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Ifeoma Chinwuba's *African Romance* as a Dialogic Discourse on Gender Complementarity

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Abstract
For many Nigerians, the term "feminism" has, unfortunately, come to be misinterpreted as an anti-male, anti-culture, anti-marriage, and anti-religion movement. This misconception is largely influenced by certain strands of Western gender and feminist advocacy that are incongruous with African cultural experiences. While pro-feminist scholars continue to draw attention to the various forms of denigration and stereotyping of women, it is imperative to employ literature as a medium to articulate versions of feminist thought and advocacy that align with African history and culture. Ifeoma Chinwuba's *African Romance*, a choreo-poem, is purposively selected for this study because it embodies an Afrocentric feminist consciousness yet has received inadequate critical attention. This analysis adopts a close reading of the text, employing Catherine Acholonu's concept of motherism to highlight the poet's use of poetry as a dialogic discourse to offer solutions to gender-based and marital conflicts. Mallama's verbal exchanges with Maigida, Townspeople, and Career Mistress reveal an Afrocentric ideology that is accommodationist, pro-patriarchy and devoid of the dogmatism and aggressiveness often associated with some strands of Western feminism. Her motherist consciousness is evident in her critique of characters who perpetuate harmful traditions that undermine womanhood. The study contributes to the understanding of how writers like Chinwuba employ literature to articulate the objectives of feminist advocacy within the African context. While rejecting male chauvinism and narcissism, the discourse foregrounds values such as gender complementarity, gender equity, motherhood, womanhood, family and marriage as essential ingredients that shape Afrocentric feminist thought and practice.

Keywords: Choreo-Poem, Afrocentric Feminist Consciousness, Motherism, Dialogic Discourse, Gender Complementarity

Introduction

African Romance earns the epithet "dramatic poem" or "choreo-poem", that is, it can be read as poetry or performed as drama. Among the few popular collections in this domain of a rare tradition that foregrounds the bond between genres of literature are Odia Ofeimun's *A Feast of Return* and *Under the African Skies* and Remi Raji's *Lovesong for My Wasteland*. Chinwuba's poem has not been given sufficient critical attention, in spite of its presentation of the practical application of gender theories within the African continent. Ezeigbo (1999) has noted that one of the strategies for expanding the African literary tradition is for critics to bring attention to the works of deserving women writers, thereby creating more spaces and multi-dimensional perspectives in gender discourses. In this dramatic poem, Chinwuba presents poetry as a multi-voiced, dialogic genre. The collection captures the tribulations of an African wife whose husband's philandering drives her into bouts of vituperation. The lamenting female voice employs satirical humour as a strategy for conveying her disillusionment, disappointment and displeasure over the sexual promiscuity of her husband and as therapy for overcoming the vulgarities of life. Her overall vision is to foreground equity, gender complementarity and marital harmony as the fulcrum of African feminism.

Gender Discourse in the African Literary Domain

Feminists believe that the stereotypical portrayal of female characters as paralysed, weak, inferior, emotional, submissive, timid, mute and objects of trade in the literature of male authors is a deliberate deconstruction of the original makeup of women (Etim, 2020; Da Silva, 2004). In her contributions to the gender discourse, Emenyi

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(2005) notes that "artistic works reveal the forces at work in the society and how they are arranged to maintain the status quo", which she captures as patriarchal hegemony (p. 28). Nevertheless, since the Enlightenment, with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), female writers and advocates have been urging women to break off the imposed psychological, social, cultural, political and economic limitations placed on them by men or other women who embrace unwholesome and heinous practices (Castle, 2007; Imam and Adekunle, 2016). In spite of its eclectic nature and various strands, feminism has gender equity as its major aim. Pro-feminist advocates believe that no one should be denied their fundamental human rights, such as the right to vote or be voted for, access to education, the ability to associate with groups of choice, the right to receive equal pay as others, and so on, because of their gender. To achieve this, feminism exposes patriarchal forms of power that are responsible for the unequal and subordinate status of women (Castle, 2007; Dobie, 2009). Unlike the female portraits found in male-authored literary texts, women played prominent roles in African oral tradition or literature. They were active not only as performers but also as producers, preservers, and transmitters of knowledge, especially in view of oral literature's pedagogical foundations and didactic or moral imperatives (Nnaemeka, 1994; Da Silva, 2004). Against the backdrop of this awareness of the roles of their forebears in time past, African feminist writers and their supporters who do not embrace the epithet "feminist" are committed to renouncing male definitions of women, deconstructing stereotypical portrayals of women, reconstructing women and their experiences and fighting against forms of oppression that women still suffer.

