fails to idealise an institution that would re-establish a ‘voice’ or collective locus for the Osu. While he deserves some credit for his efforts to re-establish the position of the Osu within the society, it could be argued that he lacks the intuition to give ‘voice’ to the Osu despite his senior government administrative position and his political influence. If proper agency is not established to assist the Osu, their ‘voice’ will remain unheard.

Having identified two problems that silence the Osu, I would like to state the connotations of the ‘voicelessness’ of the Osu in Achebe’s novels. Achebe represents the Osu in their voiceless state to show two things: (a) To present the repugnant situation of the subaltern in Igbo society. Since the ‘voice’ of a person is a sign of life, the ‘voiceless’ nature of the Osu thus represents the ‘death’ of these unfortunate people in the grip of their tradition. (b) ‘de-voicing’ the Osu is Achebe’s way of creating a sense of sympathy for these people, while establishing the need to challenge such traditions that marginalise them.

If *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* picture the hopeless situations and voiceless representations of the Osu, 'Chike's School Days', Achebe's short story and a sequel to both novels, could be interpreted as Achebe's creation of an ideal society where the Osu has 'voice-consciousness' and is free from oppression, victimization and domination.

'Chike's School Days', in Iniobong Uko's word, 'depicts the adverse consequence on the traditional system and people of the incursion of new, strange cultural norms.'²²⁶ The story centres on Amos who defies all warnings by his people not to marry Sarah, an Osu woman. His determination is strengthened by his Christian belief; he marries Sarah and he has four children with her, the last of whom is a boy, named, Chike. Amos's union with Sarah automatically makes him and his children Osu. While one expects his children to live as 'sub-humans' for being Osu, Achebe reverses and changes the circumstances of the Osu by giving them voice. He recognises that 'language' [voice], as Osei-Nyame observes, 'is the means through which individuals articulate resistance, exposing especially the flaws within the social order that allows for an ambivalent approach to tradition and culture.'²²⁷ Chike lives without fear like the free-born, with his full human rights, dignity and respect. Chike, the narrator tells us, was taught by his mother 'not to eat in their neighbours' houses because they offered their foods to idols.'²²⁸ One day, a neighbour offered a piece of yam to Chike, who was only four years old. "The boy shook his head haughtily and said, 'we don't eat heathen food.'²²⁹ The neighbour, the story has it, was full of rage, but 'she controlled herself and only muttered under her breath that even an Osu was full of pride nowadays.'²³⁰ Achebe's presentation of the condition of the Osu signifies his recognition of contemporary realities to change the position

²²⁶ Iniobong Uko, 'Artistic and Pedagogical Experimentations: Chinua Achebe's Short Stories and Novels, *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Vol. 2, p. 63

²²⁷ Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, p. 152

²²⁸ Chinua Achebe, 'Chike's School Days', *Girls at War and other Stories*, [London: Heinemann Books Ltd, 1972], p. 36

²²⁹ 'Chike's School Days', p. 36

²³⁰ 'Chike's School Days', p. 36

of Osu and give them back their ‘voice’, dignity and pride as human beings. Achebe criticises the era when ‘an Osu could not raise his shaggy head in the presence of the free-born. He was a slave to one of the many gods of the clan. He was a thing set apart, not to be venerated but to be despised and almost spat at. He could not marry a free-born, and he could not take any of the titles of his clan. When he died, he was buried by his kind in the Bad Bush.’²³¹ Notice that Achebe writes of this discrimination against the Osu in the past tense. It suggests his own way of saying that redemption has come for the Osu and they are no longer regarded as ‘sub-humans’. Now with Chike, Achebe changes their position: ‘an osu could even look down his nose at a free-born, and talk about heathen food!’²³² It is interesting how Achebe pictures the emergence of a new, equal society where even the Osu could refer to the meal of the free-born as ‘heathen food’, that is, a food sacrificed to idols. In the past, this used to be the position of the Osu, but Achebe reverses the case. This is a very important stage in the discourse of ‘the thorny issue of the Osu, which has defied reason and rationale in generations in Igbo cosmology.’²³³ Achebe gives Osu voice and pride to break from the stigmatisation of being Osu.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* where the Osu group was spoken for, both novels record no sign of hope for change in the situation of the Osu. But in ‘Chike’s School Days’, where the Osu speak for themselves, their position and social status changed completely. What this shows is that hearing the voice of the ‘marginalised’ constitutes an important step in the challenge to African traditions such as Osu. It represents what Barbara Babcock, as quoted by Osei-Nyame, describes as a ‘symbol of negation’ when she argues that, ‘the transgression of tradition is attained through symbolic ‘negation’’ when ‘the thinking-process frees itself from the limitations of repression and expresses its feelings of

²³¹ ‘Chike’s School Days’, p. 36

²³² ‘Chike’s School Days’, p. 36

²³³ Iniobong Uko, p. 64

marginalisation loud enough' so that its 'personality' obtains 'a first degree of independence from the results of repression and at the same time from the sway of the pressure principle' of tradition.²³⁴ Babcock's argument makes it thus clear that 'voicing' the subaltern, as Spivak argues, is a huge step towards the redemption of the Osu. By 'voicing' Chike, the Osu, Achebe 'crushes at a blow foul superstitious laws.'²³⁵ Ultimately, I argue that external voices cannot emancipate the Osu. It is the voice-consciousness of the Osu themselves that can save them. Put simply, no one can redeem the Osu; it is the Osu who alone can emancipate themselves. Mayo Katherine puts it as follows: 'by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society.'²³⁶

There is a strong character contrast between Amos, Chike's father, in 'Chike's School Days', and Nwoye, Obi's father, in *No Longer at Ease*. While Amos is a Christian by example and practice, one who is ready to break and reject any traditional culture of dominance and discrimination, Nwoye is at best what most Christian clerics would call a 'Shallow Christian', one who believes Christianity should help sustain cultural practices whether debilitating or ennobling. By creating the character of Amos, Achebe seems to correct the character of Nwoye. With Amos, he describes the image of a true Christian, and his responsibility in a suffocating society. Not only is Amos a contrast to Nwoye, he is Achebe's correction of Obi's shortcomings and failure. Amos fights the resistance of his people to marry Sarah. His widowed mother, shocked by the news of his intention, 'begged Amos not to do this thing. But Amos would not hear; his [belief] had been nailed up.'²³⁷ He went on to marry Sarah, for he is not a man that would give up in a fight for justice and change. Obi, on the other, fails to achieve his mission. He allows the tradition of his people to dictate his future, and ultimately,

²³⁴ Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, p. 158

²³⁵ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, p. 20

²³⁶ Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, p. 15

²³⁷ Chike's School Days, p. 37

he did not marry Clara, an Osu. He is thus criticised for giving up the fight to change the situation of Osu.

In another short story, 'Marriage is a Private Affair', published in *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1991), Achebe reacts to systems of discrimination as they relate to marriage. Nnaemeka marries Nene despite the disapproval of his father. His attitude is a step forward in breaking the old convention of imposition and discrimination in marriage in Africa. Although this story does not relate to the Osu system but to tribal marriage discrimination in Nigeria, Nnaemeka's rejection of his father's disapproval shows how determination can break the discrimination inherent in African culture. Through him and Nene, Achebe depicts the challenge to repelling conditions of discrimination, despite its harsh conditions. The situation of Nnaemeka and Nene, Amos and Sarah is similar to that of Obi and Clara, the difference being that, while Nnaemeka and Amos continually challenged the negative traditions of their people, Obi stops half way and is over-powered by tradition.

In these short stories, Achebe 'opens an interesting vista, a new trend in this discourse. He highlights the possibility of accepting this class of people; he endows them with self-esteem and pride regardless of their despised status in society.'²³⁸ The apparent relationship between Achebe's novels and short stories is highly significant. As Uko suggests, 'Apart from showing his aptness in handling similar issues successfully across the boundaries of genre, it emphasises the relevance of the issue he explores.'²³⁹ There is thus no doubt that the discourse of the Osu caste system is a serious issue in Achebe's fiction, one he feels passionately about.

²³⁸ Iniobong Uko, p. 64

²³⁹ Iniobong Uko, p. 64

In conclusion, Achebe's sense of commitment is to challenge not just the practice of Osu in Nigeria but any repugnant system in the country. His writings are concerned with the preservation of cultural values as well as the recreation of such values. I suggested in the earlier part of this chapter that Achebe's writing is concerned with much more than a study of the traumatic effects of colonialism on a subject people even though this is a serious part of his intention. Achebe recognises his obligation to his society and has said of himself that he must participate in the pressing task of re-education and re-generation. This situates him as one who conducts an internal critique of Nigerian social practice. As Killam puts it, he 'has a special commitment to formulating the basic values of society and is both a reflection and a criticism of those values.'²⁴⁰ He recognises the educative role of the writer when he says of himself that he is 'the sensitive point of the community'²⁴¹. As a prominent writer, he knows the sensitive and most pressing concerns of the people of and for whom he writes. One such concern is the victimization of the Osu in the society, one he devotes his writings to criticise.

Achebe is an Afrocentric writer not only because he challenges Europe but because he condemns in his writings his people's obnoxious cultural practices which militate against development and progress in society, for example, the killing of twins, superstitious beliefs, wife-battery, and the victimization of Osu in the society. Achebe does not only look 'outward' at the problem of colonialism; he, in my argument of Afrocentrism, looks 'inward' at the negative African traditions. Having discussed how Achebe's literature attacks the system of Osu in Nigeria, my next concern will be how Adaora Ulasi, Wole Soyinka and Duro Ladipo criticise the traditional Yoruba practice of the Oro festival and ritual suicide.

²⁴⁰ Douglas Killam, p. 128

²⁴¹ Chinua Achebe, 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', p. 120

Chapter Three:

The Critique of the Oro Festival and the Tradition of Ritual Suicide as a Discourse of Afrocentrism: Adaora Ulasi, Wole Soyinka and Duro Ladipo.

Traditional Yoruba culture occupies a significant position in this research. This is because, like the Igbo tradition of the Osu caste system, the Yoruba tradition has some insidious practices which still affect the life of modern-day Nigerians. One such example is the continuing practice of the *Oro* festival and the performance of ritual suicide. The *Oro* festival is an important ceremony among the Yoruba natives of the western part of Nigeria. *Oro* is celebrated to mark ‘the end of the harvest season,’ a period around August or September, and it is also ‘a ceremony conducted at the burial of a deceased Yoruba king’.¹ At both occasions in the festival of *Oro*, people are advised to keep off the streets. ‘Cases, according to Abisoye Pius, ‘have been reported of people who died from beholding *Oro*.’² However, the most significant *Oro* ceremony where people are reported dead or missing is at the burial of a Yoruba king. By tradition, as I shall explain subsequently, ‘a deceased Yoruba king is not expected to be buried without, at least, a human head.’³ So, the *Oro* festival, as it is practised today, is thus the traditional ceremony where humans are captured to be buried with the deceased king to complete the rite of passage. This is the subject of Adaora Ulasi’s mystery novel, *Many Thing You No Understand* (1970), which strongly criticises the practice, and in clear terms.

Not only is the *Oro* festival a means of acquiring human heads to bury a dead king, it is shocking to note that, in Yoruba culture, the deceased king’s chief-servant is expected to perform ritual suicide, that is, to kill himself, at the burial of the king. According to Yoruba tradition, he is to accompany the dead king to the land of the spirit. ‘‘The King die last month. [sic] Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin (king’s chief-servant)

¹ Okunola Akanji, ‘Oro Cult: The Traditional Way of Political Administration’, 2012. p.21.

² Pius Abisoye, *African Traditional Religion*, 2012. p. 50

³ Omosade Awolalu, ‘Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion’, 1976. p. 280.

must die so as to accompany him to heaven.’⁴ To the Yoruba, he is only performing his official duty as the king’s chief-servant; one who journeys with the king. It is this tradition that prompts Wole Soyinka’s truth-telling play, *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) and Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Waja* (The King Is Dead) (1964). It is however sad that despite the arrival of modernity, this tradition is still being practiced in contemporary Yoruba society. Although some Nigerians might argue that such systems have been abolished by the Christian missionaries, I agree with Nonso Okafor who contends that ‘such a system is prevalent in our society, especially in the rural communities.’⁵ I will thus argue that the discourse of Afrocentrism through Nigerian literature continues to challenge such traditions in Nigeria that have outlived their relevance.

In this chapter, I will endeavour to analyse Afrocentric interventions into the debilitating traditions of the *Oro* festival and ritual suicide. I will analyse how Ulasi’s *Many Thing You No Understand*, Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Ladipo’s *Oba Waj* directly criticise and challenge these practices. I will begin by exploring Ulasi’s novel, which has been completely overlooked by African critics on the grounds that, for many, it ‘is a poorly written novel.’⁶ I shall discuss Ulasi’s use of language as a fundamental tool in her critique of the *Oro* festival. Despite the lack of recognition and critical attention given to it, I shall show why this novel should be considered a finely written text by analysing Ulasi’s idea of ‘voice’. In this novel, Ulasi reveals the significance of ‘voice-throwing’ even more than the well-known Afrocentric Nigerian writers do. She is aware of the importance of voicing the subalterns. She takes this idea a step further by integrating it as a specific theme in her novel. As I will argue, Ulasi shows her creativity by focusing the entire plot of the novel on the concept of ‘voicing’. Giving the criticism of the *Oro* festival the kind of serious attention it deserves, this chapter will analyse the concept of ‘mediation’ in Ulasi’s novel. It will critically analyse her use of

⁴ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, 1975. p. 28

⁵ Nonso Okafor, ‘Relevance of Traditional Jurisprudence’, 2006. p. 40.

⁶ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, p. 184

characterization and the double-voiced nature of her characters as a technique to condemn this traditional belief. Another point I will examine is her use of ‘metaphor’ and Pidgin English to show her rejection of this system. She carefully incorporates Pidgin English to widen her readership, which inevitably brings more awareness to the subject matter. One interesting point which I will elaborate is her creation of what Chikwenye Ogunyemi calls ‘a journalist-investigator’, one who sheds light on the evils of some aspects of tradition. Ulasi, a journalist by training, adopts this technique to criticise traditions which enslave Nigerians. Lastly, I will endeavour to analyse Ulasi’s criticism of ‘black magic’ or *juju* as she calls it, for promoting the practice of Oro.

With its focus on the tradition of ritual suicide, this chapter will then turn to Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. While showing the polarized passionate debates which this play has generated among critics, I will analyse how Soyinka condemns the traditional system of ritual suicide. I will begin by interpreting the laggard will and procrastination of Elesin Oba, the victim-protagonist, to kill himself, as proof of Soyinka’s revulsion at the tradition of ritual suicide. One technique that captures Soyinka’s criticism of this tradition is the use of symbolism. I will analyse Olunde’s wilful suicide in the play as symbolising the death of, and an end to, the tradition of ritual suicide. I will endeavour to analyse Soyinka’s use of proverbs as his means of challenging this tradition. With reference to Daniel Izevbye’s essay: ‘Mediator in Soyinka: The case of the King’s Horseman’, I will explore the concept of mediation in Soyinka’s play. I will argue that the principle of mediation is fundamental to challenging practices such as ritual suicide that ‘remain implicit in Yoruba culture.’⁷ Like Soyinka’s play, Ladipo’s *Oba Waja* will be read as a contribution to the condemnation of the tradition of ritual suicide in Yoruba land. Borrowing Foluke Ogunleye’s argument, I will

⁷ Daniel Izevbye, ‘Mediation in Soyinka: The Case of the King’s Horseman’, p. 117

demonstrate how Ladipo employs the technique of ‘festival structure’ in his criticism of ritual suicide. While analysing Ladipo’s use of proverbs, I will discuss his use of metaphor in criticising this tradition. Lastly, I shall study his portrait of the character of Olori Elesin, the victim-protagonist, and his creative construction of the character of Dawudu, Elesin’s son, as proof of his rejection and criticism of the tradition of ritual suicide in Yoruba. Soyinka’s play and Ladipo’s draw heavily upon the actual event in the ancient city of Oyo in 1946. The synopsis of this event was narrated to them by Ulli Beier, a German scholar, who lived in Western Nigeria in 1950, having a strong interest in traditional Yoruba culture and arts. According to Oluseyi Ogunjobi ‘the story of *Oba Waja* came to life through Piere Verger 11, who narrated the story to Ulli Beier. Beier gave Ladipo the synopsis of the story in 1964, but explained that he had earlier summarised the episode to Wole Soyinka, suggesting he use it for a play, three years before *Oba Waja* was written.’⁸

I have chosen these three writers for this chapter because, as I will show, they are aware of the reality and thus importance of challenging these traditional practices in Nigeria. Before engaging with the literatures of Ulasi, Soyinka and Ladipo, it is necessary to give an in-depth account of the Yoruba tradition of the *Oro* festival and ritual suicide. To do this, this chapter will, firstly, introduce the Yoruba people, secondly, give an over-view of the veneration given to kings in Yorubaland, which is the bedrock of the ritual practices under study, thirdly, elaborate on the traditional practice of the *Oro* festival and the performance of ritual suicide and fourthly, show why this practice has not been successfully eradicated by the Nigerian government even in the twenty-first century, when such a tradition is believed to have outlived its relevance.

