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CONTEXTUALISING MALE PRIVILEGING IN CHELUCHI ONYEMELUKWE-ONUOBIA'S *SON OF THE HOUSE WITHIN THE AFRICAN WELTANSCHAUUNG*

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Abstract

The attempts by literary writers to present an almost pitch-perfect and grotesque-free representation of women's struggles in patriarchal settings yield diverse results because of the subjectivity and dynamism of societies. Discourse on male privileging may be universal, but its manifestations are sundered by spatial and cultural factors rooted in diverse weltanschauungen. Within this context, this paper situates male privileging in Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House* within the African society, employing a qualitative approach in its analysis of the aforementioned novel. With Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism as its theoretical template, this paper investigates the different strategies used in the novel to propagate male preference and its effect on women. Findings reveal that boy-child syndrome, polygyny, and cultural dictates of women's career choices promote male privileging. Beyond this, the imbalance in the allotment of power between men and women is not solely a male endeavour but also sustained by women as represented by Mama Nkemdilim. They further reveal that the identified agents of male privileging limit women's possession of property and dwindle their ambitious desires. The paper concludes that domestic efficiency and social relevance are not mutually exclusive, and as such, Onyemelukwe-

Onuobia subtly advocates a reevaluation of power distribution between men and women for the accommodation of the latter's ambition for social, political, and academic ascendancy without repercussions.

Keywords: Literature and gender studies; boy-child syndrome; African weltanschauung; Polygyny

Introduction

There are attempts by writers of different racial designations to capture the struggle that has been mummified by gender constructs. When discourse on gender is initiated, female marginalisation is mostly conjured in the mind of the interlocutors, whether man or woman; national or cosmopolitan; elitist or egalitarian. Within and outside the African worldview, the advocacy of women's rights based on the equality of the sexes has become a fertile ground for both male and female writers to paint a portraiture of the disproportional distribution of power between men and women. As a movement that was birthed by the need for women to attain equal rights in terms of education, politics, among other endeavours, feminism, in some sense, seeks to rewrite traditional gender roles which marginalise and limit what women can do, how, when and with whom. It tackles patriarchy which, according to Adrienne Rich, is a system characterised by male dominance in the familial, social, ideological, and political spheres, utilises various instruments such as force, tradition, law, language, customs, and the division of labour to define and limit women's roles, effectively subsuming them under male

authority (57). The result of disassembling language as one of the agents or instruments of male domination highlighted by Rich reveals that 'humanity', for instance, can be replaced by 'man' and 'mankind', but 'womankind' is denied such generic representative ability. Consequently, 'man' in such dictums as 'To err is man; to forgive is God' caters to both man and woman. Patriarchy, therefore, is not just a system marked by men's control but further characterised by female subservience. For critics like Sabine Erika, patriarchy ensures the invisibility and wielding of less power by women (53).

An examination of the corpus of African literature within the confines of gender reveals that historically, patriarchy is the dominant structure operational in African society. As noted by Abidemi Asiyanbola, this patriarchal structure has been in existence for many years and remains a major feature of traditional societies (2). The indices of inequality projected by patriarchy vary among societies and this is represented in literary writings across times and climes. Its manifestation in African society stretches from the belief that men are superior in terms of ability and intelligence, among others, to boy-child syndrome and gatekeeping certain jobs for men while relegating some to women. Sophia Ogwude submits that one of the problems feminist scholars have against patriarchal ideologies is the stereotypical and disparaging portrayals of female characters in African literature, particularly those authored by male writers (2). However, in *Son of the House* — a female-authored text — Onyemelukwe-Onuobia incorporates patriarchal indices in the text, not to promote the system but to depict its persistence in society.