Whenever the subject of gender relations is brought up in many fora in Nigeria, it stirs up heated arguments between pro-feminists and the rest who detest the nomenclature "feminism". A simple observation of such debates quickly reveals a couple of things. First, for many Nigerians, the term "feminism" has incorrectly come to signify a movement that is anti-male, anti-culture, and anti-religion because some women import the toxic versions of some Western ideas of gender and feminist advocacy that are incongruous with the African culture and experiences, while others act on obvious knowledge gaps in this regard (Wariboko, 2018). This makes it appear as if "gender" or "feminism" are war terminologies between men and women. Second, each party appears impatient and scarcely listens to or understands the arguments of the other. Hence, while many of the reactions from anti-feminists reveal a high level of ignorance about feminism, its emendations and numerous strands, the counter-responses of pro-feminist activists or discussants reveal a tendency towards impressing or imposing their ideological stance on their opponents by all means. That women are victims of oppression and exclusion is not a question anymore but an undeniable fact because of the prevailing cultural and social practices such as child marriage, forced marriage, physical abuse, rape and sexual abuse, wife battering, lack of right to inheritance, leadership discrimination, marginalisation in education, pernicious rites of widowhood, dearth of employment opportunities for women, female genital mutilation, retention of a girl in her paternal family for procreation, and so on (Bamgbose, 2012). Scholars also believe that in Nigeria, women have not been given sufficient political opportunities (Mordi, 2022; Ogbenika, 2022). A proper understanding of the gender discourse regarding women's empowerment and "liberation" reveals their quest for equity, justice and fairness in all aspects of human endeavours.

While many academics and, perhaps, a few other learned Nigerians express a balanced understanding of the concept of mainstream feminism, its various emendations and its African alternatives, others outside institutions of higher learning do not understand these issues. For this reason, gender issues or feminist discourses are greeted with a lot of scepticism in domestic, political, cultural and religious circles. The tendency among many Nigerians to discard any comment or idea that smacks of feminism is not unrelated to the fact that anti-feminists latch on to the Western origin of the term to convince others that feminism embodies all the evils associated with colonialism, imperialism and attempts to dethrone the rich cultural heritage of Nigerians in particular and Africans in general. Such conspiracy theories easily appeal to Nigerians because of the impacts of the four hundred years of colonialism that still affect Africa culturally, economically and politically. It is, therefore, imperative to present important emendations of gender and feminist theory and advocacy through the reading of Chinwuba's *African Romance* and their proper applications to achieve balance, inclusion, equity and justice in the peculiar Nigerian society. A simple and straightforward critique of Chinwuba's poem will help shed more light on what we believe to be the importance of African alternatives to mainstream feminism.

Theoretical Framework

In contrast to Western feminism, Catherine Acholonu's motherism takes into consideration the specific historical and cultural conditions in Africa to advocate gender equity. As an Afrocentric alternative to Western feminism, it is premised on partnership, cooperation, tolerance, love, understanding and patience. Acholonu (1995) defines motherism as "a multidimensional theory that involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures and building and rebuilding in cooperation with nature at all levels of human endeavour" (pp. 110–111). She situates the importance of the woman in African society within the context of motherhood, which she believes is "central to African metaphysics" (p. 110). For Acholonu, African women are homemakers, nurturers, partners

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with men, leaders and defenders of both their husbands and children. Motherists uphold the idea that both men and women are builders, healers and co-creators with God. This theoretical framework is chosen for critical analysis because it is consistent with the content and thematic vision of Chinwuba's choreo-poem, which is an advocacy for gender inclusion, female empowerment, collaboration and accommodation so that both women and men can partner to engender a stable and progressive society.