⁸ Oluseyi Ogunjobi, ‘The Visual Language of Duro Ladipo’s Theatre in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*’, p. 210

3.1 The Yoruba People

The Yoruba as an ethnic community from the south-west part of Nigeria share a border with the Republic of Benin, a country also populated by Yoruba and which has a shared history with Nigerian Yorubas. The descendants of the Yoruba can also be found in the diaspora, namely Sierra Leone, Togo, Ghana, the Gambia, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti and the Americas, as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to Karade Baba-Ifa, ‘Yorubas have been estimated to have a worldwide population of over forty million’.⁹ They are united by a common language, Yoruba, which is spoken in many dialects. In Nigeria, their native home, they have made a great contribution to the history of the nation as one of the three major tribes in the country: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. ‘In Yorubaland’, as could be said of other parts of Africa, Awolalu Omosade argues, ‘tradition forms the existence of the people, and people’s existence is their tradition’.¹⁰ Tradition and culture to the Yoruba occupies an integral part of their life. Nothing exists in the Yorubaland without a direct link to their culture and tradition.

For many decades, the Yoruba culture has been a subject of interest to scholars. Some of the findings on the Yoruba cultural traditions, origin, politics, festivals, art forms, rituals and religious belief systems have been documented in the works of both recent and pioneering researchers. Some of these studies are presented in Samuel Johnson (1921); John Mbiti (1969); Abimbola Wande (1973); J.A. Ayorinde (1973); Drewal Henry (1989), Pemberton and Abiodun (1989); Idowu Bolaji (1994); Okediji Oladejo (2002) and J.D.Y. Peel (2003), to list a few. I do not intend in this study to present a discourse of the Yoruba culture and people in its entirety. All I hope to do is to bring to light and criticise an aspect of the Yoruba tradition which encourages the performance of ‘ritual suicide’ and the ‘festival of *Oro*’ as a means of

⁹Karade Baba-Ifa, *The handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, p. 10

¹⁰Awolalu Omosade: ‘Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion’, p. 280

glorifying a dead ruler, whom, according to tradition, is believed to be a ‘semi-god’. This tradition of human sacrifice forms the crux of the three selected works for this chapter.

3.2 Veneration to the *Oba* (King)

In Anthony Ojigbo’s study of the traditional Yoruba political system, the social structure of traditional Yoruba society can be roughly divided into two groups: the royal lineage and the non-royal lineage, the latter being the remaining members of the society who, as it were, form the subject group.¹¹ The subject group or commoners venerates and honours the *Oba* even to death. An *Oba* is the overall head or the traditional ruler of the Yoruba kingdom. According to the Yoruba order of power, the king has ultimate power over his subjects. The power of the *Oba* is directly given to him by tradition and *ogun*, the Yoruba god of iron and war. He is regarded as next in rank to the gods. As a descendant of the gods, ‘the Yoruba regard the *Oba* as ‘*alase ekeji orisa* or *Igbakeji orisa*’ [one who is next to the gods].¹² Whatever he says in the community is regarded as final. He combines both the legislative and judicial power in that his word is seen as law. ‘Amongst the people of Yoruba’, Atanda explains, ‘the *Oba* is seen as a greater spiritual force that must be obeyed.’¹³ Obeying the king is automatic. His words are the words of the *Orisa* and therefore considered powerful. He is seen as the representation and preserver of their tradition and culture. This position of the king is described by Emmanuel Adebayo:

Kingship is of great importance to the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. Indeed, the institution is regarded as sacrosanct. The king (*Oba*) is the Chief executive and has absolute control over the supreme organs of the kingdom [...] The *Oba* derived his power from tradition [...] An *Oba* in Yorubaland is regarded as the source of honour of his town and has absolute control of all lands, as well as role to play in the worship of deities.¹⁴

¹¹ Anthony Ojigbo ‘Conflict Resolution in the Traditional Yoruba Political System’, p. 277

¹² Okunola Akanji, ‘Oro Cult: The Traditional Way of Political Administration’, p. 60

¹³ J. A. Atanda, *A Comprehensive History of the Yoruba People*, p. 70

¹⁴ Emmanuel Adebayo, ‘Chieftaincy Institution and Traditional Taboo in South-Western Nigeria’, p. 7

Obas are rulers by every standard because they derived their executive, legislative and judicial functions from traditions long rooted, recognised and revered by their people. As explained by Toyin Falola, a subject can incur punishment from the gods if the *Oba* is not conceived as a divine being.¹⁵ For this reason, ‘he is addressed: ‘*kabiesi*’, one whose authority cannot be queried.’¹⁶

According to S. O. Arifalo,

Kings in Yorubaland are often credited with various kinds of supernatural powers, including that of clairvoyance. They are regarded as the most powerful, the most knowing and the wisest of men. The privileges and right of the king are derived from his position as the father of his people. Absolute obedience was due to the kings from his people as well as profound respect.’¹⁷

To stress the position and respect accorded to *Obas* in Yorubaland, Samuel Johnson’s point is worth stating: ‘Yoruba kings were objects of veneration and worship: they were sacred.’¹⁸ There is nothing wrong with subjects venerating their kings as demanded of them by their tradition. But what does seem wrong, as I argue, is the absolute power of kings whom, according to Adebayo, ‘have the power of life and death over their people and are not answerable to them for any of their actions.’¹⁹ Johnson continues, ‘He is regarded as the source of all honour in the town and absolute control of all lands.’²⁰ Whilst it is clear that tradition protects and favours the king, it is worth stating that the same tradition discriminates against the commoners. It is forbidden to say that a Yoruba king ate, drank, slept, washed, fell ill or died. As Arifalo explains, ‘all things had to be said in proverbs or in metaphors. When any king died’, Arifalo continues, ‘the traditional way of announcing it was, *Oba w’aja* (he had

¹⁵ Toyin Falola, *Customs and Culture of Nigeria*, p. 20

¹⁶ J.A. Atanda, p.80

¹⁷ S.O. Arifalo, *The Changing Role of Traditional Rulers and the Challenges of Governance in contemporary Nigeria*, p. 60

¹⁸ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, p. 50

¹⁹ Emmanuel Adebayo, p.52

²⁰ Samuel Johnson, p. 60

gone up the ceiling), *Erin wo* (the Elephant had fallen), or *Ope ye* (the pillar has given way).²¹ In all aspects of Yoruba culture, even in the use of the Yoruba language, the worship and fear of the king is clear. By virtue of the position of the *Oba* in Yoruba tradition, it becomes a taboo for an *Oba* to be buried alone. ‘Doing what is forbidden, the Yoruba believe, ‘brings disaster not only on the particular person but also to the entire community.’²² For G.O. Babatunde, ‘the Yoruba believe in the reality of tradition. Keeping traditional rites give joy, happiness, wealth, comfort and long life; but breaking tradition bring about misfortune and misery.’²³ For this reason, the belief of the *Oro* festival and practice of ritual suicide remain fundamental principles of practice in Yorubaland, even in the modern age. I shall next discuss in detail these two practices.

3.3 The Oro Festival and Ritual Suicide

In a more detailed study on *Oro* by Okunola Rashidi, ‘the history of the *Oro* festival is as old as the history of the Yorubaland.’²⁴ According to Olu Daramola, ‘*Oro* is a god of the ancestral spirit among the Yoruba natives. They are dead spirits which wander about the air and which must be appeased by certain sacrifices.’²⁵ *Oro* means fierceness, tempest, or provocation and has personified executive power. To Sofola Johnson, ‘it is a religious cult group among the Yoruba natives with the kings, high chiefs and other prominent personalities from all walks of life as its members.’²⁶ Common men cannot join the cult of *Oro*. As Rashidi puts it: ‘*Oro* is an ancestral organisation which is not open to the common men of the society.’²⁷ *Oro* haunts the forest in the neighbouring towns, and it makes its approach known by a strange,

²¹ S. O. Arifalo, *Egbe Omo Oduduwa: A Study of Ethnic and Cultural Nationalism*, p. 21

²² Adebayo Emmanuel, p. 60

²³ G.O. Babatunde, *Eewo ati Asa Ile Yoruba*, p. 54

²⁴ Okunola Rashidi, p. 20

²⁵ Daramola Olu, *Awon Asa Ati Orisa Ile Yoruba*, p. 50.

²⁶ Johnson Sofola, *Order and deviance in Human Society*, p. 31.

²⁷ Okunola Rashidi, p. 22

whirring, roaring noise. As soon as this is heard, all women, strangers and non-members must shut themselves up in their houses, and refrain from looking out on pain of death.²⁸ Describing the emblem of the *Oro* cult, Rashidi explains further:

Oro is a symbolic god. It is a thin strip of fashioned bamboo wood. The fashioned bamboo wood is about 2.5 inches broad, about 12 inches long, tapering at both ends, which is fastened to stick by long string [...] The cutting and fashioning of the bamboo tree is done in a secret place away from the public gaze of the women, children, strangers.²⁹

In native Yoruba, as Rashidi argues, two events suggest the need for the *Oro* cult festival or the *Oro* festival: firstly, the *Oro* festival is conducted at the end of the harvest season around August or September; secondly, it is also performed at the burial of a Yoruba king or member of the cult group.³⁰ As Daramola explains, in preparation for the festival of *Oro* to mark the harvest season, all families in the town would cook different kinds of food, and prepare lavish dishes to entertain one another and to give as a sacrifice to the *Oro* god. People feast together, while taking cover from beholding the *Oro* cult. Whilst it should be made clear that during this period of the *Oro* festival, people are always in a celebratory mood with no death case recorded, I wish to emphasize that at the burial of a king, as Rashidi stresses, ‘the *Oro* festival has a defined mission: to get human beings to accompany the dead king.’³¹

In Yoruba culture, kings are not buried alone. When a king dies, he is to be buried with a human head. Awolalu’s fascinating essay on the Yoruba sacrifice captures this:

In Yoruba, human beings are buried with important chiefs when the latter dies. The people so killed are killed principally to serve social purposes so that the deceased might continue to enjoy the services of the sacrificed people in the next world where life is believed to continue.³²

²⁸ G.J. Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, p. 50

²⁹ Okunola Rashidi, p. 21

³⁰ Okunola Rashidi, p. 20, 21.

³¹ Okunola Rashidi, p.25

³² Omosade Awolalu, ‘Yoruba Sacrificial Practice’, p. 89

In *Many Thing You No Understand* as I shall study shortly, Ulasi makes this her main theme. In the novel, Okafor, one of the central protagonists, tells Chukwuka, his accompanist: ‘We need twenty or more head! A chief die, therefore a big man, we want for bury. The head must go inside the ground with him, for chief no go by himself.’³³ This traditional belief is deeply rooted in Yoruba culture and it continues to be practiced by native Yoruba who believe strongly in sacrifice to gods. For Yoruba, sacrifice meets certain basic needs and aspirations. It is the belief of the Yoruba that

burying human beings with the dead king is a sacrifice made to the supernatural beings to express gratitude to them for success, long life and prosperity; to fulfil a promise; to avert the anger of the divinities; to ward off the attacks of enemies; to change unpleasant circumstances; and to serve as a means of communion between man and the supernatural world.³⁴

Just like the *Oro* festival, ritual suicide in Yoruba culture carries what Olusegun Adekoya calls ‘an inordinate amount of symbolic significance because the continuity and stability of the Yoruba world depends on its performance.’³⁵ Ritual suicide is a figure for ‘self-sacrifice’. According to Yoruba tradition, ‘when the king dies he must be followed by his chief servant to the eternal world, after a month of his death.’³⁶ It is the servant’s duty, as tradition demands, to cross the realm of transition and reach his master to escort him with honour to the next world. James Booth captures this: ‘The name ‘King’s Horseman’ (Ona-Olokun-Esin), designates a man whose function in life is to accompany the Alafin of Oyo into the next world when he dies. That is his reason for living. He has no other option.’³⁷ In Adekoya’s opinion, ritual suicide is ‘the sacrificial giving of one’s priceless possession (life) for the good of one’s community, and the greatest expression of love.’³⁸ Adekoya believes the practice still holds

³³ Adaora Ulasi, p. 12

³⁴ Omosade Awolalu, ‘Yoruba Sacrificial Practice’, p. 85

³⁵ Olusegun Adekoya, ‘Death and the King’s Horseman: Soyinka’s Defence of the Yoruba Cosmology and Culture’, p 58

³⁶ Omosade Awolalu, ‘The Yoruba Philosophy of Life’, p.30

³⁷ James Booth, ‘Human Sacrifice in Literature: The Case of Wole Soyinka’, p. 11

³⁸ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 60

some economic, political and social benefits for the entire Yorubaland. I disagree: of what social, political and economic benefits is the ‘culture of death and decadence’ to Nigerians? What is the relevance of such economic benefits, if any, when those who should enjoy it are forced by tradition to commit suicide? I agree with Biodun Jeyifo and her African Marxist group who condemn this traditional belief. As Jeyifo argues, ‘the Yoruba tradition of the king’s servant to ritualistically kill himself upon the burial of the king to re-join him in death is a culture of death and decadence.’³⁹ It is, according to Niyi Osundare, one of Nigeria’s most well-known playwrights, ‘a gory practice.’⁴⁰

When the king’s chief servant offers himself as sacrifice, Samuel Johnson argues, his position will be taken over by his eldest son. His son is expected to grow up with the same mentality to take up the place of his father.⁴¹ Just like the Osu system, this traditional practice is hereditary. It is a belief passed from father to son which continues from generations to generations. As part of the ritual, Johnson states, the heir is forbidden to set eyes on his father from the moment of the king’s death. Any delay by the chief-servant or reluctance to accompany the dead king to the other world, the Yoruba believe, could bring heavy punishment to the entire community. This explains why chief-servants were forced to commit suicide following the death of a king. But by the end of the nineteenth century, as Izevbaye argues, ‘all the men (chiefs) refuse to die and they are never forced to do so.’⁴² This does not mean that there has never been any act of ritual suicide in twenty-first century Nigeria. For, according to S.B. Amusa, ‘people still perform ritual suicide in many rural communities in Nigeria.’⁴³ It is this thorny traditional practice that Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Ladipo’s *Oba W’aja*, lay bare. In both the *Oro* festival and performance of ritual suicide ‘where human

³⁹ Biodun Jeyifo, *Yoruba Creativity: Fiction, Language, Life and Song*, p. 10

⁴⁰ Biodun Jeyifo, p. 15

⁴¹ Samuel Johnson, p. 52

⁴² Daniel Izevbaye, ‘Mediation in Soyinka: The case of the King’s Horseman’, p.117

⁴³ S.B. Amusa, ‘Chieftaincy, Festivals and Rituals’, p. 66

life is afforded no sanctity, and where the awesomeness of death is routinely employed to add solemnity to public occasions,' Nigerian imaginative writers should continue to address this topic as well as others until Nigerian communities are completely free from barbaric and archaic traditions which enslave fellow Nigerians.⁴⁴

Like the three Nigerian literary writers selected for this study, the research of three Nigerian archaeologists: Eluyemi Omotoso, Haruna Al-Rasheed and Ekpo Eyo, focus primarily on the criticism of the Oro festival and ritual suicide in Yorubaland. These archaeologists excavated some cemeteries in Ile-Ife, the spiritual home of the Yorubas in the early 1970s, to bring to light this tradition and to criticise it. Depicting the horror of this tradition, as recorded by Oluseyi Ogunjobi, Eluyemi, Haruna and Ekpo identified

a royal grave pit, discovering a very tall king [...] He was of a powerful physique and wore a necklace made of red stone (*okun*) and blue glass (*segi*) beads. He also wore an enormous bronze bracelet on his left forearm whilst on his right forearm he wore eleven thinner bracelets. His head had been carefully removed after death and placed on his chest. His body was flanked by two iron daggers with bronze fittings. Also found in the grave were two men, two women, and two individuals whose gender could not be ascertained. [...] Individual bones of some skeletons were scattered about the grave pit so it is clear they were buried with the Oba.⁴⁵

The importance of stating these archaeological findings is clear for this study. While it shows the reality of this traditional practice, it also depicts the gravity of this traditional system as it affects Nigerians. Lastly, it shows the collaborative efforts of different fields of study in challenging this tradition. Reading this archaeological report, I am reminded of the story of one of my childhood friends, Bassey Uduak.

