
Patriarchal Dogmas and Marital Crisis in Ifeoma Chinwuba's African Romance

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how Ifeoma Chinwuba successfully depicts the conflictual relationship between spouses in a strictly patriarchal society in her long poem *African Romance*. The Poem tells the tumultuous story of a married couple struggling to find a compromise between the man's excessive desire for domination and the woman's thirst for freedom in a highly patriarchal community. Chinwuba transforms a family conflict into a genuine critique of Hausa society, in which women are marginalised in favour of men due to patriarchal dogmas.

This study addresses the issue of both spouses' responsibility for the success of their relationship. Drawing on the theory of 'Africana womanism', this study demonstrates that patriarchal precepts that harm women prevent married couples from leading fulfilling family lives.

KEYWORDS: dogmas, patriarchy, couple, home, marriage.

INTRODUCTION

In some societies, marriage is defined by patriarchal dogmas — values and principles that give men central power and authority as the head of the family. On the other hand, women are seen as subordinate beings, relegated to the periphery of the home and society. This conception of marriage, often perpetuated by tradition and social expectations, helps to maintain the established social order and male domination within the family, resulting in conflictual relationships between spouses. For Juliet Mitchell, Patriarchy is "the omnipresent system of male domination and female subjugation which is achieved through ideological means and maintained by institutional methods." (1973: 65). Marriage is clearly one of the ideological means through which patriarchy is emphasised and perpetuated in the society. Thus, marriage becomes an institution that keeps women in a state of oppression, preventing them from flourishing and finding fulfilment at home. The theme of conflictual marital relations is a common one in African literature, as illustrated by Ifeoma Chinwuba's *African Romance* (2013). In this long poem, the author provides a context for some of the challenges that married couples may face in Hausa society, highlighting the fact that women in this society tend to endure marriage rather than enjoy it. In the poem, the heroine, Mallama, is married to a man who is completely absent and has abdicated his roles as husband and father. Her husband's infidelity and abuse cause her to turn against him, resulting in her being branded by society as a rebellious and defiant woman. In this marital conflict, society effectively acts as a third party, taking the husband's side because it is thought that regardless of how the man behaves at home, the woman is expected to remain silent, submissive and resilient. The blame for unsuccessful marriages is often placed on women because they are expected to endure the abuse inflicted on them by their husbands. In this perspective, Kwame Gyekye thinks that: "even though the cause of the failure of a marriage is as likely to be the man as it is to be the woman, the emphasis nevertheless is almost always on, the search is almost always for, a good woman, a woman who is of good character, obedient, hard-working, and generally well respected in the community." (1996: 81-82)

As suggested here, the success of a marriage is often judged by a woman's ability to silently and resiliently endure the abuse she experiences at the hands of her husband. However, it must be acknowledged that times are changing, as are paradigms. Today, many women refuse to remain silent and endure abuse at the hands of their husbands. In *African Romance*, Mallama openly expresses her anger towards both her husband and society. She believes that society validates her husband's actions. Drawing on Africana womanism, this article analyses how excessive male authority and irresponsibility can encourage female rebellion, leading to a crisis within the home. On the one hand, this study aims to demonstrate how patriarchal beliefs prevent women from enjoying their homes fully when subjected to excessive domination by their husbands. Secondly, it seeks to explore the mechanisms by which Ifeoma Chinwuba exposes and condemns society for its role in marital conflicts.

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1- Synopsis of the Poem

Ifeoma Chinwuba's *African Romance* is a long poem in fragments which tells the story of an unfortunate love between two spouses in an African household. The poem questions the patriarchal dogmas that govern and define marital relationships in certain communities. The man's excessive desire for domination and the woman's quest for freedom will lead to the ruin of the household. *African Romance* is a poem in which the poet uses a marital conflict to highlight the binary oppositions between masculinity and femininity, submission and domination, feminism and patriarchy, and the implications of all these elements in defining a community's operating structures.

2- Theoretical Framework

This paper has Africana Womanism as its theoretical base. Africana Womanism is a branch of feminism specifically dedicated to African women. The starting point for any discussion of feminism (of any trend) and all actions to promote the female sex is patriarchy, which is seen as a social structure or organisation in which women are completely side-lined in favour of men, who are the centre of society and considered to be the pillars. Hans Bertens in his work *Literary Theory: The Basics*, believes that "A society is organized along patriarchal lines whenever women are excluded by law or custom from political participation and lack the full legal capabilities necessary to the exercise of all civic and personal rights. In such a society, only males are educated." (2001: 95).