Methodology

This qualitative study is hinged on close reading, which allows us to critically examine the text in relation to the characters and their perspectives or comments regarding the various dynamics that characterise gender relationships in the choreo-poem. Chinwuba's *African Romance* was purposively selected for the study because of its dramatic elements, which enhance the Afrocentric dialogic discourse, offering practical solutions to gender-based and marital conflicts.

Situating Chinwuba's Brand of Feminist Practice

The brand of feminist ideology espoused by Chinwuba is at variance with the Western varieties of radical feminism and the like. Chinwuba's strand of feminist ideology finds its root in African epistemology and cultural practice. She espouses an African feminism (motherism) that advocates interdependence and complementarity between the man and the woman. The need to situate feminism within the African context has prompted African theorists to attempt to evolve a valid African poetics of reading and interpretation to reflect Africa's social, political and economic realities rather than always depend on Western theories that may not be in consonance with the African worldview. Against the background of cultural, racial and other differences, African critics have sought a feminist model that is fashioned in consonance with the African worldview. That is, the need to integrate theory with practice forms the basis of the quest for alternative terminologies that adequately address the specificity of the experiences of African women, and avoid what Fashina (2009) regards as "undigested application of Western images of sexuality to the African gender relation issue" (p. 72).

According to Sotunsa (2009a), although feminism claimed that its goal is to emancipate women from sexist oppression, it failed to take into consideration the uniqueness of Black females and people of colour. In other words, in practice, feminism concentrated on the needs of middle-class white women in Europe and America while wrongly posing as the movement for the emancipation of women globally. The weaknesses of mainstream feminism, as observed by Sotunsa and many others, gave rise to Afro-centred feminist theories such as Stiwanism, Motherism, Snail Sense Feminism, Nego-Feminism, Africana Womanism, and so on. With the exception of womanism, many African scholars have corroborated the suitability of other aforementioned strands of feminism to the African context (Sotunsa, 2009b; Orjinta, 2013; Mangena, 2013). These scholars believe that, in contrast to Western feminism, an indigenous African theory on gender equity must involve a dialogic or accommodationist approach, a healthy appreciation of African cultures, a recognition of the heterogeneity of African cultures and a realistic and wholesome strategy devoid of unnecessary aggressiveness. Moreover, it must prioritise and centralise family, marriage and motherhood as positive experiences for African women. Any theory that meets these criteria stands to extensively address the specific needs of African females, thereby making the gender discourse on the continent relevant and dynamic.

This paper, therefore, demonstrates that Ifeoma Chinwuba's *African Romance* expresses the tenets of Catherine Acholonu's motherism, a feminist ideology that is rooted in African epistemology and worldview. Hence, we have relied upon it as our critical lens to analyse *African Romance* as a poem of gender complementarity and marital harmony. Chinwuba's female protagonist acts according to the African feminist ideals of complementary partnership between the man and the woman, with a high premium placed on motherhood, marriage and family. Before an analysis of the poet's portrayal of the African woman as an advocate of complementarity, we shall first consider instances of unwholesome patriarchal domination and stereotypes against women, as represented in the choreo-poem.