⁴⁴ James Booth, p. 11

⁴⁵ Oluseyi Ogunjobi, 'The Visual languages of Duro Ladipo's Theatre'

In 1998, Bassey and I lived at a twin block of flats in Lagos, Nigeria. We attended the same primary and post-primary schools. In January 1999, Bassey's father, who works for the Nigerian Customs Service, was transferred to Oyo state, south west Nigeria. This took Bassey to Oyo state. In September, news came that Bassey was dead. As I heard from my father, Bassey was sent to pick some groceries for the family. He went to the market and never returned. Apparently, as his father had informed mine, an *Oro* festival had taken place in the town following the death of a king. As strangers to the land, they were completely unaware of this ritual practice. Bassey unfortunately fell in the hands of the *Oro* cult. This tradition has deprived him of his fundamental human rights. Bassey's story thus serves as evidence of the practice of *Oro* in modern-day Nigeria. No doubt, there are many 'Basseys' in Nigeria whose lives have been affected by the traditional practice of the *Oro* festival. It is for such predicaments like Bassey's that people within and out of Nigeria continue to put pressure on the Nigerian government to stop the *Oro* festival and the performance of ritual suicide. A good example is the protest held by residents in Ikorodu area of Lagos, Nigeria on 27 September 2011, captured by *Vanguard*, one of Nigeria's national dailies.

I quote directly from the newspaper,

Residents of Ikorodu, Lagos State, on Tuesday called on the government to stop the *Oro* festival. The residents said that the festival hindered their movement [...] The residents were reacting to the restriction of movement because of the *Oro* celebration. A businesswoman, Mrs Olayemi Bamgbade, said that she had experienced the restrictions for 15 years. 'We urge the government to put a stop to this *Oro* festival.' She said that the tradition was a violation of the fundamental human rights of the residents. An accountant, Mr Tony Iruah, said that the tradition was frustrating his family. 'Whenever *Oro* day comes, I, my children and wife are forced to stay at home. Schools and business activities in the area remain suspended and paralysed,' he said. For Mrs Iyabo Olofin, the continued observance of the tradition by its adherents gave the impression that the country was tilting towards barbarism. 'It is so sad that in spite of the level of civilization globally, we, in Nigeria,

still condone such an archaic and barbaric tradition that ought to be extinct,' she said.⁴⁶

From this quotation, it is clear that the practice of the *Oro* festival is a continuing social problem in Nigeria. It challenges any claim that this practice has been eradicated. Rather, it justifies the need for more research and criticism on the subject of the *Oro* festival, a practice, that I believe, should be the object of Afrocentric critique. I shall next discuss the failure of Nigeria government to stop these repugnant traditions.

From the comprehensive study of the role of tradition and traditional rulers in contemporary Nigeria by S.B. Amusa and M.O. Ofuafor, I draw out three reasons why traditions in Nigerian culture are never challenged or criticised by Nigerian governments despite the complaints of some Nigerians. Traditional rulers, Amusa argues, 'occupy important positions among the people of Nigeria.'⁴⁷ Their positions are 'sanctioned by traditions, history and culture of their respective peoples who hold them in high esteem and reverence.'⁴⁸ Even more than the Nigerian government, people submit themselves and are absolutely submissive to the authority of the traditional rulers whom they regard as the 'symbol of their past, custodians of their history, upholder and preserver of their culture and customs, the epitome of cultural norms and values of the society.'⁴⁹ Nigerian people, Ashiru Dauda observes, 'are so bound with their traditions and traditional rulers to the extent that whatever they ordered is what the people would do or not do as the case may be.'⁵⁰ Since the 'hearts' of the people are with their tradition and traditional rulers, many, like Soyinka's Olunde, Ladipo's Dawudu and Ulasi's Chukwuka and Okafor continue to perform the *Oro* festival and the act of ritual suicide with the hope of preserving traditional practices. This thus hinders any campaign by the

⁴⁶ Vanguard 27 Sept. 2011

⁴⁷ S.B. Amusa, 'Resilience of Traditions in Contemporary Politics: A Historical Study of the Political Influence of traditional Rulers in Nigeria', p.408

⁴⁸ S.B. Amusa, p. 408

⁴⁹ E.C. Emordi, O.M. Osiki, 'Traditional Rule in Nigeria', p. 90

⁵⁰ Dauda Ashiru, 'Chieftaincy Institution and Grassroots Development in Nigeria', p.116

Nigerian government to stop the performance of a repulsive tradition in the country since it is the collective will of the majority.

Another reason which has strengthened the performance of tradition in Nigeria and reduced actions by government in the fight against an abhorrent tradition is the position of some traditional rulers as members of the Nigerian government. After the amalgamation of both the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914, 'the 1914 Constitution of Nigeria made provisions for six Nigerian traditional rulers to be members of the governing council: Sultan Attahiru of Sokoto, the Alaafin of Oyo, the Emir of kano, Chief Richard Henshaw of Calabar and the Shehu of Borno.'⁵¹ In the First republic, Olufemi Vaughan notes, Oba Aderemi, the Ooni of Ife, in the Western region, was appointed as Governor of the West in 1959. In addition to this, some prominent traditional rulers in Yorubaland such as the Olubadan of Ibadanland, Osemawe of Ondo, Oluwo of Iwo, Olu of Warri and a host of others were given ministerial appointments during this period.⁵² In 1966, as recorded by E.C. Emordi and O.M. Osiki, the Aguiyi Ironsi military regime appointed traditional rulers as the Chancellor of federal government owned universities. Also, the 1989 constitution stipulated the establishment of a state and local government council of chiefs in every state and local government area in Nigeria, while the General Sani Abacha-led regime in 1998 gave positions to traditional rulers and decreed that 55 of the statutory allocations of local governments should be set aside for the upkeep of the traditional institutions in such local government areas.⁵³ In the amended 1999 democratic constitution, traditional rulers continue to occupy important positions in the government of Nigeria. Their membership as part of the Nigerian government has helped to stop any form of criticism against tradition by the government. They are in government to protect and preserve tradition, while opposing any elite government official who

⁵¹ A.O. Adesoji, 'Traditional Rulership and Modern Governance in 20th Century', p. 40

⁵² Olufemi Vaughan, *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern politics, 1890 to 1990s.*, p. 91

⁵³ C.M. Emordi, O.M. Osiki, p. 90

aims to criticise any traditional practice. This is one reason why tradition continues to gain ground in Nigeria.

Despite the significant accusations and reports of continued participation in traditional festivals and rituals such as Osu and the *Oro* festival in spite of modern influences, ‘traditional rulers have remained a political force to reckon with in contemporary Nigerian politics.’⁵⁴ Traditional rulers in Nigeria play an important role in the choice and emergence of electoral candidates in contemporary Nigeria. During the electioneering processes, political aspirants troop to palaces of traditional rulers in their communities to receive royal blessings and endorsements. As father to all, they give royal blessings to all the aspirants that come to them. Since traditional rulers command great respect and awe among the people of Nigeria, it is thus evident why candidates who seek political positions patronise them in the build-up to elections. Examples of this abound in various parts of Nigeria during local or state government elections. ‘Even at the federal level, presidential aspirants endeavour to visit and get royal supports of first class traditional rulers across the country.’⁵⁵ Not only during the time of elections do political leaders visit palaces of traditional rulers, they sometimes visit to seek advice and for ‘legitimization of tenure.’⁵⁶ How then is it possible for the Nigerian government to criticise the activities of traditional rulers when they are subject to them? It is thus clear that traditional rulers possess enormous power not just over the people but the government of Nigeria. This accounts for the continuation of certain cultural practices in Nigeria. The criticism and challenge to these practices are left to the educated elites, creative artists and literary scholars who are poised to bring them to an end. Having discussed the tradition of the *Oro* festival and ritual suicide in Nigeria, my next focus is to analyse Ulasi’s *Many Thing You No Understand*

⁵⁴ S.B. Amusa, p. 411

⁵⁵ S.B. Amusa, p. 412

⁵⁶ S.B. Amusa, p. 413

as an Afrocentric novel; one which conducts what I am calling an internal critique of Nigeria's social system.

3.4 *Many Thing You No Understand, Death and the King's Horseman, and Oba Waja*

Born in 1931 in Aba, Eastern Nigeria, Adaora Lily Ulasi, arguably 'the most misunderstood writer from Nigeria', is the daughter of an Igbo chief.⁵⁷ Most incidents in her novels, particularly her first novel, *Many Thing You No Understand*, are based on events she recalled from her childhood. Biographical information on her is scant at best: the most we know of her is that she studied in Los Angeles, CA, at Pepperdine University, and at the University of Southern California, where she earned a B.A in Journalism in 1954. In the 1960s, she was Women's Page Editor of the *Daily Times* of Nigeria. She subsequently married Deryk James and had three children. After her divorce in 1972, she returned to Nigeria as editor of *Women's World* magazine, and in 1976 travelled to England. As a journalist, she worked for the BBC and Voice of America. 'In several ways', as Chikwenye Ogunyemi, one of the notable critics who has conducted in-depth research on her, points out, 'Ulasi mimics the Yoruba deity and tradition.'⁵⁸ Despite being Igbo, Ulasi places attention on the Yoruba tradition and culture, adapting the genre of the traditional crime thriller (the *Oro* festival) of Yoruba to her novels. Her first novel, *Many Thing You No Understand*, (1970), dramatizes the Yoruba tradition of the *Oro* festival. In this novel, Ulasi exposes this troubled traditional system, while representing the dissatisfactions, intimidations and oppressions inherent in it. In 1971, she published *Many Thing Begin For Change*, a sequel to her first novel. In 1974, she wrote her American-based novel, *The Night Harry Died*. *Who Is Jonah*, (1978), her fourth novel, represents resistance to the British intervention into the Igbo heartland in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the same year, she also wrote her last novel, *The Man From Sagamu*. As

⁵⁷Chikwenye Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, p. 194

⁵⁸ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 190

a balanced Afrocentric writer, Ulasi challenges not just external forces of oppression in Nigeria in *Who Is Jonah*, but, I argue, inner forces as well in *Many Thing You No Understand*, *The Man From Sagamu* and *Many Thing Begin For Change*.

Ulasi is among the first generation of Nigerian literary writers whose works proffer several models of resistance to particularly outmoded traditions and a challenge to external oppressive forces upon Nigeria. She is regarded as ‘the first woman to create a new political enclave through journalism.’⁵⁹ Her novels are received as ‘the first detective fictions in the country.’⁶⁰ In all her novels, ‘she brings in a journalist-investigator who tries to expose the secret evils in traditions’, a point I will elaborate on later.⁶¹ She is also acknowledged as ‘the first to controversially use Pidgin English to dramatize interactions.’⁶² Although this skilful writer has not received the critical acclaim which writers of her time received, her novels continue to air the national societal problems which still plague the nation. Her nationalistic impulse makes it imperative that she challenges repugnant traditions and other oppressive systems. To give voice to her novels which are gradually going out of circulation due to a lack of critical attention, I shall next introduce and analyse *Many Thing You No Understand*, the focus of this chapter.

Many Thing You No Understand is set in Igbo territory in the early 1930s when colonial rule still existed in Nigeria. The setting is the fictitious Ukana village, which has developed into a town. The novel spotlights the odious tradition of the Oro festival and ‘the impudent colonial administrator John MacIntosh who is determined to prosecute the head hunters responsible for the ritual killing.’⁶³ In the novel, MacIntosh, an Assistant District Officer is

⁵⁹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 183

⁶⁰ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 185

⁶¹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 188

⁶² Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 189

⁶³ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 197

employed to administer justice and uphold the law. He keeps court hours, and listens to property disputes, accusations of adultery and incest, and cases involving theft, while handing down sentences of fines or jail terms as required. Most of his business is conducted through an interpreter, and there is a lot of humour in the manner in which the interpretations are handled:

Assistant District Officer (ADO): ‘Mr Jonah Udochi. On July 26th a consignment of corrugated iron, the property of I.O.A Ltd was found on your premises, covered with palm leaves. What do you say to that?’

Interpreter: ‘The ADO said, that you thief IOA zinc. What say?’

ADO: ‘Ask him whether the corrugated iron got there by osmosis.’

Interpreter: ‘He said, they come to your house by wind?’

ADO: ‘tell him he should be ashamed of himself’

Interpreter: ‘Mr. Udochi, the ADO say, shame, shame!’⁶⁴

In spite of the humour, Ulasi’s novel addresses what is of major concern to this chapter: the tradition of the *Oro* festival. The chief of Ukana, Chief Obieze, dies and, according to custom, some twenty or more heads are required to be ‘lowered into the grave with him’⁶⁵ :

‘We need twenty or more head! A chief die, therefore a big man, we want for bury. The head must go inside the ground with him, for chief no go by himself.’⁶⁶

The new ADO, who has only been stationed at Ukana for six months, is horrified by this tradition. He resolves to pursue justice and to stop this practice when Sylvester Ndu, the brother of one of the ‘heads’ acquired for the burial, brings an accusation against Chukwuka and Okafor, the men responsible for the ritual killing of his brother. Chukwuka and Okafor, like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, are adherents of tradition. They pursue traditional belief with

⁶⁴ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 8

⁶⁵ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p.11

⁶⁶ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 12

zeal, whether abhorrent or ennobling. Hence, they took it as their responsibility to ensure that their chief is buried with enough ‘heads’:

Each man had a sack and a cutlass. Before dawn, there had to be sufficient heads in the two sacks [...] The travellers and the inquisitive, and one or two others who accidentally walked into their trap, supplied all the heads that were necessary. And as dawn was streaking, the heads were deposited in the inner sanctuary of the chief’s home, in his compound. Later, towards sundown, those heads and the ceremonial requisites would be put into the six-foot grave before the chief was finally laid to rest.⁶⁷

Determined to rid this community of such a hideous tradition, MacIntosh decides to take this case as the defining moment in his administration at Ukana. However, ‘his superior, Maurice Mason, the prototypic empire builder, tries to discourage him.’⁶⁸: ‘Mac, if you’re still worried about that business of the heads, well, I will advise you to put it out of your mind.’⁶⁹ This catalyzes the conflict in the novel.

As the plot develops further, Okafor, Chukwuka, and, implicated by his position, the newly crowned Chief Obieze III, use *juju* to confound their British and Nigerian opponents to avoid arrest. While Okafor and Chukwuka use *juju* on Sylvester Ndu, turning him into a madman, Chief Obieze III uses *juju* to conjure up a snake, spiders, ants, headache, and fever, which finally makes MacIntosh hallucinate. This necessitates his return to Britain without achieving his mission. The frequency of madness as a theme in the novel indicates a world gone awry. In this episode, Ulasi dramatizes not just the potent powers ascribed to *juju* in Nigeria, but the power of ‘voice-throwing’, as I shall elaborate upon subsequently. By impeding the sanity, and by implication, the voice of Sylvester and MacIntosh, Chukwuka, Okafor and Obieze III show an awareness of the efficacy of ‘voice-throwing’ which is capable of disrupting the continued practice of the Oro tradition.