However, in feminist-related writings, the frequent use of the word 'women' which is usually associated with maturity does not signal the exemption of the naïve girl child from the crippling tentacles of patriarchy. Accordingly, Ketu Katrak avows that 'As a female child grows from childhood to womanhood to motherhood, she is controlled and owned by her father, her husband, and then her sons, only as a mother is she culturally believed to be a human being' (163). In this regard, the struggles of the girl-child with her dented sense of humanity in a patriarchal society begin from birth to death, during which period her actions are decided by her father, husband, and even the male children she is meant to control — she can only control her female children, courtesy of age differences. Thus, the ignorance of the girl child on gender-related issues does not spare her from whatever patriarchy holds as she grows in patriarchy till she comes to an age of enlightenment when she either accepts her condition and continues in subjugation or rejects the strictures that accompany the system. Nevertheless, just like any prey trapped in the claws of a predator cannot escape without tears and rupture, women, who, in the words of Catherine Acholonu, are 'trapped in the claws of the taboos and the restrictions that only help to propel male chauvinism' (qtd. in Gloria Fwangyil, 262), cannot break free without suffering physical, mental or social damage, depending on the amount of force exerted and techniques deployed.

Sexism, the prejudice or discrimination based on one's sex or gender, as a form of male privileging has fostered the need for writers to assert women's place in a society that traditionally relegates women to the

background. This is seen in the acknowledgement of the position of power as strictly male while subservience is seen as a female attribute. In this light, Diana Koester asserts that:

> Gender shapes power relations at all levels of society. In fact, the set of roles, behaviours, and attitudes that societies define as appropriate for men and women ('gender') may well be the most persistent cause, consequence, and mechanism of power relations from the intimate sphere of the household to the highest levels of political decision-making (2).

The female roles in *The Son of the House* are mostly sustained by the assumption that women are less significant than men, and this is noticed in the way men, even before birth, are highly in demand — what defines womanhood within the African purview, among other things, is male children. Irrespective of a woman's intellectual prowess and social standing, in the world of Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's novel, when pitched against a man, the latter's value overshadows the former's.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism, one of the Afrocentric feminist templates that tackle male domination and female subservience, not radically like such Western strands of feminism as radical feminism and lesbian feminism, but with snail-like patience and efficiency in negotiating their ways around and over 'boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough

terrains' (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, 27) scattered along their ways when dealing with men in patriarchal environments. It highlights the plausibility of a society characterised by equity for both men and women with the complementarity of both genders and not polarity. Generally, Africans do not promote male hatred or exclusion, and this compelled African women to initially isolate themselves from mainstream feminism which prompts Ogundipe-Leslie's confirmation that 'many African female writers like to declare that they are not feminists as if it were a crime to be feminist' (64). Buchi Emecheta's declaration to be a feminist with a small 'f' announces her denouncement of the radicalism that exudes from Western feminism which is rooted in male-female dichotomy and not complementarity.

Snail-sense feminism adopts the concepts of compatibility and negotiation as the acceptable approach relevant to the attainment of female freedom, strongly advocating that women adopt a snail-like way of 'conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men' as they chart a course rough terrain:

> … smoothly and efficiently with a well-lubricated tongue that is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects. Moreover, the snail carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 27).

This model further alleges that 'this is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria's harsh patriarchal

culture' (27) and that our foremothers adopted this approach and lived well in their society. By deploying the instrumentality of Adimora-Ezeigbo's Afrocentric template of feminism to this study, the reality of the African woman in a society reeking of strong patriarchal manifestations is explored in Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The House of the House*.

Male Privileging in Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House*

Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's novel projects how imbalanced the allotment of power is between men and women, pointing at the benefits, protection, and advantage given to males solely based on their sex and not because they are deserving of the privileges more than females. The author also highlights patriarchal norms which are deducible in traditional African settings. For instance, the narrator says that Mama Nkemdilim 'had not gone to school and yet knew how to do all that a woman of Nwokenta could do — clean, cook, fetch firewood, make a fire, make palm oil, farm, buy, sell, and bear children' (20). It is noteworthy that when Mama Nkemdilim's capability as a woman who lacks formal education is pitched against women who have acquired formal education, the list of things done is domestic. One would have expected a more sophisticated list which may include teaching and counselling for the academically-advanced women. However, 'all that a woman of Nwokenta could do' is everything domestic, with childbearing being the last on the list. Consequently, the level of education acquired by a woman mattered little as domestic activities remained the reserve for women.