Patriarchal Domination and Female Stereotypes in *African Romance*

African Romance is written to undermine the economic, social and cultural oppression of African women. This is why Mallama maintains that she has had enough of Maigida's "Domestic dictatorship / And authoritarianism" (p. 7). In considering the poet's presentation of traditional gender roles, attention is placed on Kinspeople, a representative of those who have internalised unhealthy practices of patriarchy, such as the legitimatisation of traditional gender roles that cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive, but cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, and submissive. For instance, Mallama's vituperation against her flirtatious husband meets with Kinspeople's rebuke:

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Shut up, woman!
Who are you to speak unsummoned?
Who are you to complain
Against a husband?
Who gave you authority
To take decisions,
To sack Maigida? (p. 8)

The above expresses the quintessential patriarchal notion that women cannot "summon" men or ventilate their anger about their husband's unconcealed lasciviousness and promiscuity. According to Tyson (2006), anger and other violent emotions are exclusively permitted and encouraged in men, for "anger is a very effective means of blocking out fear and pain … and anger usually produces the kind of aggressive behaviours associated with patriarchal manhood" (p. 88). In patriarchal societies, it is normal for men to upbraid their wives in public, but when a woman publicly speaks against the misdeeds of her husband, she is deemed to have brought shame upon her husband. These unfair patriarchal norms shape society in such a way that women are expected to remain mute and keep a smiling face, even if they are hurt.

An important point to note in Chinwuba's *African Romance* is the portrayal of the woman's anatomy. In feminist discourse, it is affirmed that the problem of the woman is embedded in her anatomy, which is considered the basic index of her value. Hence, men are willing to use their privileged positions to exploit the sexuality of women. In the text, women are depicted as victims of radical changes in the moral and ethical values of the time and the unrestrained lasciviousness of men who are excused by patriarchal tradition. Some male characters are portrayed as albatrosses who prey on and gain from the predicaments and losses of women. The sexual intercourses between Maigida and his domestic servants, who "go on all hours/ On all fours/ Under Maigida's *babanriga*/ And Madame's pant-ry" (p. 53), are strategies to reflect the subjugation and objectification of women. Career Mistress is pushed into prostitution because of the senseless economic policies made by a male-dominated ruling class. She presents herself and the "digital girls" as crime victims, people to whom harm and losses have been caused by political office holders who abuse their lawful powers through corrupt practices. According to Career Mistress, scholarship mechanisms and educational aids are nonexistent; instead, "Corrupt government officials / Chopped the money / Meant for bursary" (p. 107). This is in consonance with Tyson's (2006) affirmation that patriarchy creates the failure that it then uses to justify assumptions about women. At this point, Career Mistress has cast off all forms of guilt or restraint, boasting about her career in prostitution:

I am there to do
The dirty jobs you dare not do at home.
I touch all things
Smile till my jaws numb (p. 101)

Career Mistress's following narration of her sexual escapades and the sadomasochistic encounters of the digital girls is a depiction of women as sexual slaves whose torture is a source of pleasure to their "clients":

I have heard tell
That love with the digital girls
Is fraught with danger
From accidental pinches and scratches
Fatal butts
To life-threatening diseases (p. 52)

When I am kicked about
Like a rubber ball
And flogged
For fun
[…]
What of when I am tied
Like a barbecue chicken
Like a ram to be slaughtered (p. 103)

Once he passed piss on me
And the thicker stuff

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Runny and slithery
Slid down my thighs
In the heat of passion (p. 105)

Stereotypes accorded women in patriarchal societies are culturally, not biologically, produced. For example, it is a patriarchal assumption, rather than a fact, that women are the only ones to be addressed as prostitutes. Because prostitution has often been defined as a female problem, men are seldom (or not even) punished for acts of promiscuity and prostitution. Instead, a man's infidelity or duplicity is ignored, glorified, and interpreted as his natural polygamous inclination. From his university days, Maigida engages in sexual affairs with many girls, including Obioma, "Senior chick extraordinaire" (p. 32), who puts him "on daily allowance" (p. 33) and gives him "assorted monies" (p. 35) when he is out of work. In other words, Maigida receives money for sexual services and society turns a blind eye to his sexual spree as he goes on to "sow wild seeds / On willing and fertile soil" (p. 42). Furthermore, Maigida engages in indiscriminate sex with Amaka, Obioma, Dupe, Mariam, Ronke, Ngozi, Judith, Bisi, Nkechi, Esther, Okunna and Ekaette. His kinsmen are silent about his philandering, but his father's wife and his aunts are the ones who rebuke him. According to him, they "frowned at me, / They scolded me / Like a small boy" (p. 40).