⁶⁷ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 14

⁶⁸ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 198

⁶⁹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 27

In the novel, Ulasi does not only criticise the *Oro* festival, she equally attacks the practice of incest. In another court scene, a father is alleged to have raped his daughter, arguing that, since he owns her, he can do what he likes with her. Although this is not Ulasi's main concern in the novel, Buchi Emecheta also critiques this taboo in *The Family*.

The conclusion of the novel is more tragic than comic. It portrays the predicaments of Mason, who, having sent MacIntosh back to Britain, decides to continue to seek the prosecution of Chukwuka and Okafor. Ultimately, Mason is betrayed by one of the villagers and handed over to Chief Obieze III and his group, as he tries to capture Chukwuka and Okafor. Sylvester Ndu remains mad and fails to get justice for his murdered brother. The novel, as the title suggests, is testament to the fact that there are many things some Nigerians and foreigners do not understand about the traditions and cultures of Nigeria. In *Many Thing Begin For Change*, a sequel to *Many Thing You No Understand*, Ulasi envisages change as she continues to criticise the tradition of the *Oro* festival.

Many Thing Begin For Change opens with the gruesome beheading of the captured District Officer, Mason, by Obieze III and his men. Mason's absence triggers a search by the District Commissioner, George Hughes, and other white colonial administrators. With no explanation to the reader, 'Hughes incriminates Obieze and dupes him into expecting a knighthood.'⁷⁰ On the way to receive this, Obieze commits suicide when he realises that he is heading for imminent disgrace. Obieze's death is symbolic. As Obieze, Chukwuka and Okafor represent the *Oro* tradition; Obieze's death symbolises and represents this vanishing tradition, a point I shall explain subsequently.

⁷⁰ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 202

A few critics, notable among them, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Yemi Mojola and Taiwo Oladele have elaborated on Ulasi's creativity in her first novel. Ulasi's novel, Ogunyemi argues, 'has baffled critics straining to classify it.'⁷¹ The conflation of mystery and *juju* which Ulasi foregrounds and dramatizes, eulogises the African culture which she equally criticises. Clear as it is, '*Many Thing You No Understand* has successfully dramatized the mystery genre and exposed the odious strains of traditional tunes.'⁷² Ogunyemi famously describes this novel as 'a text which proffers several models of resistance to culture', arguing that 'the most memorable features of the novel are the colonial officer, court, police, church, school, newspaper, marketplace, and compound', with each having a significant input in the challenge to tradition.⁷³

Since the primary focus of this novel is on the challenge to Nigeria's insidious traditions, and the secondary focus being the criticism of colonialism in Nigeria, I disagree with Ogunyemi who argues that 'Ulasi's true nationalist is the rebel who opposes the magistrate, the police, and the newspaper or disrespects any of the paraphernalia that keep the oppressor (colonial administrators) in power.'⁷⁴ Her true nationalists like Sylvester Ndu and his wife, Comfort, I argue, are those who oppose any form of injustice whether internal or external. Because of the period when this novel was written and the colonial administrators playing a major role in the novel, the novel poses a problem for modern readers who are quick to classify it as an anti-colonial text, where as in the real sense, the novel is also 'anti-tradition'. It will be a negative reading and an act of injustice on Ulasi's effort to classify Chief Obieze III, Chukwuka and Okafor who oppose and disrespect the court and colonial paraphernalia in its pursuit for justice and human rights, as Ulasi's true nationalists. The inclusion of colonial

⁷¹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 186

⁷² Taiwo Oladele, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*, p. 60

⁷³ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 201

⁷⁴ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 201

characters should not undermine the fundamental message, I am arguing, Ulasi tries to convey. Since Ulasi was writing during the time when African tradition was never openly challenged by insiders (Africans), Ulasi wisely chose to use colonial paraphernalia as a safe place to attack tradition. This suggests why she gives more voice to the colonial administrators, while giving what I will call a ‘sub-voice’ to Sylvester. As an occasional radio broadcaster and journalist, ‘she presents her material carefully so as not to be discredited or silenced.’⁷⁵

Taiwo Oladele’s general observation about the language of *Many Thing You No Understand* is worth considering. According to Oladele, ‘Ulasi is conscious of the limitations of the English language for the Nigerian in her criticism of Nigerian culture.’⁷⁶ ‘Experimenting with language, Ulasi’, Ogunyemi argues, ‘employs what she refers to as pidgin (in her works, it appears as an awkward mixture of broken and pidgin English) in conversations between British and Igbo men.’⁷⁷ This language choice is employed for two reasons: first, it is to create humour and second, it is to address the Nigerian issue (tradition) in the ‘Nigerian way’, since pidgin English is spoken and understood by the majority of Nigerians, as I shall discuss later on. ‘*Many Thing You No Understand* introduces us to the fears, horror and uncertainties that are part and parcel of Nigerian tradition.’⁷⁸

As Yemi Mojola in her 1988 essay on Ulasi’s fiction has argued, ‘*Many Thing You No Understand* is classified as a detective story.’⁷⁹ ‘Adaora Ulasi’, she continues, ‘occupies the unique position of being the only Nigerian female novelist who, up till now, has written detective novels [...] although there are reservations as to the detective quality of her novels.’⁸⁰ She has written five such novels. Critics have associated Ulasi with this popular form, although

⁷⁵ Taiwo Oladele, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*, p. 50

⁷⁶ Taiwo Oladele, *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. P. 80

⁷⁷ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 189

⁷⁸ Taiwo Oladele, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*, p. 15

⁷⁹ Yemi Mojola, ‘Adaora Ulasi’, *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present*, p. 180

⁸⁰ Yemi Mojola p. 183

this develops more in *Many Thing Begin For Change* and *The Man From Sagamu*. “They have faulted her for not following the genre consistently and for leaving the reader cheated and dissatisfied.”⁸¹ Could this account for the reason for the neglect I have mentioned earlier of Ulasi’s literature? Ogunyemi takes this as a concern when she comments that ‘Ulasi has never received the critical attention she deserves.’⁸² Critics who have never read her novels (and might never read them, since they are now hard to come by) wax eloquent on the shortcomings of her writing, without considering its positive aspects.

Ulasi’s career as a journalist enhanced her writing by sharpening her eye for detail; it helped ground her work in Nigerian traditional realism. The discipline of investigative journalism broadened her vision, extending it to the seamy side of life which many have neglected, the sensational, the fascinating, the horrifying, and the mystifying in Nigerian traditional practice. The journalist in her is always ready to uncover tales, events and cultural practices within Nigerian tradition that affect the Nigerian condition. In doing this, she captures my deconstructive approach to the Afrocentric theory. Having identified the scant literary criticism of Ulasi’s *Many Thing You No Understand*, the point to begin my interpretation of this novel as an internal critique of Nigerian social system is Ulasi’s technique of ‘voice-throwing’, a point I have identified and analysed in the chapters on Womanism and the Osu caste system.

In Achebe’s fictions and Nwapa’s novels, I identified Siga Jagne’s concept of voice-throwing as a major tool in the challenge to repugnant traditions. Voice-throwing is a disruptive action that brings the speaker to the centre of discourse. Jagne explains that ‘by ‘throwing’ one’s voice, a disruption of discourse can take place. The act of ‘throwing’ one’s voice can create an epistemic violence to discourse that will create a space for the hitherto

⁸¹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 190

⁸² Chikwenye Ogunyemi, p. 187

unheard voices.⁸³ What Jagne is arguing here is that subalterns should have ‘voice’ and such voice which she refers to as ‘disruptive speech’ is capable of placing the marginalised people as subject rather than object in the society.⁸⁴ It is this idea that Achebe and Nwapa adopt in their representation of the voice-consciousness of the subalterns. Whilst Achebe and Nwapa adopt the speech pattern of voice-throwing in their challenge to discriminatory traditions, Ulasi shows a more comprehensive understanding of voice-throwing.

According to Michelle Rowley, ‘voicing refers to the varying articulated levels of consciousness, action and inaction. It occurs in many forms.’⁸⁵ Rowley’s position suggests that voice-throwing is not just restricted to ‘speech’ alone. As she puts it, it occurs in many forms. For example, within Nigeria and Africa by extension, ‘gestures such as chupsing (sucking one’s teeth), cut eye (a dramatic way of looking at someone from head to toe then closing one’s eye and turning one’s eye away from the person), and placing one’s hands on the hips when talking to those in authority are associated with rebellion.’⁸⁶ Such gestures could be classified as voice-throwing. ‘Voicing’, Rowley continues, ‘could be articulated through writing.’⁸⁷ Voice-throwing for Rowley takes a deeper form and structure than Jagne’s, who contends that voicing is simply a ‘disruptive speech.’ In *Many Thing You No Understand*, Ulasi employs both Jagne’s and Rowley’s ideas of voice-throwing to criticize the culture of the *Oro* festival. For her, voice-throwing is not just the monumental speech against an abhorrent tradition. It could take the form of writing and other gestures when speech fails to bring about the desired change.

⁸³ Siga Jagne, ‘African Women and the category ‘WOMAN’ in Feminist Theory.’ Proceedings at the Annual Conference of the African Literature Association, p. 18

⁸⁴ Siga Jagne, p. 19

⁸⁵ Michelle Rowley, *Feminist Advocacy and Gender Equity*, p. 50

⁸⁶ Nyoka Mtutuzeli, *I speak to the Silent*, p. 100

⁸⁷ Michelle Rowley, p. 51

In the novel, she presents Sylvester Ndu with a double-voiced pattern: speaking and writing as he challenges the tradition of the *Oro* festival. Sylvester, a native of Ukana hurries to the office of MacIntosh, the Assistant District Officer (ADO), to report the murder of his brother by Chukwuka and Okafor for chief Obieze's burial:

'My brother, crrr!' The latter word he emphasised by running a finger across his throat. 'Killed?' The man, (Sylvester Ndu) who was very agitated, nodded. 'My brother head in ground with Chief!' [...]

'Are you trying to tell me that your brother's head is in the Chief's grave?'

'No, master. But it go be there for evening-time.' [...]

'Where was your brother when they killed him?'

'He get up for night to go for latrine, sir?'

'And he didn't come back?'

'No, sir.'

'How can you be sure that your brother's disappearance is connected with the Chief's death?'

'I see it with my own eyes.' [...] 'When they kill my brother. The men, they run away with him head and body when I come out for look for my brother.'

'I see. Did you see the men who did it?' [...]

'I certain I fit know them, sir. I certain!'⁸⁸

This conversation between Sylvester Ndu and MacIntosh instigates the conflict in the novel. Sylvester's voice creates an epistemic violence between Chukwuka and Okafor, when they discovered that Sylvester had gone to report the issue to the ADO:

Okafor beckoned to Chukwuka [...] 'Something bad happen!' [...] 'You know the last man we catch?' 'Him brother tell on us!' 'oh to whom he tell?' 'The man tell ADO!' 'What!'⁸⁹

The voice of Sylvester unsettles Chukwuka and Okafor. By throwing his voice, a disruption to the continuous practice of abhorrent tradition takes place. To borrow Jagne's words,

⁸⁸ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 21

⁸⁹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 33-34

Sylvester's voice becomes a 'disruptive action that brings him into the centre of discourse.'⁹⁰ His voice thus reasserts the position of the marginalised as a force to reckon with in the society. Like *Things Fall Apart* where the death of Ikemefuna began the personal tragedy of Okonkwo, the voice of Sylvester initiates series of unrests for Chukwuka and Okafor.

Voicing for Ulasi is an important technique in the challenge of tradition. Ulasi shows her understanding of the power of voice-throwing when she portrays the actions of Chukwuka and Okafor, who are determined to silence Sylvester's voice. Chukwuka and Okafor as the custodians of tradition and the epitome of a repugnant tradition know the efficacy of voice-throwing. They are aware that voicing Sylvester and other oppressed people is a 'de-voicing' tradition. Thus, de-voicing Sylvester is a strategy to stop any opportunity for change. For this reason, they resolved to stop his voice by making him mad:

'I no think we go let our complaining friend reach ADO him office tomorrow.'

'No, let him go to him office. But make we scatter him brain so he go tell ADO tomorrow different story from what he tell him today!'⁹¹

Through juju, Chukwuka and Okafor were able to stop the voice of Sylvester. They saw voice-throwing as the most effective 'form of resistance by the marginalised.'⁹² Thus, when hit by madness, Sylvester forgets what to say at his second visit to the ADO and refutes his initial report of the murder of his brother for the burial of chief Obieze:

He felt the hand of juju upon him. [...] in the time he's walked from his home to the office of the ADO, something had happened to him and he had forgotten why he had gone there. 'Our man is here!' MacIntosh said. But Sylvester Ndu frowned and shook his head. 'But you came into my office yesterday! Why are you reluctant to do so now?' 'No, Mr ADO, I no come for here yesterday.'

⁹⁰ Siga Jagne, p. 18

⁹¹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 34

⁹² Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, p. 80

‘You tell the ADO say, some men come for your house and kill your brother when he go for latrine.’

‘Ah master, me no say so [...]

‘You come yesterday and tell one story. You come today and tell different story!’⁹³

Mason, who tries to interrogate Sylvester, is appalled by Sylvester’s predicament. He knows that ‘this madness must’ve come on as a means to silence him.’⁹⁴ By impeding the voice of Sylvester, Okafor tells Chukwuka: ‘You take big load away from my chest.’⁹⁵ This suggests that voicing can cause epistemic violence through unsettling normative cultural practices; a force that is capable of bringing about change.

When Sylvester’s speech was impeded, Ulasi drops Jagne’s idea of voice-throwing and took to Rowley’s. She provides Sylvester with another form of voice, through writing. Sylvester, Ulasi tells us, was among the new crop of young men. His murdered elder brother had struggled to send him to the fee-paying mission school. When Sylvester had reached Standard Four his brother could do no more; the fees had become too steep and so Sylvester left school.⁹⁶ With his basic Standard Four education, Sylvester ‘wrote a note and told his wife to guard it with her life and to pass it on to MacIntosh if it became necessary.’⁹⁷ This note is his “‘voice’”. It contains the names of Chukwuka and Okafor, the murderers of his brother, which he had promised to bring to MacIntosh the day he was made mad. The letter reads:

Dear sir, this is hoping to find you for good health. I send the name of the two men. The name be Okafor and Chukwuka. They come from Ukana township. Thank you sir. I remain to be sir, Sincerely yours, Sylvester Ndu.⁹⁸

⁹³ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 42

⁹⁴ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 74

⁹⁵ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 35

⁹⁶ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 43

⁹⁷ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 42

⁹⁸ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 59

This written voice of Sylvester continues to disrupt and unsettle the culture of dominance in Ukana. While challenging the tradition which Okafor and Chukwuka represent, it creates conflict and unrest in their minds. On receiving news that a letter from Sylvester had reached the ADO, 'Okafor's heart sank; his throat tightened. And he swallowed with difficulty.'⁹⁹ He says to Chukwuka: 'My friend, I come with heavy heart. I come with bad news.'¹⁰⁰ To hide from the arrest of the ADO, the written voice of Sylvester forced Okafor and Chukwuka to 'go underground like a coward.'¹⁰¹ With advice of the elders of the village, they hid themselves and pretended to be dead: 'We go tell ADO you die!'¹⁰² I read the feigned death of Okafor and Chukwuka's as the symbolic death of the tradition of *Oro*; a death forced by voice-throwing. Having analysed 'voice' as a technique of internal criticism of the Oro festival, I shall next elaborate on Ulasi's use of Pidgin English as a language strategy to challenge a vile tradition. Before discussing the use of Pidgin English in the novel, it is imperative to state briefly how Pidgin English as a language strategy gained ground in African literature.