The privilege conferred on men is so conspicuous that a girl-child, even at a young age, is not oblivious to the magnitude of power men wield. When Nwabulu's first mistress slaps her (Nwabulu's mistress's) husband, little Nwabulu is shocked as she questions: 'I was looking down into the dirty dishwater when a loud crack came to my ears. I glanced up. His hand held his cheek, his face turned away from his children and me. Why did he allow this? I wondered. Was he not a man?' (22). She feels the aberration in the alteration of what she knows to be the order of things between a man and a woman. It comes as a shock to witness a man cower at the sight of a woman who happens to be his wife, especially at the grave stage of being slapped. For her, the man should restore normalcy by, perhaps, hitting the willpower out of her. In matters concerning infidelity and rape, it is often the woman who is reprimanded for being loose, even when it is a forced sexual relationship. At her mistress's house in Lagos, Nwabulu is raped by Oga, her mistress's husband. This continues on different occasions until Oga is caught by his wife. Nwabulu narrates:

> He rolled away, and there stood Madam, a kitchen knife in her hand, her face contorted with rage, looking not at Oga but me. She advanced towards me and struck my shoulder, slicing into it like the neck of a Christmas chicken, red blood spurting onto my wrapper. The knife went up and down quickly, striking, slashing at my arms and hands (23).

This is substantiated by Margaret Matlin's assertion that a victim of rape is 'doubly victimised, first by the assailant and later by the attitudes of other people … family and friends … and society [who] all tend to blame her and beat her negatively because of something that [is] not her fault' (433). It is not uncommon that Madam, Nwabulu's mistress, focuses her rage on Nwabulu instead of the rapist, her husband. It is even more alarming that evading Oga and targeting Nwabulu is not a result of her inability to beat the former, as she has been slapping him, but depicts how women also champion the patriarchal cause of men, especially in their dealings with other women.

After running back to Mama Nkemdilim, her 'story about what had happened did not fetch … [her] anything other than, "That is what happens when you try to take another woman's husband"' (24). This stems from the fact that the society privileges men to the detriment of women and that men are pardoned for promiscuity while women are not. This is further reified when Urenna's mother is told that her son has impregnated Nwabulu. She asserts: 'That is impossible … My son is in the university where he meets lots of nice girls. I am not sure why your girl … wants to pin her trouble on him' (66). She does not say that her son cannot or should not indulge in sexual activities, but that it is impossible for him to do so with a housemaid — the thought that her son has had sexual intercourse does not make her flinch. Thus, the boy child is granted the leeway to be promiscuous, provided he does not stoop so low by impregnating a maid.

Beyond this, male privileging also manifests in who lays claim to a child in the family. It is reechoed in

the novel that 'a child belonged to the father' (93). It did not matter:

> How that came about, whether the woman had committed adultery or not; so long as her bride price had been paid, the child was her husband's. It did not matter that her husband was violent and she had run away from constant beatings. Her family might come to take their daughter home, but even they knew that the children belonged to her husband (93).

Violence, infidelity, and pleas cannot change this primal state of power dynamics where ownership of a child remains with the man, and not the woman who carries the child for months till delivery. Furthermore, a woman is often reminded that her sexual market value decreases as her age increases. Conversely, it is believed that a man's sexual market value increases as he ages, and Julie's mother reiterates this claim when she affirms:

> Yes, a woman will marry this drunken brother of yours. For love; for money, though God knows how he will ever make any; for his tall foolishness; or for children. Why? Because he is a man. With a penis between his legs. But you are a woman. With a womb that comes with an expiry date (108).

It is concretised that the condition of Afam as a drunk does not diminish his acceptability within the purview of

marriage but Julie, on the other hand, cannot enjoy the same privilege because she is a woman.

While reminiscing the imbalance between the two genders, Julie recalls the small party the night before Afam went off to school at CKC while she suppressed envious thoughts that no such party was held for her or even contemplated when she 'got into Aba Girls on scholarship, the only child around Umuleri who had done so in the year 1951' (107). Realistically, securing a scholarship as the only girl child for an academic year is more substantial than merely gaining admission. However, a party is held for her brother while nothing is done for her, her stellar achievement notwithstanding. In reflecting on how men are privileged, Onyemelukwe-Onuobia underscores the collective complicity of both men and women in female marginalisation. That is, she does not project female oppression solely as a male enterprise but as a social phenomenon that, in some settings, is more perpetuated by women than men. On the first page of the first chapter, Nwabulu narrates:

> 'Amosu,' she would call me, a witch. 'Why do you still hold out your hands for food?' she would ask, squeezing her face in puzzlement when I stood outside the kitchen, waiting for food. 'Is all that blood you suck from me and my children not enough? Or does it all go to your big head? (1).