These definitions highlight the fact that women in patriarchal societies have long been relegated to the periphery of society, where they very often play a second-class role, generally lacking decision-making power and largely dependent on the men in their lives (father, brother, uncle, husband, etc). This treatment of women in patriarchal societies created the conditions for the birth of the feminist movement, which, despite its many currents and descriptions, can be summarised as the "ways in which literature and other cultural productions undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Lois Tyson, 1998: 81.)

It is then necessary to stress the fact that feminism originated in the West and as a whole, through political, social and cultural movements, aims to promote equality between women and men by campaigning for women's rights, based on the fundamental principle that men and women are equal and must be treated as such in society. However, some of the ideas and ideologies advocated by Western feminism do not fit with African realities, and so several other types of feminism more suited to the African continent have emerged, including black feminism, womanism, Africana womanism and so on. As Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1998: 197) points out:

The majority of African women cannot search for autonomy and self-fulfilment in the same manner as the Western woman because their criteria of values are sometimes poles apart. Many Africans still celebrate conventional family values and they believe that the breakdown of the family system and its replacement with other "politically correct" and acceptable setups is responsible for the rate of crimes, drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide and many perversions that are the hallmark of modernized societies today. Feminism celebrates many of these values that Africans consider problematic and this explains the attitude of nonconformist African scholars.

The difference between Western feminism and African feminism is that the latter aims to be the voice of women living in patriarchal societies where they are considered second-class citizens. African feminism examines and analyses African gender relations and the problems faced by African women, highlighting their causes and consequences, but not placing men and women in binary opposition. It is in this context, then, that Hudson's Africana Womanism, which is the literary theory used to analyse this work, is best understood, since it is defined as:

Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism; Africana Womanism is not Black feminism, or Walker's womanism that some African women have come to embrace. Africana Womanism is an ideology created for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African women (Clenora Hudson Weems, 1998: 22)

As suggested in this definition, the theoretical framework initiated by Hudson Weems rejects the dominant culture imposed on African women by Western feminism, which does not take into account the authentic paradigm that reflects the everyday lives of African women. The protagonist of *African Romance* is Mallama, a woman who is subjected to abuse by her husband. Her rights are violated by him in the full consent of the whole society, including his male peers and some women who are part of the same dynamic. The patriarchal dogmas and norms that prevail in that society lead to the deterioration of relations between the two spouses and the breakdown of the family unit or structure. In this case, it is not just the wife who suffers from ill-treatment at the hands of her husband; her immediate environment, in particular her children and the wider family, also suffer. Mallama's cry is not that of a woman who wishes to dominate or compete with her husband. Instead, she is calling for help because her husband's

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infidelity and abuse are destroying the family. Her primary motivation is to save her home, not to defy her husband. African womanism is therefore a good theory to analyse this Poem because it will help to assess and understand the legitimacy of the Mallama's claims or complaints.

3- Discussion

3-1- Male Irresponsibility and Family Crisis

The patriarchal family order established by some societies places men at the centre, with the responsibility of being the leader and head of the family. Women, on the other hand, are placed behind men as passive figures who play the role of guardians of the home and stay-at-home mothers. "Traditionally, gender roles in African marriages were rigidly defined, with men assuming the role of the breadwinner and decision maker, while women were primarily responsible for the household and child-rearing" (Elvis Madondo et al, 2025: 514.) That being the case, submission and silence are golden values that men, brought up in patriarchal societies, often look for in a woman when it comes to marriage. The woman is expected to show respect and submission to her husband in order to legitimise his power and authority as head of the household. Thus, the woman in a patriarchal society is expected to take care of her household, especially her husband, without complaining about anything. Therefore, from an early age, girls are educated and conditioned to endure the hardships of life as housewives. The success of the home, according to many patriarchal considerations, depends on the girl's good education and her preparation for the role of housewife. These are generalities about marriage, which can be considered as common sense because any person born and brought up in a patriarchal society should know this.

The fictional society created by Ifeoma Chinwuba in *African Romance* is an essentially patriarchal one, where the man has his rightful place as master of the house and the woman owes him reverence and respect. However, Chinwuba opens her poem by creating a rebellious female character, Mallama who rebels against the male authority that stems from the power that the patriarchal system endows men with. In fact, the protagonist in Chinwuba's *African Romance* is not prepared to bow to the dictates of patriarchy. In full view of the world, taking her kinsmen as witnesses, she decides to sack her husband, calling him names and publicly emasculating him, as the following lines from the poem indicate.