The use of the English language in postcolonial literature is a controversial debate among postcolonial writers and scholars. As early as 1962 African writers were debating the issue of the use of English in African literature at the Makerere Conference of African Writers in Kampala. The participants in this debate may be classified into two groups: those who rejected the idea of African literature in English, and those who saw English as a valid medium for African literature. The former group, which is referred to by Gabriel Okara as the 'Rejectionists', strongly opposed African writers' use of English. The 'Rejectionists' held that only when African writers use their native languages can their works be considered 'African'. The latter group, the 'Evolutionists/Experimentists', supported the notion of African literature

⁹⁹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 59

¹⁰⁰ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 60

¹⁰¹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 61

¹⁰² *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 69

in English. However, as their name suggests, they did not attempt to, nor did they believe they should, write in English the same way a native English speaking writer does. Instead, they aimed to Africanize the English language by investing it with African ideas and ‘flavours.’ By so doing, they hoped that the language of the former colonizers would evolve into a medium for African literature.

One African writer and critic who argued against the idea of the ‘Experimentists’ is the Kenyan intellectual, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Ngugi reinforced his attack as a major opponent of English as a medium for African literature. In *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of language in African Literature*, in an attempt to dissuade African writers from using European languages, he passionately asks:

Why ... should an African writer or any writer become so obsessed by taking from his mother tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our language? How can we ‘prey’ on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggle of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own?¹⁰³

Ngugi is a practitioner of his own beliefs. In 1977, he stopped using English in his novels, plays and short stories. In 1986 in a statement in his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi declares that ‘This book, *Decolonizing the Mind*, is my farewell to English for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way.’¹⁰⁴

Ngugi’s stance as a ‘Rejectionist’ is challenged by many African writers like Achebe who was also present at the Makerere conference, Soyinka, Ulasi, Nwapa, Ladipo, and today, Chimamanda Adichie who all Africanize English with Pidgin English and other African ideas to communicate African experience and criticise outmoded African traditions. Commenting on the way in which African writers should use the English language, Achebe argues that

¹⁰³ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of language in African Literature*, p. 8

¹⁰⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, p. xiv

English should be ‘still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.’¹⁰⁵ This is what Ulasi does: she alters English with Pidgin English to suit the Nigerian surroundings. Ulasi has found that the use of Pidgin English, by giving an ‘African flavour’ to the English language, can be effective in representing African experiences and challenging outdated African traditions such as the Osu caste system and the Oro festival.

In Ulasi’s novel, Pidgin English, better called ‘Nigerian English’, works well as a strategy to criticise certain Nigerian cultural practices. Pidgin English is understood and spoken by both the educated and non-educated Nigerians. Since this is a language many Nigerians understand, Ulasi adopts this strategy to pass a clear and simple message to Nigerians. Adopting Pidgin English for the title of the novel: *Many Thing You No Understand*, is a deliberate attempt to write specifically for Nigerians and to attract more Nigerian readers. By doing this, Ulasi intends to create amongst Nigerians a widespread awareness of the horror of the *Oro* festival. This, she hopes, will encourage Nigerians like Sylvester Ndu to speak against this practice which they do not understand.

Although Yemi Mojola argues that ‘Ulasi represents the colonial figures in her novel in Standard English and Nigerians in Pidgin English to mirror the colonizers attempts to prove the inferiority of the colonised’, Ulasi, I argue, proves once again that her work is not primarily about colonialism by representing Mason, the District Officer, in Pidgin English and standard English. The different conversations between Ezekiel, MacIntosh’s cook, and Mason reflect this point:

Mason couldn’t resist a conversation. ‘You get good honest face, Ezekiel. Mr MacIntosh give you too much trouble?’

‘Ah, no, sir. He good.’

‘You give him good chop, Ezekiel! Which place you learn for cook?’

¹⁰⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 20

‘Mr macIntosh, he teach me.’¹⁰⁶

‘Go bring one glass cold water. And make you look for inside the place your master keep him medicine and bring the aspirin bottle. You fit know aspirin when you see it?’ Mason told him.

‘Ah, sir, I fit know.’ Ezekiel replies.¹⁰⁷

In trying to convince the already mad Sylvester to stick to the truth, Mason uses Pidgin again:

‘Now look, Sylvester, why you lie now say you no come here yesterday?’ asked Mason ... ‘You tell the ADO say, some men come for your house and kill your brother when he go for latrine.’¹⁰⁸

The social boundaries indicated by the use of standard English and Pidgin English by people of different classes, are transgressed by Mason’s use of Pidgin. Mason’s spoken Pidgin conveys Ulasi’s message: she is committed to criticising the *Oro* festival not the debate on the superiority or inferiority of persons or race.

Ulasi’s representation of Mason in Pidgin is an index of identification: a way to seek social acceptance or intimacy with the people. Whereas Mason uses Standard English in his communication with Mr Anako, the interpreter, MacIntosh, the ADO, and the District Commissioner amongst others, he uses Pidgin with his cooks and other non-educated persons to gain their trust and to seek collaboration in the struggle against the continuous practice of the Oro festival. A good example is his conversation with Sunday, his cook. Mason makes use of Pidgin to gain the trust, confidence and collaborative effort of Sunday in his quest to apprehend Okafor and Chukwuka:

‘Sunday,’ Mason went on carefully ... ‘for how long you work for me?’

‘Fifteen years.’

‘During the fifteen years, I never ask you for favour before.’

‘No, master. You talk true.’

¹⁰⁶ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 30

¹⁰⁷ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 104

¹⁰⁸ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 44

‘You work for me, I pay you and look after you.’

‘That be so, sir.’

‘Sunday if anybody tell you to catch your father, you go fit do it?’

... ‘If anybody tell you make you do the same to somebody way you no know?’

... ‘But if the person point the man to you, what say, Sunday?’ ...

‘But if the person they say make you catch kill twenty people, you go fit do it?’

His houseboy whistled, and stared with his mouth opened. ‘Ah, master he be bad man to do that kind thing!’ Sunday exclaimed, and Mason nodded.

‘He be bad man, Sunday. They be bad men- that’s why I want catch them!’

‘they be Okafor and Chukwuka.’¹⁰⁹

This long but funny conversation in Pidgin helps to shorten the perceived distance and gap between Mason and Sunday and to create a kind of intimacy between them to actualise a common goal: to apprehend Chukwuka and Okafor, representatives of a particular tradition. By employing more Pidgin expressions in her description and criticism of this practice, Ulasi has succeeded in using what is acceptable by Nigerians to challenge what is completely unacceptable by many Nigerians. If the sole aim of African literature is ‘to uplift our spirit, shine a cold light to dark truth, give audience to underrepresented voices, and topple the bourgeoisie hegemony’, the use of Pidgin, I argue, can help in accomplishing these goals.¹¹⁰

Ulasi’s exploitation of Pidgin as a linguistic strategy reflects her acute consciousness of using language as a barometer for social change in Nigeria. It also betrays her genuine craftsmanship in manipulating English, to mirror Nigerian realities. Her success in this adds to the achievements of Pidgin English in Nigerian literature. Not only is Pidgin English a

¹⁰⁹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 151-52

¹¹⁰ Terri Ochiagha, ‘African Literature and the Role of the Nigerian Government College, Umuahia’, p. 21.

strategy employed by Ulasi to criticise tradition, the art of mediation is one clear technique that is replete in her novel.

Mediation in its simplest form can be defined as a process of assisted or facilitated negotiation. According to Chris Moore, ‘mediation is the intervention of an acceptable, impartial and neutral third party ... to assist contending parties in voluntarily reaching their own mutually acceptable settlement of issues in dispute.’¹¹¹ The central quality of mediation, Lon Fuller argues, is ‘its capacity to orient the parties by helping them to achieve a new shared perception ... a perception that will redirect their attitudes and disposition.’¹¹² Mediation is more common-sense-based, less bureaucratic, more humane, and more efficient. It is a structure that responds to the human condition. In the opinion of Goldberg Green, the ‘mediator makes parties aware of the social norms applicable to their relationship and persuades them to accommodate themselves to the structure imposed by these norms.’¹¹³ While some critics believe that the mediation principle cannot ‘order parties to conform to certain principle, others are of the opinion that mediation is directed toward the creation of relevant norms through order, force and persuasion.’¹¹⁴ Mediation to the latter group produces a new structure which challenges existing practices that affect the human condition. Based on this understanding, many literary writers employ this technique for social change and to create balance, equality and morality in society.

The concept of mediation in Nigerian literature has been carefully studied by Daniel Izevbaye. In Izevbaye’s understanding of mediation, ‘a mediator can be a person, an act, or a structure.’¹¹⁵ Using this idea, I will analyse how Ulasi employs ‘the court of law’ as a

¹¹¹ Chris Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*, p. 20

¹¹² Lon Fuller, *The Morality of Law*, p. 325

¹¹³ Lawrence MacDonnell, ‘Natural Resources Disputes Resolution: An Overview’, p. 11

¹¹⁴ Chris Moore, p. 52

¹¹⁵ Daniel Izevbaye, p. 117

mediating structure in her novel to challenge and change the deplorable condition of Nigerians. Although Ulasi does not actually use the word mediation or mediator in her writing, the presence and operation of the principle of mediation in her novel is implied in her constructive challenge to tradition.

In *Many Thing You No Understand*, the first page of the novel describes the Native Court headed by John MacIntosh and the native interpreter Mr Gabriel Anako:

... a parcel of land, central to everyone, was selected and handed over to the Crown for the building of a Native Court. In 1935, the court's twentieth year, it fell to John MacIntosh, as assistant district officer, to preside over its deliberations... the court was painted with a locally concocted distemper.¹¹⁶

Right after the description of the court, Ulasi shows the mediating effect of the court which was immediately used to settle a land dispute between Messrs Ofodile and Chukwuma. This mediating structure is important to Ulasi, and for this reason, she dedicates the first chapter of the novel to court settlements of cases one after the other. Not only did Ulasi employ this strategy to resolve social disputes and arguments, she employs it to criticise the unacceptable act of incest and the practice of the *Oro* festival.

A case was brought to the Native Court accusing Mr Udeama of committing incest:

Mr Udeama: it was reported to this court by your neighbour, Mr Iloka, that, some weeks ago, while he was up a palm tree tapping palm wine ... he looked across to your verandah and his eyes beheld what he thought he'd never live to see. In other words, that you were committing incest with your sixteen-year-old daughter. Did you commit any such crime?¹¹⁷

Without any remorse for his action, Udeama tries to justify his act: '...my daughter be my own and I get right for do anything.'¹¹⁸ No doubt, Udeama's reply comes from the traditional belief that women as objects, are subject to men, a condition I have discussed in Chapter Two, on

¹¹⁶*Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 5

¹¹⁷ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 10

¹¹⁸ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 11

Womanism. Such traditional system that positions women as objects in society is what Ulasi tries to challenge through her conscious use of the court as a mediating strategy.

In the second chapter of the novel, Ulasi introduces the system of the *Oro* festival by introducing Chukwuka and Okafor and their search for ‘human-heads’ to bury their late Chief, as tradition demands. Sylvester Ndu’s complaint brings this case to the native Court. MacIntosh invites the new Chief Obieze III to court to address this issue: ‘Sylvester Ndu has complained to us that his brother’s head was among the items in your late father’s grave.’¹¹⁹ The conversation that follows between MacIntosh and the new Chief dramatizes Ulasi’s position in this case. Through MacIntosh’s challenge to Obieze, Ulasi addresses traditional chiefs on the acceptable form of relationship that should exist between them and their subjects:

Kings do not do what they like with their subjects. There should be a constitution that protects the rights of the individual. ... Kings should not be buried with twenty heads.¹²⁰

Obieze’s reply, ‘we get native law and custom for ordinary people’, prompts yet a fresh dimension to Ulasi’s message through Mason, when he says to Obieze: ‘...laws should not be written specifically for His majesty’s subjects. Laws are for the sovereign and his subjects alike.’¹²¹ Ulasi believes in equity, unity, love and prosperity in society. Hence she employs mediation as a strategy to give hope to the marginalised; to reinforce the need to stop abhorrent cultural practices in Nigeria; to guarantee the liberty of all Nigerians; and to promote equity. This strategy of mediation situates *Many Thing You No Understand* as a key text that critically condemns outmoded traditions in Nigeria. I next will study Ulasi’s creative use of ‘journalist investigator’ in her sustained critique of the *Oro* festival.

¹¹⁹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 94

¹²⁰ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 97

¹²¹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 98

The character of what Ogunyemi calls ‘journalist-investigator’ is a carefully worked out personality to ‘proffer several models of resistance in the culture.’¹²² ‘A journalist-investigator is one who opens up the evils in tradition.’¹²³ I shall borrow Ogunyemi’s understanding in this manner to analyse Ulasi’s journalist-investigators.

In *Many Thing You No Understand*, Ulasi, a journalist by training, creates many journalist-investigators to uncover, expose and criticise the evils inherent in the tradition of the *Oro* festival. She begins with Sylvester Ndu who publicly challenges the murder of his brother to bury the late chief by reporting the case to MacIntosh. When Sylvester complained to MacIntosh, MacIntosh presents him with his very first duty as a journalist-investigator to get the names of the men who murdered his brother:

‘Did you see the men who did it?’

‘small-small. But not proper.’

‘If you saw them again, could you identify them-would you know them?’

...

‘I certain I fit know them, sir. I certain!’

‘But you didn’t know their names?’

‘Oh no, sir. But I fit find out.’

‘How soon can you do that?’

‘By tomorrow morning sir ... I sure by morning-time I go know them name.’¹²⁴

Knowing the importance of his position as a journalist-investigator, Sylvester quickly swings into action. He did his research properly and discovers the names of the murderers as indicated in his letter to MacIntosh through his wife, Comfort, when he was made mad: ‘... the name of the men be Okafor and Chukwuka ...’¹²⁵ Macintosh, having received this letter from Sylvester,

¹²² Chikwenye Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, p. 200

¹²³ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, p. 195

¹²⁴ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 21

¹²⁵ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 59

says to Mason: 'The evidence we have in this letter is sound enough to prosecute them.'¹²⁶ It is this letter that motivates Macintosh to seek justice for Sylvester and to challenge the tradition of the *Oro* festival. The identification of Okafor and Chukwuka led to the invitation of the new chief for questioning which begins the conflict in the novel, giving hope to the oppressed. By this, Ulasi shows that a journalist-investigator plays a key role in the concerted resistance against oppression.

MacIntosh's role as a journalist-investigator takes up where Sylvester's leaves off. When Sylvester is made mad, MacIntosh continues to strategize ways to convict the murderers. He continues his investigation by sending Mr Udeka, one of his servants to confirm the 'pretentious death' of Chukwuka and Okafor: '... Mr Udeka, I want you to go to the homes of Messrs Okafor and Chukwuka ...'¹²⁷ Mr Udeka returns, saying: 'They die sir! I hear they die this morning.'¹²⁸ When MacIntosh is hit by 'juju' and can no longer continue his investigation, Mason takes over.

When MacIntosh is about to join the boat back to England, Mason promises to investigate the 'death' of Okafor and Chukwuka and to convict them. He says to MacIntosh: 'After I've seen you off, I'll go back for the other two men' - Okafor and Chukwuka.¹²⁹ Having received a letter from Ezekiel, MacIntosh's servant, that Okafor and Chukwuka were alive, Mason decides it is time to apprehend the murderers. He plans with his servant, Sunday and a stranger, to quietly arrest Okafor and Chukwuka in their hiding places. Although he is unable to arrest the murderers but is rather ambushed and beheaded, having been a constant thorn in the flesh of Okafor, Chukwuka and Chief Obieze III, through Mason, Ulasi shows that the position of journalist-investigator is capable of unsettling any culture of dominance. The

¹²⁶ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 64

¹²⁷ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 73

¹²⁸ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 73

¹²⁹ *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 150

predicaments of all three investigators are clear proof of the ‘horror’ inherent in particular traditions that continue to affect Nigerians. I, however, read this as the commitment and fearlessness of journalist-investigators as the conscience of the society, who are ready to sacrifice their lives for justice, peace and equity. Ulasi’s journalist approach to literature in this way serves as her own means of resisting internal oppressive traditions in Nigeria. Having identified the predicaments of Sylvester, MacIntosh and Mason who were affected by *juju*, my next focus is to analyse Ulasi’s use of *juju* to depict the perverseness of this aspect of Yoruba culture.