The first chapter begins with Nwabulu being maltreated by Mama Nkemdilim who does not think that food 'should be wasted on putting extra flesh on … [her]

bones' (1). The oppression gets to a stage where her stepmother reflects on sending her away as a housemaid for fear that it is 'too good for her' (2), and that she could become 'a big person in Lagos' (3). After deliberating its implausibility, she sends her away.

Mama Nkemdilim treats Nwabulu not as her stepchild but as a housemaid, always accusing Nwabulu of killing her parents. There is no part of the novel where the narrator commends Mama Nkemdilim for anything done; all she does throughout the scenarios where she features Nwabulu is abuse the latter. Nwabulu reports: 'Mama Nkemdilim gave me a little food and shelter. In the morning, my broom went up and down our compound, creating neat lines on the red earth while Mama Nkemdilim's children slept. My head bore pots of water from the stream' (20). It would not have been a case of female oppression if Mama Nkemdilim's children were also subjected to the same level of servitude that Nwabulu is subjected to. In the house of her new mistress, Nwabulu witnesses Daddy, her mistress's husband, oppress Mummy. In turn, as a way of purging herself of frustration heaped on her by Daddy, Mummy oppresses Nwabulu. Even as Nwabulu is oppressed, she is meant to 'not reply; … [she] was not required to' (21). Mummy also suffers in silence and does not talk back at Daddy as the narrative voice discloses:

> Sometimes she would come into the kitchen and cry quietly after a particularly bitter argument. 'I am sorry, Ma,' I said, the first time this happened. She lifted up her head and stared at me with so much contempt that I knew I had

> stepped out of line. Afterwards, I would keep quiet and avert my eyes, just like other housemaids who saw husbands beat their wives or bring home women while their wives were away at work (32).

No matter the situation, Nwabulu is not required to initiate conversations irrespective of the exigency of the intercourse but to remain silent just as maids keep silent about their masters' abusive and adulterous lives. Events in the novel show that in the pyramid of privileging, men sit at the top echelon, followed by women, then by other women separated by age, class/social standards, or both.

Silence is a tool of male privilege in the novel, and it is considered an index of female virtue that must be upheld to maintain femininity. Any form of resistance is rebuked, such that 'whatever a rebel or a radical was, Daddy did not like it' (38). As a woman, Nwabulu is conditioned to act 'the way … [she] was supposed to — listen silently' (30). The value of silence and servitude for the woman in patriarchal settings is projected in such a way that the aforementioned are considered better feminine qualities than charisma and/or intelligence. Nwabulu says:

> My reading improved, exponentially it seemed, and I came top of my class at my school every term … Mummy was impressed by my report card and my consistency. She suggested to Daddy that I should be sent to the commercial school close by to continue my studies. Daddy, I think, was less impressed by my report card

> than my ability to withhold tears as I cleaned the sitting room as many times as he wanted me to on any given day (34).

Accordingly, in a patriarchal society, the true mark of femininity is not guaranteed by the wealth and intelligence of a woman but by her subservience and ability to execute domestic chores dutifully and professionally.

Although the worth of children in *The Son of the House* is of high value, a male child is almost priceless. The absence of a male child in the literal and literary worlds has snowballed into diverse problems ranging from broken marriages to infidelity and polygyny, among others. This situation is captured by Laure Zanou, Celestin Gbaguidi, and Hubert Kpavode when they aver that:

> African societies are too demanding vis -à- vis the women when it comes to motherhood and childbearing. And one thing is to bear children but another thing is to succeed in bearing male children. This belief perpetuated over generations is sustained by patriarchy, a system which promotes the domination of men and boys over women and girls (22).