There is no retreat.

Mallam Maigida! 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. (Chinwuba, 2013: 8)

These words, coming from a woman raised in a patriarchal society, convey a sense of barely contained anger or even a certain revolt. What initially seems like an act of defiance against her husband and societal norms is, in reality, nothing more than a cry for help from a disillusioned woman who is abandoned by her husband. From there, Ifeoma Chinwuba turns into a social critique and, through the character of Mallama, sheds light on the different forms of difficulties that women face in their homes. Indeed, this is merely a strategy used by the poet to reveal the monstrosity of the husband's actions within this household in crisis. Mallama's first complaint against her husband is that he is totally absent and has completely abdicated his role as husband and father. She explains that:

He comes late home Later than the
neighbours.

Then goes out again In a flash
Without warning.

When the guard dogs

Bark deep in the night

I know my man has returned

From his escapades

With the digital girls. (Chinwuba, 2013: 95)

As suggested in this extract, the husband comes home very late, which does not allow him to fully assume his role as a father, which includes looking after the well-being of his wife and children, as well as supervising the wife's role in the home. It is also important to note, as this extract suggests, that the husband goes in and out immediately

"In a flash", limiting the time he spends with his wife and children. Mallam spends most of his time away from home, indicating an abdication of his responsibilities as head of the household. The woman, who is expected to support her husband, finds herself alone, forced to take on the roles of both man and woman in the household. The reader witnesses a kind of family crisis in which

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the man shirks his responsibilities as father and head of the family, forcing the woman to assert herself in a bid for emancipation. The woman then sees her chance to 'emasculate' him by calling him a 'yeye man'. In this context, the wife, left to fend for herself and abandoned by her husband, is exasperated and finds herself faced with profound loneliness, as put in the following lines.

Welcome, solitude! Do come in!
Take a seat There by the window His
favourite spot!
You shall be my companion now. (Chinwuba, 2013: 116-117)

The personification of loneliness reveals the husband's absenteeism, which leads Mallama into the arms of a lover, thus destroying the home and the image of the model family. One main purpose of marriage is companionship, as human beings seek a partner to avoid loneliness and make plans for their lives. However, as the above excerpt highlights, Mallama finds herself alone in her home, feeling lost, abandoned and despised. The absence of the husband leaves a void that transforms her into a bitter and rebellious person. It is important to emphasise here that a lack of reciprocity in love often causes frustration for the person who gives more, is more involved and fights to keep the relationship stable. This can lead to resentment and, ultimately, hatred. In this regard, Mallama complains as follows:

I hate you Mallam,
Maigida
I hate for all the tears you caused
I will hate you for lost pride And the shame you
poured On me.
I will hate you forever And ever and
evermore. [...]
For your silent treatment
For un-explained absences
And wrong presence. (Chinwuba, 2013: 82-83)

The "wrong presence" referred to by Mallama in her monologue suggests an unfulfilled desire on her part towards her husband. The emotional desires of women in marriage differ from those of men, and each partner must use their emotional intelligence to satisfy their spouse. Generally, women need attention and caring in order to feel loved. As put by John Gray, (2004: 147)

When a man shows interest in a woman's feelings and heartfelt concern for her wellbeing, she feels loved and cared for. When he makes her feel special in this caring way, he succeeds in fulfilling her first primary need. Naturally she begins to trust him more. When she trusts, she becomes more open and receptive.

In the poem, Mallama feels unseen and undervalued. She complains not only about her husband's constant absence from home, but also about the poor treatment, she receives from him when he is present. As said earlier in this work, women are expected to be submissive and treat their husbands with respect. However, the conditions are not in place to make this easy for them. A woman who is despised and treated badly by her husband cannot in turn show submission and respect towards him. In response to the mistreatment he inflicts on her, she will develop a certain contempt for her husband. Mallama explains that:

Mallam disregards me
Most of the time
He only addresses me
To dress me down,
To snap me
Or berate me
And condemn me For one thing or
another In sharp tones.
Many times, he ignores me Giving me the silent
treatment As if I did not exist.
When I try to raise a matter
He shouts me down,
And dismisses me. (Chinwuba, 2013: 43)

As indicated in this excerpt, Mallam treats his wife rudely and contemptuously. He has no regard for her and degrades her instead of valuing her. This creates a climate of constant conflict in the home, which in turn creates a very negative atmosphere. The mistreatment Mallama suffers at home prevents her from developing self-esteem. In response to his repeated provocations, she rebels against her husband and seeks validation outside her home in the arms of a lover. In general, women are expected to be

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completely submissive and respectful towards their husbands, even when this is not reciprocated. It is therefore important to note that a man who treats his wife with contempt could not expect total submission from her. A woman who feels loved and appreciated is more likely to submit to her husband, which helps avoid conflict at home. The next section analyses how society is involved in creating or resolving marital conflicts.