Treating *juju* as superstition, which is what it really is and should remain, Ogunyemi is of the opinion that ‘Ulasi has experimented with form, creating a new genre which could be classified as *juju* fiction.’¹³⁰ As practiced by Ulasi, ‘*juju* fiction can be described as a bewitched crossroad grounded on cultural imagery.’¹³¹ *Juju*, better known as black-magic, is the use of supernatural powers or magic for evil and selfish purposes. In the novel, Chukwuka and Okafor use *juju* on Sylvester Ndu, making him mad so that they can vanish or become invisible to escape from MacIntosh. Chief Obieze III on the other hand, uses *juju* on MacIntosh to stop any further challenge to the tradition of Oro: ‘So I put *juju* on ADO.’¹³² Confused by *juju*, MacIntosh hallucinates, seeing spiders and ants all around him which eventually necessitated his return to England.

In her construction of the novel, Ulasi prioritises *juju*’s agency as a strategy to suppress change as I indicated earlier in my analysis of voice-throwing. With *juju* playing a significant role in the novel’s plot, Ulasi appears to be delivering a clear message: that Nigerian tradition accommodates and approves of the use of *juju*. *Juju* is used by traditional adherents to

¹³⁰ Chikwenye Ogunyemi p. 205

¹³¹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi p. 204

¹³² *Many Thing You No Understand*, p. 124

confound people they do not like. Chief Obieze III tells Chukwuka, Okafor and some elders: ‘Because I no like the man ... So I put juju on him.’¹³³ *Juju*, in the novel, does not create a happy society, instead, it creates a tumultuous one full of mad men, hallucinating people, anarchy and the continuing practice of traditional belief which oppresses Nigerians. Having identified *juju* in this way, Ulasi is thus expressing the view that *juju*, a traditional strategy for evil purposes, is a crime. If Ulasi shows a clear criticism of the *Oro* festival in *Many Thing You No Understand*, her second novel, *Many Thing Begin for Change*, a sequel to her first, captures her clear disapproval of *juju* in Nigerian society by punishing Chukwuka and Okafor for driving Sylvester and MacIntosh mad through the use of *juju*, and Chief Obieze III for beheading Mason.

Many Thing You No Understand carries a clear Afrocentric message: a challenge to an internal system of discrimination in Nigeria. I would argue that Ulasi has been overlooked in critical circles because she challenges what has been hushed up in Nigerian society. Her achievements as a novelist lie not in the solution she offers, but in the courage and determination she shows in dealing with unpopular subjects in Nigerian literature. She is courageous for taking up neglected subjects and criticising the foibles in her culture. She can only wait for the resolution to the numerous injustices the tradition of the *Oro* festival brings. Having analysed the criticism of the *Oro* festival in Ulasi’s novel, I shall shift focus to the tradition of ritual suicide in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*.

Unlike the lesser known Ulasi, Soyinka is a renowned Nigerian writer and intellectual whose personality projects ‘five points of view: as an academic; as a man-of-the-theatre; as a political activist; as a writer, and as a Yoruba.’¹³⁴ Oluwole Akinwande Soyinka was born on July 13, 1934 in Ijebu, Nigeria. His father was a school supervisor and his mother, a trader.

¹³³ *Many Thing, You No Understand*, p. 124

¹³⁴ James Gibbs, *Critical perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, p. 3

Soyinka went to primary school in Abeokuta and to secondary school in Ibadan. After some months working in Lagos, he went to University College Ibadan. He then did an English Honours degree at Leeds and he distinguished himself in the course of his studies. He has since held a number of University appointments. Soyinka gained importance and achieved so much as a man-of-the-theatre, actor, director, and playwright. Between 1954 and the present, Soyinka has written, produced and directed more than thirty plays in three continents among which are: 'Keffi's Birthday Treat' (1954), *The Invention* (1957), *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958), *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959), *The Trial of Brother Jero* (1960), *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1983), *From Zia with Love* (1992), and *King Baabu* (2001), to mention a few. As a political activist, Soyinka has been a vociferous critic of many Nigerian military dictators as well as other political tyrannies in Africa. To this day, he continues to speak for the oppressed in Africa, challenging forms of discrimination. Much of his writings are concerned 'with the oppressive boot and the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it.'¹³⁵ His challenges to governance and certain traditions saw him imprisoned for 22 months in September 1967 in the wake of the Nigerian civil war. Though refused materials such as books, pens and paper, while in prison, Soyinka recounts his prison experience expressly in *The Man Died* (1971). *The Man Died* is unique among Soyinka's writings for the directness of the challenges it sets out, expressed in the mantra 'the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.'¹³⁶ In 1986, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the first African laureate. His plays, poems and essays continue to address African realities, tradition and customs.

¹³⁵ Peter Enahoro, 'The Man Died', p. 240

¹³⁶ Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died*, p. 1

As a Yoruba, much of Soyinka's work is limited to Yoruba culture and Yoruba concepts. Some of the most obvious examples which show his abiding concern with a Yoruba world-view, include: 'Abiku' and 'Alagemo' (1959); 'Egbe's Sworn Enemy' (1960); 'Salutations to the Guts' (1962), an essay which salutes the Yoruba as a race of lyrical gastronomes; *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), which adopts Yoruba ritual and variations on Yoruba verse forms; *The Interpreters* (1964), and 'Idanre' (1967), which are deeply informed by Yoruba myths, or Soyinka's versions of them; 'The Fourth Stage-Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy' (1967), an exercise in cultural analysis; *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1967), a translation of a Yoruba novel by Chief D.O. Fagunwa; and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), a play based on historical events, the interruption of a ritual suicide, which took place in Oyo in 1946.

Out of the fifteen major plays that Soyinka has published to date, *Death and the King's Horseman* is considered by many as one of his finest, especially in being able to combine an appraisal and condemnation of the Yoruba tradition into a unique kind of poetic drama. The play tells the story of Elesin, the king's horseman, who is expected to commit ritual suicide following the demise of the king. Elesin is a prominent chief and the king's horseman. Precisely a month after his death, the king of Oyo is to be buried and tradition requires that Elesin accompany him to the world of the dead, as a necessary rite of passage to ensure the continuity of fertility, good health, peace, prosperity, and stability of the land. Simon Pilkings, the District Officer, learns of the impending suicide of Elesin and in a well-meant intention, he arrests Elesin to 'protect' him from himself and his culture. Pilkings is informed by Joseph,

'It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven'¹³⁷

¹³⁷ *Death and the King's Horseman*, p, 28

Partly owing to Elesin's detention by Pilkings, and essentially to his fear of death and his hedonistic lifestyle, Elesin fails to perform his traditional duty. Olunde, Elesin's son, a student of medicine in far-away England, returns home having been informed of the king's death by a relation via a cable. He has returned to bury his father who is expected to commit ritual suicide following the death of the king. While Olunde seems to hear distant drums which he thought were announcing his father's death, whom he is not expected by tradition to see alive, Elesin is brought in alive in handcuffs. That his father lives is taboo, since to break with the *Oro* ritual is to challenge Yoruba custom. The Yoruba believe that such an act is 'capable of disrupting the cosmic order of the universe and thus the well-being and future of the community.'¹³⁸ The last scene takes place in Elesin's impoverished prison. Elesin sees the face of his dead son, who takes on the responsibility of his father by committing suicide in his place to restore the honour of his family and the other of the universe. In an instant, Elesin in terrible agony strangles himself with the same chain with which he is bound in the cell. As Olusegun Adekoya suggests, 'thus is Elesin's death which is supposed to be a sort of beatification, a grand celebration of a fulfilled life, and a comic resolution of the conflict with destiny transformed through his tardiness and weakness of will into an anti-climax and a tragedy.'¹³⁹

This play is a complex illustration of Soyinka's conception of the tragedy. According to the playwright's prefatory note, the play's primary plot is based on events that actually happened in Oyo, 'ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946.'¹⁴⁰ The playwright alters the historical facts, placing the tragic responsibility on Elesin's shoulders, so that he might focus

¹³⁸ Abiola Irele, 'Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka', p. 47

¹³⁹ Olusegun Adekoya, '*Death and the King's Horseman*: Soyinka's Defense of the Yoruba Cosmology and Culture', p. 59

¹⁴⁰ *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 6

on tradition rather than colonialism. In his 'Author's Note', he sternly warns against the misinterpretation of his play as a 'clash of cultures':

'the bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of 'clash of cultures', a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality in every given situation of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter.'¹⁴¹

Of all Soyinka's plays so far, none has generated as much passionate debate and polarized criticism as *Death and the King's Horseman*. 'The controversy,' as observed by Adekoya, 'centres around the rationality and irrationality of ritual suicide.'¹⁴² While some critics like Ketu Katrak, Niyi Osundare, Toyin Falola, and the African Marxist school of Biodun Jeyifo to mention a few are of the opinion that *Death and the King's Horseman* captures Soyinka's criticism of the practice of human sacrifice in Yoruba culture, others like Eckhad Breintinger, James Booth and Olusegun Adekoya oppose this view, arguing that this play is Soyinka's defence of the Yoruba cosmology and culture and a challenge of 'European images of barbarism in African tradition.'¹⁴³

In a fascinating essay entitled 'Death and the King's Horseman: Soyinka's Defense of the Yoruba Cosmology and Culture', Adekoya argues that in the play Soyinka questions Pilkings's interruption of the personal ritual suicide of the Elesin Oba which is aimed at 'enhancing and preserving the spiritual health of the Yoruba people.'¹⁴⁴ He contends that 'Soyinka himself found it necessary to write the highly polemical essay 'Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?' as a strong rebuttal of the charge of atavism levelled against him and a solid defense of the Yoruba world-view and Yoruba culture.'¹⁴⁵ 'Elesin's ritual suicide', he argues, 'carries a symbolic significance because the continuity and stability of the Yoruba world

¹⁴¹ *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 6

¹⁴² Olusegun Adekoya, p. 57

¹⁴³ James Booth, 'Human Sacrifice in Literature: The Case of Wole Soyinka', p. 8

¹⁴⁴ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 58

¹⁴⁵ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 58

depends on its performance.¹⁴⁶ Adekoya's interpretation above suggests that ritual suicide, as he puts it, 'is the bedrock of the Yoruba people and tradition.'¹⁴⁷ He seems to support and acknowledge 'the significance of self-sacrifice as the overall well-being of society.'¹⁴⁸ To critics like Adekoya, tradition should not be questioned, challenged or done away with, even when it affects the people to whom such tradition is meant to protect. Another such critic is Breitinger, who justifies the act of human sacrifice when he argues that 'the strength of Elesin's sacrifice lies in the firm relation in the life force of the entire religio-cultural community that will affect individual lives only indirectly.'¹⁴⁹ Rather than condemning such a tradition that compels people to commit suicide, Breitinger looks at the positive aspect of the ritual suicide of Elesin. He criticises even the Western critics for classifying such tradition as barbaric. In his argument, 'Soyinka makes it very clear that it is up to the community to judge or redefine its cultural values, it is not a matter for outsiders to declare cultural practice as barbaric or savage.'¹⁵⁰

Challenging the views of Adekoya and Breitinger, I agree with Katrak, Jeyifo, Osundare, and Falola that Soyinka in this play does not glorify the practice of human sacrifice, neither is he writing a polemic aimed at securing the continuation of ritual suicide in Yoruba society; rather, he is questioning and criticising this tradition. In line with the arguments of these critics, as I will show, and a close reading of this play, I shall demonstrate how Soyinka criticises and rejects this system of ritual suicide by, first, analysing his portrait of the laggard will and procrastination of Elesin Oba to kill himself, and second, by evaluating Olunde's death as an act that symbolises an end to the tradition of ritual suicide. These two points will open

¹⁴⁶ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 62

¹⁴⁷ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 58

¹⁴⁸ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 60

¹⁴⁹ Eckhard Breitinger, 'Wole Soyinka: Death and the King's Horseman', p. 30

¹⁵⁰ Eckhard Breitinger, p. 28

up other structural and literary strategies employed by Soyinka in the criticism of ritual suicide as a discourse of Afrocentrism.

The character portrait of Elesin Oba who puts self and life over and above the communal and traditional belief of ritual suicide is Soyinka's way of condemning this 'tradition of death.' As tradition demands, the community is to respect and honour him with all his needs. As it is his last day, he cannot be denied anything he demands. Elesin asks for the best of food, clothes, and even a beautiful bride. He receives the sweetness of a beautiful young girl who is already betrothed to Iyaloja's son, expensive and gorgeous costumes, and the celebration and praise of a king. The women in the market decorate him with rich and colourful clothes like 'damask, *alari*- a rich, woven cloth, brightly coloured, *Sanyan*- a richly valued woven cloth, and cloth of indigo.'¹⁵¹ Such gestures and gifts are given to the emissary of the other world, to honour him and glorify his final journey. These gifts and pleasure increased his zest for life and he sees the futility of performing ritual suicide to accompany the dead king. It is at the prison that he confesses his love for life to Iyaloja:

I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift ...¹⁵²

Elesin's statement does seem to show that what hindered him from carrying out his expected duty is not the interruption of the white man but his love for life. His willingness to die fades away after his moment of pleasure with the bride and the enormous gifts he receives.

When the drums summon Elesin to commit suicide at midnight before his arrest, Elesin, whose basic instinct for survival outweighs his love for the tradition of ritual suicide, complains to his people: 'I cannot tell where is that gateway through which I must pass.'¹⁵³ Elesin's

¹⁵¹ *Death and the king's Horseman*, p. 16-17

¹⁵² *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 65

¹⁵³ *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 41

complaint is an open show of rejection and unwillingness to perform the ritual suicide. ‘‘Elesin Obas’’, according to Yoruba tradition, are prepared for this ritual death since their young age. For Elesin to suggest ‘he does not know the gateway or means to kill himself’, signifies his rejection of such tradition. For, as Iyaloja tells Pilkings, ‘he knows the meaning of a king’s passage; he was not born yesterday.’¹⁵⁴ As Elesin, he is aware of the numerous ways to which he could have quietly killed himself to accompany the dead king. In Adekoya’s opinion, ‘he could have taken a poison from his pouch in the privacy of his room.’¹⁵⁵ Instead, he indirectly calls for the intrusion of Pilkings by making an elaborate and public show of his departure which leads to his arrest.

Fully aware that Elesin’s public display is proof of his unwillingness to go, Praise-Singer, one of the major characters of the play through whom Soyinka shows his brilliant lyrical dramatic language, relays the king’s message:

If you cannot come Elesin, tell my dog.
I cannot stay the keeper too long
At the gate.¹⁵⁶

But Elesin tactfully refuses to either take the cue or give a direct reply, and instead hides under the smokescreen that:

Elesin Alafin
Trusts no beasts with messages between
A king and his companion.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 71

¹⁵⁵ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 74

¹⁵⁶ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p.42

¹⁵⁷ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 43

Elesin is not a man who believes in the tradition of ritual suicide. He is ‘a man of enormous vitality who speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions.’¹⁵⁸

Adekoya argues that ‘Elesin’s refusal to perform ritual suicide is an abandonment of his community for another.’¹⁵⁹ I strongly disagree: Elesin’s refusal to carry out his supposed duty of ritual suicide only shows his rejection of the tradition of ritual suicide and not of the entire traditional belief systems of Yoruba. To show his passion for his community, he speaks in proverb:

A hive

Is never known to wander. An anthill

Does not desert its roots.¹⁶⁰

From Elesin’s statement, it is clear that Soyinka is not writing against or rejecting the entire Yoruba tradition. Rather, he seems to be criticising and challenging the tradition of ritual suicide, arguing as Jane, Pilkings’s wife, puts it that, ‘life should never be thrown deliberately away’ to fulfil traditional demands.¹⁶¹

From the outset, Elesin gives expression of his unwillingness to leave the world that he has come to love so dearly, which the Yoruba metaphorically represent as a market. As he obliquely puts it, ‘The market is the long-suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go.’¹⁶² ‘Market’, according to Yoruba tradition, ‘is a symbolic representation of the world itself.’¹⁶³ The Yoruba epigram captures this more clearly: ‘the world is a market; heaven is home.’¹⁶⁴ To show his love for the world and his refusal to die, Elesin says again:

¹⁵⁸ Biodun Jeyifo, ‘Tragedy, History and Ideology’, p. 98

¹⁵⁹ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 60

¹⁶⁰ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 17-18

¹⁶¹ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 42

¹⁶² *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p.9

¹⁶³ Adeleke Adeeko, ‘*Death and the King’s Horseman*- Wole Soyinka’, p. 32

¹⁶⁴ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 32

‘This market [life/world] is my roost.’ He however avers that ‘in the market, nothing [ever] cloys.’¹⁶⁵ The essential force that confronts Elesin is neither the intervention of Pilkings nor the distraction caused by a marriage contracted at the eleventh hour, but the withering of will. His unwillingness to continue such a practice is evidence of Soyinka’s critical position. Grief-stricken at his son’s courageous embrace of ‘the death of death’ to borrow Iyaloja’s words, something Adekoya argues ‘he terribly fears and shies away from’, Elesin kills himself with the chain that has kept him captive.¹⁶⁶ His death comes too late and thus fails to accomplish the objective for which it is supposed. His suicide is therefore not a ritual suicide to fulfil tradition, but a way of escape from the humiliations and insults of his people. The conversation between Elesin and Iyaloja captures this:

Iyaloja: You have betrayed us. We fed your sweetmeats such as we hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said No, I must eat the world’s left-over... You said No, I shall step in the vomit of cats and the droppings of mice;

Elesin: Enough Iyaloja, enough.