Motherist Consciousness in *African Romance*

Chinwuba uses Mallama to underscore her vision for African women. Mallama expresses motherist consciousness and espouses gender equity. Her responses to her insensitive and arrogant husband puncture all forms of male chauvinism and narcissism. She represents a version of African women whose experiences have brought them to a place of self-awareness and the discovery of self-worth and confidence. According to Tyson (2006), unwholesome patriarchal thought "equates femininity with submission, encouraging women to tolerate familial abuse, wait patiently to be rescued by a man, and view marriage as the only desirable reward for 'right' conduct" (p. 88). This idea is expressed by Mallam, who says, "A wife is to serve the man / Keep clean his abode / And warm his bed" (p. 21). In patriarchal societies, women are usually considered mere objects to be employed for the pleasure of men. However, when the woman, like Mallama, loses her charm and anatomical symmetry, she is discarded. The poet uses satire to present this phenomenon, thus:

He says I am too fat
And my stomach is headed
South-south.
My neck is manifold.
Mallam says my hair is thin
And the tyre on my chest is flat (pp. 43—44).

Mallama's response to the above is to walk away from her egocentric and insensitive husband:

I am going, going, going
To sack you
Hear, hear, his-people,
I have spoken.
I shall sack that good-for-nothing
That thinks himself a man. (p. 8)

Mallama does not fall into the mould of women who are made to view marriage as the "only desirable reward", especially when the man is incapable of providing exemplary leadership for his family. Usually, in patriarchal tradition, a wife does not "sack" her husband, but Mallama does so. *African Romance*, therefore, punctures male chauvinism and narcissism, and presents a species of an African woman who has undergone a metamorphosis of self-awareness and discovery of her true worth. By this representation, Chinwuba does not imply that the African feminist is not submissive; rather, she draws a line between senseless submission and the African woman's attempt to undermine acts that are inimical to her dignity, humanity, and existence.

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It is important to note that feminist scholars do not hold only men responsible for the problems of women. They believe that when women stop persecuting one another, they can redress the very many prejudices that have reduced them to second-class status (Okpala and Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2018). The foregoing censure of unwholesome patriarchal traditions notwithstanding, Mallama also directs her criticisms at women who "increase the problems and sorrows / Of the sistren" (p. 41). To such women, Mallama says:

> We women are our worst enemies,
> We see a man
> Accounted for,
> A man that is wived
> Yet we admit his advances
> We contrive and plot
> To divert his attention
> From his homestead,
> We lure him away
> From a sister.
> We increase the problems and sorrows
> Of the sistren. (p. 41)

Ada, Nike, Ngozi, Bisi, and other "digital girls" receive the brunt of Mallama's anger because they take advantage of their youthfulness, beauty and sexual activeness to displace Mallama from Maigida's heart. For instance, Maigida is willing to despise Mallama because of Jummai's breast that is "Round like *agbalumo*,/ Point up to heaven/ Swearing falsely to the sky" (p. 17). Mallama identifies these women, who "share" her husband with her, as part of the forces militating against the sanity and progress of women in general. Maigida's focus on his family is thus diverted, resulting in the disintegration of his home. Mallama is also in a state of trauma as she expresses her indignation about her marital plight:

> Of what use is a wife
> When my husband is home-less
> […]
> Our carpet is tattered
> Our roof leaks a-plenty
> The curtains are faded
> The chair torn in places
> I live in squalor because of you (p. 85).