Onyemelukwe-Onuobia integrates this desperation and preference for boy children to girl children in the novel. In the fictional world of *The Son of the House*, almost anything could be done for a family to have a male child, and this is because 'Only sons could carry the family name, could make sure that the name of the family did not

get lost' (113). The presence of boy-child syndrome in the novel is grounded so much that a character is given a name that begs for the immortalisation of his family name as seen in this excerpt:

> Afam, diminutive for Afamefuna — "may my name not be lost" — that was my brother's name. When more boys did not come along immediately, the name became even more significant… My father would call him for special sessions on our family history. Whenever possible, when I had no work to do for Mama in the kitchen, I would slip outside to listen (114).

Not only is a male child preferred to a girl child, but a girl child is not worthy enough to be an active part of the special sessions where family history is discussed. Thus, the girl child, even though a part of the family, may be oblivious to her family history as she is considered less significant.

To secure one's place as a wife in a matrimonial home, the woman has to have a boy child. Looking at Obiageli, Julie affirms that 'Already, she [Obiageli] had secured her place in her husband's home by bringing forth two boys, one after the other' (121). It is this lack of hold by Onyemaechi, Eugene's first wife that waters the soil for polygyny to sprout in Eugene's house as she is not able to bring forth a boy. The woman knows this as well, that is why any female character who is not able to give birth to a boy child does not wholly oppose the idea of a second wife. Julie, commenting on Onyemaechi's situation, says

'They must have understood her fragile position — a woman without a son, after more than ten years of marriage. If she did not understand, her parents and relatives must have explained it to her in detail. "Your hold over a man is a son"' (133). Since Onyemaechi is unable to produce a male child, Julie uses this as an opportunity to sneak into her marriage with Eugene as a second wife. In fact, with the hope that Julie will give him a male son, Eugene, at the request of Julie, sends her first wife with her two girls to Port Harcourt.

With the quest for a boy child being the focal point of intercourse, infidelity ceases to become an abomination in matrimonial discourses. Eugene, a married man, is unfaithful to his wife because he does not have a son as Julie intimates:

> The last was now eleven years old, and his wife had not conceived at all in eight years. Eugene spoke with deep regret about being unable to father a son. Once, he wondered aloud about the possibility of having a son with me, even if I did not want to marry him. Would I be able to give him a son? he asked earnestly (122).

At this point, nothing else matters — not faithfulness, not his first wife, not even his in-laws. All that matters is a male child. Navtej Purewal declares that 'While son preference is not a new phenomenon … its contemporary expressions illustrate the gender outcomes of social power relations as they interact and intersect with culture, economy and technologies' (quoted in Ine Nnadi, 135). Consequently, the longing for the boy child shows how

power is distributed between men and women (logically, the most demanded gender will wield more power than the other).

In the novel, some stereotypical agents have led to the projection of men as superiors and women as inferiors. Throughout the novel, Mummy's happiness and sadness are tied to Daddy — she is happy only because Daddy is happy or has made her so; she is not independent even emotionally. Nwabulu notes that 'By ten past seven, she could be her most cruel or her most pleased, depending on her husband's mood. She was only cruel when her husband pushed her buttons' (33). The woman is represented here as a passive being whose temperament is dependent on or decided by a man. It gets worse such that Mummy has a 'body clock — she was happiest when Daddy left for work and right after she returned from her work between three and four. Between five and six, she became anxious, finicky, panicky' (32). Perhaps, with a radical approach, Mummy would have long divorced her husband. However, mastering the art of Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense approach, Mummy learns to slowly slither past her rough experiences with Daddy.

The distance between the man and the woman in terms of power relations even as a couple is so wide to the extent that wives are not expected to criticise their husbands. Men, on the other hand, possess the monopoly of complaining about just anything and everything, like Daddy. Nwabulu avers thus:

> Then he would proceed to complain about dinner: too salty; too spicy; too bland; not enough salt; too much meat, which meant his money was being recklessly spent; too little

> meat, which meant that he was being fed like a pauper. He nitpicked until he made his wife scream like a child who had been tickled too long (31).