Iyaloja: We called you leader and oh, how you led us on.

Elesin: Enough, enough. My shame is heavy enough.¹⁶⁷

Soyinka employs this character portrait to challenge the continuity of purpose of such a practice and to critique what some critics like Adekoya argue is ‘the ethical value of the Yoruba world and existence.’¹⁶⁸ I shall next analyse Olunde’s death as a symbolic criticism of the tradition of ritual suicide.

¹⁶⁵ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 40

¹⁶⁶ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 70

¹⁶⁷ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 68

¹⁶⁸ Olusegun Adekoya, p. 57

Although Marxist critics consider Olunde's suicide 'a sheer waste of scarce resources, a narcissism which seems to reinforce a decadent order, a negation of the revolutionary ethos, and an exemplification of 'fatalism'' to what Femi Osafisan calls 'human progress', Olunde's suicide in my reading of Soyinka's masterpiece carries symbolic meanings.¹⁶⁹ It will be analysed as a solution to the continued practice of ritual suicide, and not an empty gesture as the Marxist school of Biodun Jeyifo sees it. Olunde's death is symbolic in the sense that, through it, I argue, Yoruba has lost a ritual practice from this world, because ultimately both the horseman and his heir die within minutes of each other. If we return to the opening section of this chapter where I discussed the nature of the custom of ritual suicide, I made it clear that the position of the Elesin Oba, who is expected by tradition to commit suicide as a rite of passage of a dead king, is an inherited position, a position passed from father to son from generation to generation. Olakunle George captures this: 'Elesin's calling is hereditary, tied to lineage: his father occupied the social position he currently occupies, and, all things being equal, his heir will do likewise, thereby ensuring the continuity of Oyo tradition and social-spiritual harmony.'¹⁷⁰ Olunde commits suicide without having a son to succeed him to continue the family duty as the king's horseman. For this reason, I argue that the tradition of the king's horseman, a hereditary position for the purpose of ritual suicide is broken and terminated completely. By presenting Olunde committing suicide without having a successor, Soyinka seems to break and destroy the age-old tradition of ritual suicide. "A culture that is not lived or sustained, like a language that is not used, dies." This seems to be the logic behind Olunde's character portrait.

¹⁶⁹ Biodun Jeyifo, p. 50

¹⁷⁰ George Olakunle, *Cultural Criticism in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 72

Even when Adekoya and other like-minded critics argue that Olunde's suicide is effective in sustaining the Yoruba tradition of ritual suicide, I disagree with such a position. In my opinion, Olunde's death is ineffective and meaningless to the tradition of ritual suicide. His suicide that could be interpreted as a desperate action to forestall the honour of their household flying out of the door and redeem his father's image, is a futile exercise because the role is not yet properly his. As Jeyifo argues, 'he has not been ritually prepared for the sacrifice' and he has not wined and dined with the king and therefore cannot be expected by tradition to perform such a sacrifice.¹⁷¹ This point becomes clear when one considers Iyaloja's statement that it is 'only the Elesin [who] dies the death of death.'¹⁷² Since at the time of Olunde's death he is not the Elesin Oba, his suicide becomes meaningless to the Yoruba tradition. To reiterate, Soyinka allows Olunde to commit suicide to show an end to the generational transfer of the position of the Elesin Oba which symbolises an end to the practice of ritual suicide in Nigeria. If this is not Soyinka's aim, the playwright would have insisted Olunde lives to carry on the role of his father and thereby advocate the continuation of such a repugnant tradition; secondly, he would have portrayed Olunde endeavouring to convince his unwilling father of the 'rightness' to accompany the king to the great beyond; or, thirdly, to strangle his father to death to fulfil tradition. My third suggestion is derived from the observation of the well-known Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson, who 'notes that at one time when reluctance on the part of chiefs who are expected to accompany a dead Alaafin became a burden to the society, members of the offending official lineage by tradition would rather strangle him than suffer the stain of ignominy.'¹⁷³ Instead of strictly imitating the lines of the historical developments of the event in 1946 by allowing Olunde perform any of the three mentioned roles as tradition would suggest, Soyinka's play alters historical facts by presenting Olunde differently to criticise the

¹⁷¹ Biodun Jeyifo, p. 66

¹⁷² *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 43

¹⁷³ Samuel Johnson, p. 57

practice of ritual suicide in Yoruba. As his prefatory note informs us: ‘The changes I have made are in matters of detail, sequence and of course characterisation. The action has also been set back two or three years to while the war [world War II] was still on, for minor reasons of dramaturgy.’¹⁷⁴ Olunde’s death is not only symbolic in the destruction of the tradition of ritual suicide but a violation of the Yoruba circle of being. Even though Olunde’s character plays a relatively small part in the play, he obtains great significance for this study. As a man with a strong sense of loyalty to his tradition and unconditional respect for the custom of his people, he is killed by Soyinka to symbolise an end to any act of loyalty to, and respect for this tradition in Nigeria.

Soyinka deliberately uses the death scene of Olunde to challenge tradition. For, according to Ketu Katrak, ‘Soyinka does not glorify the practice of human sacrifice... He is criticising this tradition, indirectly.’¹⁷⁵ Since to understand Soyinka’s writings one must constantly work from the secondary or connotative meaning, the usual trend of most African critics like Adekoya to identify *Death and the King’s Horseman* as a defence of the Yoruba culture is thus problematic. Having carefully established the fact that Soyinka in *Death and the King’s Horseman* indirectly criticises the tradition of ritual suicide through the death of Olunde and the laggard will of Elesin Oba, my next focus is to analyse his use of proverb as a means of critiquing the act of ritual suicide.

Proverb as a creative tool plays a significant role in the playwright’s construction and representation of the reality of his society while envisioning a better one. According to Bernth Lindfors,

the Yoruba have a saying that ‘proverbs are the horses of speech; if communication is lost, we use proverbs to find it’ ... The Yorubas ... command a whole stable of gnomic horses and groom them to serve a variety

¹⁷⁴ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 6

¹⁷⁵ Ketu Katrak, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy*, p. 82

of rhetorical purposes. They can be employed not only to retrieve communication gone astray but to speed it up, slow it down, convey weighty messages, deliver light-hearted jests, sharpen arguments, blunt criticism, clarify difficult ideas and disguise simple ones beyond easy recognition.¹⁷⁶

And for the writer, unless he is ‘an expert wrangler with words,’ this technique, as a speech horse, may gallop away in the direction not intended by him.¹⁷⁷ But Soyinka ‘has displayed so much agility in manipulating traditional verbal formulae’ that he has got ‘more literary mileage out of African oral art than any other writer on the continent.’¹⁷⁸ Proverbs are significantly used in Soyinka’s plays to ‘aid communication; for characterization; lend local colour to the plays; and perform a theatrical function.’¹⁷⁹ As Achebe puts it in *Things Fall Apart*, ‘... proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.’¹⁸⁰ They are employed to reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflicts and to focus on the values of the society being portrayed by the writer. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, almost every character at some point uses traditional Yoruba proverbs. They use proverbs to either strengthen their belief in tradition practice or challenge repugnant aspects of a tradition. To analyse this characteristic of Soyinka’s work, I shall begin by examining the character of the Praise-Singer.

In the play, the Praise-Singer’s speech is represented in proverbs. To illustrate this, I consider his remark to Elesin for taking a new bride and abandoning his duty:

Elesin o! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel gives to keep with such haste that he leave his tail behind ...

Because the man approaches a brand-new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Bernth Lindfors, ‘Wole Soyinka and the Horses of Speech’, p. 27

¹⁷⁷ Bernth Lindfors, p. 29

¹⁷⁸ Dubem Okafor, *Cycle of Doom: Selected Essays in Discourse and Society*, p. 122

¹⁷⁹ Bernth Lindfors, p. 32

¹⁸⁰ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 7

¹⁸¹ *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. 15

The character of the praise-Singer represents Yoruba tradition. He continuously rebukes Elesin for the destruction and interruption of Yoruba tradition. He shows his anger to Elesin through proverbs again:

Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it
plunged over the edge of the bitter precipice.¹⁸²

Similarly, Iyaloja, another central character, laments in proverbs, Elesin's earthly attachments and refusal to perform the ritual upon which the good of the society depends:

I first must turn up this cricket hole with my toes. We said your was the doorway at which we first spy the tapper when he comes down from the tree, yours was the blessing of the twilight wine, the purl that brings night spirits out of doors to steal their portion before the light of day. We said yours was the body of wine whose burden shakes the tapper like a sudden gust of his perch. You said, No, I am content to lick the dregs from each calabash when the drinkers are done.¹⁸³

Iyaloja, like the Praise-Singers, advocates through the use of proverbs, a continuation of the practice of ritual suicide and rejects Elesin's love for life and rejection of ritual death in tradition. There are many examples in the play where Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer use proverbs to promote tradition and condemn any challenge to tradition.

While the proverbs of Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer promote the practice of a vile cultural practice, Elesin's use of proverbs will be considered as Soyinka's expression of his unique outlook of life and condemnation of the tradition of ritual suicide. As evidence of his refusal to perform ritual suicide, Elesin, in a conversation with the Praise-Singer who had hitherto continually criticised his decision, says to him in proverbs:

Enough, enough...
... if you say this earth
Is still the same as gave birth to those songs,

¹⁸² *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 12

¹⁸³ *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 68

Tell me who was that goddess through whose lips

I saw the ivory pebbles of Oya's river-bed.

...

Not even Ogun with the finest hoe...¹⁸⁴

Elesin in the above statement uses proverbs to question the tradition of his people. Through this proverbial dimension, he also challenges the Yoruba god [*Ogun*] whom he believes has lost his value and respect. For this reason, he is unwilling to perform his duty to appease *Ogun*. He takes charge of his life and 'not even *Ogun*' can dictate to him what to do with his life. Elesin's proverbial challenge to tradition and the gods is condemned by Iyaloja who says to him:

I must tell your brother chiefs when I return how bravely you waged war against [*Ogun*]. Especially with words.¹⁸⁵

Evaluating Elesin's use of proverbs, I argue, the playwright has deliberately manipulated Yoruba proverbs, an African oral resource, to reflect his advocacy of modernity and his rejection of the age-old custom of ritual suicide. Proverbs in this play, criticize a vile tradition which according to Emmanuel Obiechina 'gives authenticity to the writing of Soyinka.'¹⁸⁶ Soyinka weaves it 'so intricately into the fabric of dramatic action that they become a vital part of the artistic design' and the creative intention of the play.¹⁸⁷ This in my opinion is what makes him a great African writer. Like *Death and the King's Horseman*, another literary work that captures and criticises the tradition of ritual suicide is Duro Ladipo's *Oba Waja*, or 'The King Is Dead'.

¹⁸⁴ *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 19

¹⁸⁵ *Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 67

¹⁸⁶ Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and the West African Novel*, p. 30

¹⁸⁷ Bernth Lindfors, p. 31

Duro Ladipo is one of the most prominent of twentieth-century Yoruba playwrights and actors. Born on 18 December 1926 in Oshogbo, South West Nigeria, ‘Ladipo was believed to be an abiku, the born-to-die child, believed by the Yoruba people to dwell in a separate spiritual realm from that of the living, where they live a parallel existence and make pacts with their mates to return by birth to the same parents several times until they either change or become tied down to the world of the living by spiritual means, in accordance with the Yoruba belief system.’¹⁸⁸ The name given to him by his mother revealed a lot about the mystery of his birth, childhood and the feelings of his parents in not wanting their child to die prematurely. ‘Duro’ literally means ‘stay, wait, remain, do not depart or do not go’ in Yoruba. His name thus represents an entreaty by his parents for him to stay. Adhering to the plea of his parents, Ladipo ‘stayed’ and grew up to become ‘a pioneer exponent of plays scripted in the indigenous African language of Yoruba.’¹⁸⁹ Since his birth and childhood are weaved around the Yoruba tradition and myth, Ladipo grew up with a keen interest to study and investigate the Yoruba tradition. No doubt, his literary works are strongly influenced by the Yoruba belief system. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he is thus critical of Yoruba cosmology, spirituality, belief and tradition. The most significant of his works are his three major plays: *Oba Moro* (1962), *Oba Koso* (1963) and *Oba Waja* (1964). The literary components of these plays takes one on a journey into understanding the aesthetics, expressions and culture of Yoruba. The plays explore the social, political and spiritual dynamics of Yoruba from an historical context, while strongly criticizing egregious practices inherent in aspects of Yoruba culture. Among Ladipo’s trilogy, the most significant play that engages with the core idea of this chapter is *Oba Waja*.

¹⁸⁸ Oluseyi Ogunjobi, ‘The Visual Language of Duro Ladipo’s Theatre in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*’, p. 15

¹⁸⁹ Ulli Beier, *Three Yoruba Plays: Oba Koso, Oba Waja, Oba Moro by Duro Ladipo*, p. 30

Like *Death and the King's Horseman, Oba Waja*, a very short play, is also about the event which occurred in Oyo in 1946. The play begins in the bedroom of the District Officer, from where he and his wife, Jane, are watching the dead Alaafin's (king's) funeral procession. Drummers and dancers are visible in the moonlight and elders and women taking part in the procession are chanting dirges, mourning and celebrating the transition of their king. The market women chant praises of Olori Elesin, who, according to tradition, will be escorting the dead king on his journey to the land of their ancestors. As the procession intensifies, the District Officer, accompanied by policemen, enters, stops the proceedings and orders the arrest of Elesin. The third act is set in Elesin's house where the people of Oyo come to express their disappointment in him for obeying the orders of the District Officer. They curse him and walk out in anger. The insults continue in the background until the Alaafin's ghost enters to also express his disappointment in the Elesin. In the fourth act, Dawudu, Olori Elesin's son, becomes aware of the Alaafin's death in a 'highlife' bar in Ghana and prepares to return home to bury his father who must, according to tradition also die in order to accompany the king to the abode of the dead. In the last act, Dawudu returns home from Ghana for his father's burial, thinking he was dead. Elesin's household is happy to see him. But when Elesin enters the scene, Dawudu screams at the horror of finding his father alive, wondering whether the king was not truly dead. While Elesin tries to have a conversation with Dawudu, Dawudu in complete shock and disappointment in his father for not keeping with tradition, stabs himself to death. Like Soyinka's Elesin, Ladipo's Elesin laments the death of his son and appeals for his people's understanding and pity. In the climax of the play, filled with sorrow, Elesin commits suicide; but his suicide comes too late to save his son.