Chinwuba uses poetry not only to depict the challenges of women who are victims of unwholesome patriarchal traditions but also to call for equity, fairness, and good gender relations. Mallama's reason for speaking against the sexual excesses of Maigida is not merely for confrontation and the dissolution of their matrimonial home. She expresses a great desire for the restoration of the broken walls of her matrimonial home and a keen resolve to recover her husband from the clutches of the "digital girls". Her description of the love that hitherto existed between Maigida and her underscores her motherist consciousness of the importance and sacredness of marriage, womanhood, and family. This is why she rebukes those who encourage the adulterous acts of her husband, thereby increasing "the problems and sorrows / Of the sistren" (p. 41).

To reinforce her motherist consciousness, Mallama complains that "Mallam says he has malaria / Whenever it is my turn / On account of the young girls" (p. 15). Her condemnation of Maigida's refusal to perform his marital responsibility that will lead to procreation is an indication of the premium which African feminists place on motherhood, procreation and family. Even though Maigida is less concerned about the continuity of their marital union, Mallama wishes that Allah leads her "to the man / From whose rib / I was made!" (p. 118). Chinwuba's motherist consciousness is an antithesis of Western radical feminism, like lesbianism, which considers the abhorrence of sexual reproduction a powerful way of challenging patriarchal hegemony. Lesbians undermine heterosexuality by encouraging women to sexually bond with one another, thereby preventing men from having access to their bodies.

Chinwuba's ideology embraces male inclusion, mutual existence and social harmony. It also creates a conducive space for women whose husbands are bent on ruining the family through their insensitive, toxic and violent actions to walk away from such relationships to find and embrace the company of other men who understand the roles of a husband as nurturer and protector. In other words, for social and cultural stability, inter-gender and marital

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relationships must be prioritised, especially to the extent to which they are devoid of tormenting, toxic and suicidal interactions. After walking away from Maigida, Mallama still expresses her desire to live with another husband. Her interaction with Suitor corroborates this. But this time, Mallama is cautious about Suitor. Having learnt from her past, she does not leap into another marital relationship but insists:

> Not so fast
> Kind Sir, not so fast
> But
> Tell first
> The DNA of your missing rib
> Let compare my spare
> In hue length and texture.
> Tell the centimetre of it
> And curve
> So we do not waste
> Time and resources (p. 123)

The utterances of Mallama show her recognition that not all aspects of patriarchal cultures, especially as they relate to marriage, undermine women. She depicts a woman who is not desperate about marriage and is sensible enough to reject a man who is unable to uphold the ideals of the institution of marriage and provide ideal leadership for his family. Her choice of words, "Kind Sir", indicates her respect for the other gender, and it counters narratives that define all feminist enterprises as anti-male, anti-culture, and anti-religion. Her references to DNA and the missing rib indicate that emotional and other forms of compatibility and understanding are the core ingredients for healthy and progressive marriages.

Conclusion

Overall, Chinwuba's *African Romance* advocates gender equity, and it resonates with dialogic and counter-stereotypical voices against unwholesome patriarchal practices that undermine womanhood. Although the long-breath choreo-poem may be described as a subversive discourse wherein "dramatic voices" challenge the monologic nature of poetry and, by extension, patriarchal hegemony, a careful analysis of the verbal exchanges reveals that the principal female ideologue espouses gender unity, not separatism. Chinwuba's motherist consciousness builds on the broader feminist discourse because it comes with a corrective slant and tends towards mutual existence, gender complementarity and social harmony, values that foreground the peculiarity of African culture and lived experiences. While she abhors a blind tolerance of tormenting, toxic and suicidal relationships, she represents an African woman who is wary of men that are ignorant of the ideals and principles of appreciating and sustaining marriage, family and womanhood. Future research on the choreo-poem of Chinwuba could focus on a comparative analysis of her motherist consciousness with other African feminist writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Mariama Ba (Senegal), Nawal El Saadawi (Egypt), Micere Githae Mugo (Kenya), and Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), among others, thereby further situating her work within broader discourses on gender, culture and identity in African literature. Such a comparative study would enrich the scholarship on African feminist aesthetics and highlight the diverse yet interconnected pathways through which African women writers reimagine agency, motherhood, and resistance in African literature.

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