When this happens, irrespective of how stupid the man sounds, the woman is not meant to tell him so. In the words of Julie's mother, 'Men don't like to be told that they are stupid. They can be foolish but put a guard on your lips when it does not involve something major' (131). This is an attempt by Julie's mother to deploy a snail-sense feminist approach as she encourages her daughter to endure men's intermittent lack of moderation.

It is stereotypical to always point at the woman as the cause of infertility/childlessness. In a childless home, studies have proven that a man can be responsible. However, in the novel, once childlessness is the topic of discourse, women automatically become the subject. Nwabulu reports that '… Mummy had been unable to give birth to another child and had gone from hospital to hospital with no result. Daddy blamed his wife' (35). It is naturally assumed that Mummy is the problem, and Daddy has never thought that he could be the problem. To worsen the situation, when a woman is childless, the man is expected to leave for one that can guarantee him children. If he chooses to stay, it is believed he is the infertile party in the marriage. Nwabulu details a related story: 'His name was Papa Ugonna, the one who had stuck by his childless wife for years while the whole village marvelled at his stoic acceptance and eventually began to gossip about the possibility that his manhood was useless' (84). People are sure that it is the woman who is infertile

and cannot conceive the possibility of a man being the cause. According to Dorcas Ofosu-Budu and Vilma Hanninen, 'In Africa, women are mostly the first to be blamed if couples are unable to have children; right from childhood, they are "culturally raised" to accept responsibility for reproduction and infertility' (2). This is against the result of a survey carried out by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development which submits that 'Overall, one-third of infertility cases are caused by male reproductive issues, one-third by female reproductive issues, and one-third by both male and female reproductive issues or by unknown factors' (1). This means that the chances of a husband being the infertile party in marriage are at par with that of his wife.

In the novel, subjugation of girls and women is culturally accepted — the culture of the fictional society of *The Son of the House* supports male privileging. For instance, the narrator says:

> 'Di nwe uno,' she hailed Nnanna, master of the house. 'Dalu o.' He looked up briefly from the mechanics of turning a tin can into a football but went back to it. Mama Nkemdilim nodded her head vigorously; it seemed right to her that Mama Nathan chose to refer to her son as the master of the house (76).

There are several subtle indices of female subjugation and male privileging incorporated in the above excerpt. As young as Nnanna is, he understands the power he wields and does not think the 'master of the house' may have been for someone else, which prompts him to turn at the

hearing of 'Di nwe uno'. Also, despite knowing that he is the subject being addressed, he looks at Mama Nathan momentarily without saying a word, not even to greet her. Beyond this, while every other person is working in the kitchen, Nnanna is kicking a can as football. Furthermore, Mama Nkemdilim nods as if to fully accept that despite being the youngest in the house, he is the master solely because he is a boy child. The implication of being privileged as a child by older women, including his mother, is that he will grow up to expect a more refined form of respect from his sisters, wife, and daughters.

Familial settings where the kitchen is reserved for women are common. It becomes abnormal for a kitchen to harbour a man cooking while a woman is doing something not related to the kitchen. This reality is captured by Godima Makama who states that 'In Nigeria, it is observed that womanhood is reduced to a mere infidel and a second-class citizen, hence, there is the commonality of [the] general belief system that the best place for women is in the "Kitchen"' (115), adding that this structure enables men to dominate women. This dominance is not only ensured by men but also enabled by women right from childhood just as Nwabulu reveals:

> Nnanna, my half-brother, was kicking an old Bournvita can that Mama Nkemdilim had thrown out … My sister, Nkemdilim, was rolling the stone in the little mortar, trying to turn the red pepper into a smooth paste, while Mama Nkemdilim was plucking ugu leaves for the soup. It seemed like a normal

> evening, with everyone doing their work … (75).

Mama Nkemdilim allows Nnanna to play while all the females in the house are in the kitchen, including his little sister, Nkemdilim — it is a normal evening. Provision is made for a little mortar to ensure little Nkemdilim's active participation in the kitchen. Mama Nkemdilim could have easily coaxed or coerced Nnanna into the kitchen, but she does not. This shows that men's elevated status in society is rooted in their preferential treatment right from childhood by their parents.