As Soyinka admitted to having changed the original historic story which informs his play, as mentioned above, Ladipo in his play also changed some historical details to critically challenge the tradition of ritual suicide. Oluseyi Ogunjobi captures this:

In accordance to the original story Ladipo received from Beier, the actual Olori Elesin remained alive, but in Ladipo's *Oba Waja*, he kept fairly closely to the facts, except that he makes the Olori Elesin kill himself in the end.¹⁹⁰

Such a deliberate twist to the original story shows the writer's intention to end the family circle of the Elesin which invariably means an end to the practice of ritual suicide. Elesin's son, Dawudu, kills himself and the Elesin, as a result of shame, also kills himself. Both the Elesin and his heir, who is supposed to take on the role of his father, die and this symbolises a deliberate abruption to the tradition of ritual suicide. If Ladipo had preserved Elesin's life, there could perhaps be a possibility of the Elesin having a son thereafter who would continue the family ritual responsibility. His death is thus an end to the cycle of ritual suicide. By making Olori Elesin kill himself, Ladipo achieves what Soyinka, in my interpretation of his figurative killing of Olunde, achieves.

Despite its 'great lyrical beauty', Beier argues that *Oba Waja* 'lacks the subtleties and ironies of the *King's Horseman*', Soyinka's version of the story.¹⁹¹ I will argue, however, that *Oba Waja* captures some finely structured techniques which help Ladipo press home his message to his readers and audience. One such technique is what Foluke Ogunleye calls the play's 'festival structure.'

According to Ogunleye,

One technique that runs through most of Ladipo's plays is the festival structure. The plays always open on a festive note - dancing and singing.

¹⁹⁰ Oluseyi Ogunjobi, p. 20

¹⁹¹ Ulli Beier, p. 35

There is a general mood of celebration in which everyone is involved. This is reminiscent of the traditional African festival.¹⁹²

As evident during the ceremonial ritual-suicide performance of the Elesin in Yorubaland, there are many instances where devotees and traditional adherents sing, dance and pay homage to the ‘god’ of the land. The ‘festival structure’ is crucial to Ladipo’s critique of the tradition of ritual suicide. In substantiating the use of this technique, Ogunleye explains:

This technique is utilized to induce audiences’ [readers’] participation as obtains in live festival performances. This festival atmosphere is fostered through the use of poetic chants in praise of gods... Through such chants, the audience (readers) ... are impressed or repulsed by such festive ritual, depending on what the ultimate goal of the dramatist may be.¹⁹³

Since the ultimate goal of Ladipo, as I shall discuss, is to challenge the tradition and ceremony of ritual suicide, Ladipo incorporates this ‘festival structure’ of dance, songs and chants in his play through the key character of ‘Chorus’ to induce his readers participation in such a cultural performance, expose such a tradition and demonstrate his repulsion of a tradition that requires the ‘life’ of an individual for the burial of a king.

The ‘chorus’ in this play is a group of characters who represent the tragedy of such a tradition in songs and chants. In the first act of the play, the ‘chorus’ responds to the ‘Elders’ who announce the death of the king thus:

Yeeeeee!
The king has gone
...
The funeral gongs
Make us tremble with fear.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Foluke Ogunleye, ‘Preserving Culture through new Artistic Forms: The Case of Duro Ladipo’s Folkloric Theatre’, p. 65

¹⁹³ Foluke Ogunleye, p. 67

¹⁹⁴ *Oba Waja*, p. 74

The chant by the 'chorus' evokes the true impact of such a tradition in society, a tradition that makes one tremble in fear, for yet another man must be lowered into the ground with the dead king. Through such chanting, Ladipo reveals the need to challenge such a practice that evokes fear in society. Situating *Oba Waja* as an Afrocentric text that challenges the tradition of ritual suicide, I shall next analyse briefly the character of Olori Elesin.

Ladipo's intention to challenge ritual suicide is established by the character of Olori Elesin. The play opens with Olori Elesin's willingness to perform ritual suicide as demanded of him by tradition. Before the interruption of the District Officer, Olori Elesin shows his commitment to carrying out his duty. He boasts of his determination to accompany the dead king:

Today I shall accompany my king across the river

No gate-keeper shall bar his way

...

Today I shall fly to heaven like the fruit pidgeon.

Today I shall leave you to walk the ground like the hornbill.¹⁹⁵

Olori Elesin's expression suggests his willingness, zeal and determination to perform his traditional duty. His position is in opposition to Soyinka's Elesin, who tactically refuses to perform the expected ritual suicide. However, despite portraying Olori Elesin as a willing character who is passionate about the tradition of the land, Ladipo, in the last act of the play, presents a new Olori Elesin with a different orientation, belief and opinion. While in prison, Olori Elesin encounters a new self and his perception of ritual suicide changes. When re-united with Dawudu, his son, Olori Elesin, full of happiness, tells Dawudu:

Olori Elesin: Welcome my son, Dawudu,

Welcome back from Ghana!

¹⁹⁵ *Oba Waja*, p. 79

Dawudu: Why are you alive,

Is the Alafin not dead?

Olori Elesin: The white man brought us a new law

A law that will not allow you to lose your father.

Let us thank God then, that we can still see each other.¹⁹⁶

This conversation between Olori Elesin and Dawudu depicts the rebirth of Olori Elesin. He is transformed from a man who supports the tradition of ritual suicide to a man who believes that life is sacred and that no tradition should make a man commit suicide. Even when Dawudu in anger responds to him thus: ‘Shame, shame on you my father, shame,’ Olori Elesin continues to show his rejection of ritual suicide. He puts it thus to Dawudu:

My son, my son,

The times have changed.

Then let us thank our God

That we still see each other.¹⁹⁷

Olori Elesin is a man who believes in change. Unlike Dawudu, the women and the people of Oyo, he advocates the need to review traditional practices. His rejection of his tradition shows that no traditional practice is beyond re-evaluation and change. Through the character portrait of Olori Elesin, Ladipo is able to project a clear message to his readers and to the Nigerian people: one of the need for change. Ladipo’s critique of ritual suicide is not only represented by his portrait of Olori Elesin. His use of metaphor, which I shall next examine, identifies his rejection of such a practice.

¹⁹⁶ *Oba Waja*, p. 85

¹⁹⁷ *Oba Waja*, p. 85

One clear metaphoric description in the play that captures Ladipo's criticism of ritual suicide is that of the elephant. In the play, Ladipo compares the tradition of ritual suicide to an elephant. In the second act when Olori Elesin still believes and supports this tradition, he makes bold this statement:

Who can obstruct the elephant?
He is not an ordinary animal
That could be beheaded with a matchet.
He is not an ordinary animal
That can be trapped by the hunter.
If thick creepers try to obstruct his road,
The elephant and the creepers will go together.¹⁹⁸

The elephant in the above statement is a metaphor for the tradition of ritual suicide: a tradition that maintains a powerful grip on society in Yorubaland. Borrowing Olori Elesin's figurative expression, it is a tradition that cannot 'be beheaded with a matchet.' Unlike other minor traditions, this tradition, which many argue is the essence of the Yoruba spiritual world, is a great force. With the stature like an elephant in the Yoruba kingdom, it intimidates anyone who dares to challenge it. This representation of the tradition of ritual suicide as an elephant suggests how seriously this tradition must be taken in Nigeria.

Not only is the elephant a figurative expression of the severity and seriousness of the tradition of ritual suicide, Ladipo also employs the figurative elephant to show his criticism and the defeat of the tradition of ritual suicide. I return to Olori Elesin's statement in the last act to demonstrate this point. Olori Elesin, who advocates change, tells his people:

The elephant has been beheaded like a common hyena,
The elephant has been trapped like a common antelope.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ *Oba Waja*, p. 78

¹⁹⁹ *Oba Waja*, p. 81

The crushing of the elephant represents the defeat of the tradition of ritual suicide. The elephant has been crushed like an antelope. What this suggests is that any outmoded and repellent traditional practice, no matter how deeply rooted it may be, can be challenged and over-turned. Ladipo's device reminds me of what Soyinka says in an interview, that 'If we cannot hang such [tradition] from the nearest lamp post, I can hang them on stage.'²⁰⁰ Ladipo has not only shown that he can hang such tradition on stage for his audience; but that, through his careful choice of words, he can hang such tradition in print for his readers.

Having analysed *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Oba Waja*, I argue that both plays have contributed to the shifting attitudes towards the practice of ritual suicide in Nigeria. As I earlier indicated in the opening section of this chapter that, while the tradition of the *Oro* festival, a ceremony where humans are captured to be buried with the deceased king continues to grow, the act of ritual suicide, a practice whereby the deceased king's chief-servant is expected to kill himself at the burial of the king, has witnessed a considerable decline in Nigerian society. Daniel Izevbaye captures this when he argues that in present Nigeria, 'all the men [Elesins] now refuse to die and they are never forced to do so.'²⁰¹ Izevbaye's statement thus suggests that the act of ritual suicide has been abandoned. However, this is not to say that there are no such unrecorded or unheard cases of such practice in some rural villages in Yorubaland. For, according to S.B. Amusa, 'people still perform ritual suicide in many rural communities in Nigeria.'²⁰² Until the criticism and challenge of such traditional system reaches to the rural villages, Nigerian literary writers should continue the struggle against the practice of ritual suicide in Nigeria.

²⁰⁰ Wole Soyinka, 'Interview with BBC', August 6 2001, 15:51 GMT

²⁰¹ Daniel Izevbaye, p. 121

²⁰² S.B. Amusa, p. 10

Ulasi, Soyinka and Ladipo have shown through their works that they are Afrocentrists. The focus of their texts is not to only challenge the West but to criticise repugnant traditional practices which continue to affect the progress of Nigerians and the Nigerian state. While Ladipo's play investigates and questions the abhorrent aspects of the Yoruba cultural system, Soyinka as a social activist challenges any system of oppression within Nigeria. As the conscience and voice of the oppressed, he challenges discriminatory traditional practices, while uplifting ennobling cultural systems. Ulasi, although neglected by critics, has shown her passion in challenging cultural practices like the *Oro* festival that affect Nigerians, thus qualifying her as an Afrocentrist; one who does not only look outward at Africa's problems, but one who takes a deeper look inside Africa.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to carry out an elaborate re-reading of the Afrocentric theory in selected Nigerian literature, demonstrating the need to redefine and extend the Afrocentric paradigm as a discourse that challenges both external and, importantly, *internal* forces of oppression in Africa. By stressing the importance of critiquing these internal forces, three case studies were identified: i) discrimination against women, ii) the Osu caste system, and iii) the tradition of ritual suicide and the *Oro* festival. These case studies presented glaring cases of social inequalities, dehumanisation and victimisation in Nigerian society. Through the literary works of Chinua Achebe, Adaora Ulasi, Flora Nwapa, Wole Soyinka and Duro Ladipio, this study buttressed the need to critically expose these repugnant practices. It has examined how these writers are conducting an internal critique of Nigerian cultural practices and traditions. One vital point which this study maintains is that a writer is not merely considered Afrocentric because they challenge Europe and the system of colonialism in Africa but because they condemn their people's obnoxious cultural practices which militate against the development and progress of the African people. Afrocentric discourse for these writers is thus not only an 'outward' investigation but an 'inward' critique of negative African traditions.

The introduction posed the following research questions to be addressed in this thesis:

- I) If the goal of Afrocentrism for the early Afrocentrists was to break what they saw as a vicious cycle of racist oppressive practices, what should be the focus of Afrocentric theory for contemporary Afrocentrists in the twenty-first century? Should they continue to conceptualise Afrocentrism as a historical response to years of colonial oppression or a challenge to oppressive systems inherent in African traditions?

- II) To what extent should the Afrocentric theory protect and promote African traditional practices? In what ways does a critique of Nigerian traditional cultures and practices undermine the external critique embedded within Afrocentrism?
- III) How have contemporary Nigerian writers improved/hindered what should be the new focus of the Afrocentric enterprise?

For the first question, through the case studies covered, this thesis has demonstrated that the Afrocentric paradigm should critically challenge discriminatory African practices, if the focus of the Afrocentric theory is to eradicate systems of oppression in Africa. While there are certain local practices that continue to oppress, marginalise and displace Africans, I argue in this thesis that the crux of Afrocentric discourse in contemporary Africa should be directed towards the challenge of such obscene traditional systems, rather than simply a critique of Europe in an era when Africa is liberated from direct European rule and dominance. Perpetuating an interpretation of Afrocentrism as simply an anti-Eurocentric theory would render Afrocentric discipline as a theory that cannot effectively meet the demands of Africans in the twenty-first century.

For the second point, as traced through the literatures of the selected writers, the essence of the Afrocentric principle is to promote ennobling African cultures while critiquing any practices which oppress. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, Achebe argued that his intention is to correct the wrong traditional practices in the society and preserve the good. He achieved this by promoting in his novels the Igbo tradition of communalism, festivals, and the worship of gods, but at the same time clearly condemns the injustice and wrongs towards the Osu and other negative practices inherent in Igbo culture. Soyinka, a firm believer in the Yoruba tradition, and a balanced Afrocentric critic, condemns repulsive systems in this tradition. From the selected literary works for this study, this thesis argued that the objective of Afrocentrism and African literature should be to oppose any aspect of tradition that harms the individual or

affects the community in general, while promoting ennobling African systems. This thesis observed that the increase in local practices that do oppress in twenty-first century Africa is a result of the failure of African scholars to critically condemn these negative aspects of African culture. Most African critics, as observed in this study, are adherents of African culture. This accounts for the reason why instead of condemning oppressive traditional practices, their works are calculated attempt to protect and preserve the African culture whether ennobling or repugnant.

Contemporary Nigerian writers have no doubt hindered what this thesis considers as to be the contemporary focus of the Afrocentric paradigm. In the introductory section of this thesis, I made clear the case that twenty-first century Nigerian literary writers have abandoned the challenge to execrable African traditional practices. They have refused to look back into African cultures to find ‘where the rain began to beat us’. Their literary focus is to criticise the wrongs of external practices upon Africa while preserving Africa’s insidious traditions. Rather than challenging traditional practices that have outlived its relevance, they focus on politics for the sake of economic gain. This explains why I have not chosen a literary work from the twenty-first century for this study. By refusing to address and criticize these themes in their literary works, contemporary Nigerian writers have, no doubt, hindered the strategic aim and purpose of Afrocentric theory in the twenty-first century.

The essence of this project has sought to revive the possibility of reading Afrocentrism as an internal challenge to African systems of oppression. Giving the rise of such oppressive practices, there is a need for African literature of the contemporary age to criticise such practices, since literature can be a powerful tool for change. Each of the chosen literary works for this study has demonstrated a sustained concern to project Afrocentrism as not just an external critique but an internal critique of Africa. The reading of Uiasi’s novel has brought to light the compelling traditional practice of the *Oro* festival, thus advocating the need to abolish

such practices in modern Nigeria. Both Soyinka and Ladipo's plays have carefully criticised the internal practice of ritual suicide in the country. While Nwapa's first and second novels challenge the system of patriarchy and the subjugation and oppression of women in Nigeria, Achebe's novels take on a different internal oppressive system: the Osu caste system. The literatures of these writers have shown that there are practices within the African tradition that need to be challenged and corrected. They have demonstrated that the challenges facing Africa lie within Africa and not only without. These writers have used their novels and plays to communicate experiences, fight unjust systems, and above all, advocate the creation of a new Nigeria, where the interests of Nigerians supersede traditional demands.

The complexity of repellent African traditional practices in the twenty-first century is something that needs to be further investigated, challenged and criticised. While this project has sought to expose three such systems being practiced in two ethnic groups in Nigeria, Yoruba and Igbo, it is evident that Nigeria, a country with more than three hundred ethnic groups, needs further investigation. Such problems affect other parts of the continent. For example, the caste system is not limited to Nigeria; it is also practiced in, for instance, Mali, Senegal, Ghana, Guinea, Gambia, Cameroon, Algeria, Chad, Bukina Faso, Mauritania, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia amongst others. Just as the Osu caste system is peculiar to Nigeria, the 'Fula' caste group is a caste division in Mali. In Senegal, there is the 'Wolof' caste system. In North Africa, there is the popular 'Tuareg social stratification'. The Afrocentric paradigm should be extended to these countries to critically expose and challenge this system of discrimination. As this study critically analysed Nigerian traditional practices, so do other African critics need to continue to research cultural practices elsewhere in Africa, with the aim of bringing to light and challenging any internal system that oppresses Africans. By this, the Afrocentric enterprise of liberating Africans from systems of oppression might be achieved.

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