3-2- Society's Biases against Women in Marriage

In patriarchal societies, marriage is held in such high regard in the society that some women become obsessed with it. Hence, marriage is not just a personal choice. It is a deep cultural obligation, particularly for women. From a young age, girls are taught that their value as human beings is tied to the fact of becoming a wife and mother, regardless of whether the marriage is good or bad. Marriage is projected as the ultimate achievement, and divorce or separation come with a deep stigma. "Women in African societies want and hope to be married; in fact, an unmarried woman is almost an anomaly." (Gyekye, 1996: 76). Considering the importance of marriage in African society, Paul Kyalo opines that: "The truth is marriage in the African sense conferred status and dignity." (Kyalo, 2012: 90).

The foregoing quotes show how important marriage is in the eyes of the society. In fact, society acts as a third party in a marriage. People, genuinely or not feel free to give their opinions on how the households are run. The people here consist of extended family members, friends and colleagues, or anyone else who considers themselves entitled to have a say in how the household is run because "Marriage is not just an individual or the couple concerned business (...) it concerns all and is affected by all." (Kyalo 2012: 88).

The poem *African Romance* is, above all, a lamentation by a disillusioned woman who feels neglected and abandoned by her vagabond husband. Chinwuba describes a distraught woman who asks herself questions and looks to society for answers. She calls for help in resolving the conflict in her home, as indicated in the following verses:

Mallam Maigida!
Mallam!
Kinspeople!
Hear, hear!
Hearken to my voice! (Chinwuba, 2013: 7)

The repetition of the words 'hear' and 'hearken' emphasises that Mallama is a desperate woman pleading for help. She turns to her community, calling on her kinspeople to bear witness. It is significant that Mallama makes society witness to the vicissitudes of her household. This is undoubtedly a way in which Ifeoma Chinwuba questions society's responsibility for creating and managing these conflicts. Indeed, all aspects of marriage are deeply rooted in society. Often, girls are taught from an early age to take their future role as housewives seriously. The collective imagination portrays the success and survival of a household as essentially dependent on a woman's endurance and ability to make things work. These values by which society defines marriage put men first at the expense of women. In the same vein Gift Thlarihani Baloyi underscores that:

While these cultural value systems are viewed as valuable to the process of establishing a family through marriage, there are, however, certain aspects of them that are toxic to the health of a marriage. Some of these aspects include: the domestication of women in marriage in the name of culture; the male-female hierarchical domination (...) In terms of this problem, men become authoritarian voices to which women must listen and obey in marriage. (2022:2)

In *African Romance*, it is therefore no surprise that Mallama's appeal is rejected by her kinspeople, who do not even listen to her reasons for pleading. She is rebuked with the following words:

Shut up, woman!
Who are you to speak unsummoned? Who are you to
complain Against a husband?
Who gave you authority?
To take decisions,
(...)
Do you carry a third leg?
Do you wear *Sokoto* in the Harem? (Chinwuba, 2013: 8)

As these verses show, Mallama is silenced; she is not allowed to speak or complain about her husband. In patriarchal societies, silence and endurance are therefore the values by which a virtuous woman is defined. The rhetorical question 'Do you have a third leg?' highlights the fact that a woman should not dare to speak publicly about her husband's misconduct. Clearly, Mallama's

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cry for help has fallen on deaf ears, as she is not even given the chance to explain her complaint. Instead, she is deemed a rebellious woman, and her husband is advised to find a more docile and submissive wife to replace her:

Hajia Bilkisu
Professional, matchmaker
Clinched a bride for My husband.
She found him a girl
On the threshold of puberty
To contest with me
The affections of my husband. (Chinwuba, 2013: 42)

In order to resolve the conflict between the spouses, Hajia Bilkisu, an elderly woman, sees no other alternative than proposing a new wife to Mallam. to calm his first wife's ardour. Thus, polygamy becomes a permanent a punishment threat to women in patriarchal societies, like the sword of Damocles. A woman who does not submit to or make her husband happy is simply replaced. Hajia Bilkisu represents those women who align themselves with patriarchal dogmas and reinforce them. Tuzyline Jita Allan, (1995: 117) finds that: "[M]arried women are afraid to shake the status quo; they are afraid and want security through men; they are harsher on other women than men are; they cling to the vanishing respectability of being married." This accurately explains the situation of many women who find themselves trapped in their own homes. They rarely find anyone willing to listen to them or help them unburden themselves of their problems. Most of them suffer in silence because patriarchal structures do not allow them to express themselves and their pain. Many of them die in their homes for lack of help, they are victimised and do not have the right to speak out because they are just women. Many women remain silent about domestic abuse because they are afraid of losing their marriage or being judged and stigmatised in a society that views divorced women as rebellious.

In the poem, Mallama's relationship with her kinspeople is rather conflictual because they consider her to be a rebellious woman incapable of running a household. She is not seen as the ideal woman who submits to societal expectations of married women. In turn, Mallama accuses her kinsmen of causing her domestic problems. Comparing the following two excerpts reveals that Mallama's marriage underwent a negative transformation as a result of societal influence. She firstly assert that:

My husband,
When we came together
Was sweet and kind, Soft and gentle
Like ripe avocado [...] He wooed me with
attention, Led me to paradise. He played the
songs for me, Made music in my name.
He rushed home to me
After work,
While his mates lingered on the way,
At the fishy joints,
In monkey business. (Chinwuba, 2013: 10)

This extract paints a glowing picture of Mallama and Mallam's marriage. By comparing her husband to a ripe avocado, Mallama conveys both his maturity as a man and his gentleness as a husband. This refers to a man who is faithful and responsible and enjoys spending time with his wife. One gets the impression that Mallama is a woman who is happy and fulfilled in her home. This description contrasts with the one offered a little further on in the poem, where Mallam undergoes a profound metamorphosis to become an indifferent husband. He has become a cold and distant husband who spends more time in the company of his mistresses and frivolous girls, inflicting ill-treatments onto her as the following extract shows.

I have had enough I say!
Of his silent treatment,
And his highhandedness
Domestic dictatorship
And authoritarianism
I have had a surfeit I say,
Of this maltreatment. (Chinwuba, 2013: 7)

Mallama outbursts because she is the victim of highhandedness, which means that she is beaten and mistreated by Mallam. Mallama's rebellion is not only against her husband, but against the institutional patriarchal rules that govern marital life in Hausa society. In many instances in the poem, Mallama turns her grief against her relatives or society as a whole for ruining her marriage. She blames her kinsmen, accusing them advice given to her by her peers.

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You are the problem In my household.
You
That poisoned his mind Against me.
With your advice Unkind and unsound.
You poured dry sand
Into our *tuwo* of togetherness.
(...)
You whispered harsh words into his ears
Forbidding him to love his wedded wife
(...)
Women, you told him,
Are like donkeys,
To serve one's purpose,
Not for petting at all
Only to be ridden (...) (Chinwuba, 2013: 9)

Mallama has clearly identified the source of the problem in her marriage. According to her, it is the community that constitutes a third party in her marriage. She believes that they are the ones turning her husband against her by poisoning his mind with preconceived notions and stereotypes. Mallama's view is not far from reality in patriarchal societies. In these societies, men are placed at the centre of everything and women are, in most cases, considered possessions that exist solely to serve men's interests. Women therefore do not have the right to be treated with care or diligence. The semiotics by which the poetess compares women to donkeys is not insignificant. It deliberately proves that women are only there to serve the interests of men.

CONCLUSION

In this work, we analysed the prevalence and impact of patriarchal dogmas on family life in the poem *African Romance*. Through this poem, Ifeoma Chinwuba shows that conflictual relationships between spouses can be exacerbated by patriarchal norms that disadvantage women and sometimes imprison them in their homes. Through the character of Mallama, it is evident that women sometimes endure marriage rather than enjoy it. But unlike many who accept being silenced despite what they may endure, Mallama refuses to accept the status quo. She expresses her contempt not only towards her husband for his mistreatment, but also towards society, which has clearly taken the husband's side. This work shows that for a more fulfilling family life, the relationship between spouses must be rebalanced; exactly as pointed out by Madondo et al (2025: 515): "To ensure respect, equality, and shared responsibilities between partners, it is essential to reinterpret traditional gender roles within marriage. Modern African marriage systems should evolve to recognise women's autonomy, leadership roles, and equal participation in decision-making."

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