Moreover, women are not expected or allowed, in some cases, to be more than just daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. Makama notes that 'Women are therefore discriminated against from, in most cases, acquiring formal education, mistreated and perpetually kept as house-help' (115). In Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House*, Julie reports: 'But my mother worried about my marriage prospects. "Who will want to marry a woman who has gone to university?" she had asked my father. Here, Julie's mother worries about her daughter's chances of getting married, 'worried that men would be put off, that the car would be too intimidating' (110), implying that formal education is not the only problem, but possessions as well, owing to the practice of hypogamy by most men. At other times, certain professions are allotted to men while women may be considered in a few others. In a conversation between Julie and her father concerning career choices, the following ensues: 'Once, when I told my father this, he said, "No, he will not be a teacher. He will be a lawyer.

Maybe he will become a judge like Justice Louis Mbanefo. He could even become a politician like the great Zik. You, of course, maybe a teacher"' (115). Julie's father immediately rebukes the idea of his male child being a teacher the moment it is brought up. Instead, he embraces the idea of being a lawyer and politician, comfortably relinquishing the teaching profession to his daughter.

Some activities and approaches to life are masculine while some are feminine. Julie says: 'In the morning, I would get up and go about life like a man' (105). Going about life like a man in this case is to 'Teach, buy a plot of land, apply to see if I could be one of those sent on full-time, paid study leave to London' (105). Hence, from domestic to social and professional spaces, men are groomed to be superior and women, inferior. One of the most profound carriers of male privileging in the novel is marriage. The status of marriage is so extolled that it is an atrocity to conceive the idea of not getting married — a woman must be married as part of her womanhood, as Julie recounts:

> 'Perhaps Julie is destined to remain single, an okpokwu,' I had heard my mother confide in a low voice to her friend two weeks ago when they thought I could not hear. There was sadness and something like resignation in her voice. 'Wash your mouth out with water and soap,' her friend, Mama Nduka, a woman who had eight sons, had replied. 'She will still marry' (105).

No matter the situation, a woman is not supposed to conceive the thought of not getting married, age notwithstanding. To sum it up, 'any marriage was better than singleness' (131), 'even a woman who had married a man who beat her' (76). One would think that the travails of a woman will at least end in marriage, but in reality, it is only the stepping stone to completing her womanhood. This is addressed by Julie's mother who says that 'the best thing that a woman could hope to possess [… is] motherhood' (109). To get to motherhood, a woman's supposed best gift, marriage then becomes inevitable.

However, men seem to be the advantaged party in issues concerning marriage as the way marital affairs are portrayed in the novel supports men's polygamous nature. It is worse for a woman who has had a child out of wedlock, a situation that warrants Nwabulu to believe that:

> The best opportunity for a woman such as I had become was to marry an old man as his second or third wife. This might be a man who had no sons and who was hoping that what I had in my belly was a boy. It might be a widower whose wife had died and who had young children who needed a mother. Or it might be an old man, who simply wanted young blood that would be difficult to get otherwise, and who was not averse to taking the baby as an extra (72).

The above gives many opportunities for men to the detriment of women. An old man is allowed to take another wife, not because his first wife is deceased but because he just wants a young woman who would serve

his amorous needs. At this point, the woman's assumed best gift (motherhood) is denied by the man. The patriarchal setup of this society which cossets and coddles boys and men while neglecting the maximisation of women's interests does not spur the latter into polarising the former. Instead, as Adimora-Ezeigbo proposes, they adopt a snail-sense approach where they adjust where and when necessary to ensure the unity of boys/girls and men/women across all levels.

Conclusion

This paper has delineated male privileging in Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House*, highlighting the marginalised situation of women from childhood and the privileging of men from infanthood. The author portrays society's layered expectations from the woman which come in quick succession — mastering the art of home-keeping; possessing top culinary skills; being submissive and silent, especially in her dealings with men; getting married and having children (preferably male). The metric with which men and women are adjudged in the novel differs, and this does not stem only from the congenital physiological differences between the two primal genders but also from social constructs that are consciously or subconsciously programmed to undermine the humanity of the woman or dwindle her ambitions. For instance, Julie's mother in the novel is anxious about the unmarried status of her daughter which may remain unscathed till her death. This anxiety is rooted in her daughter's acquisition of formal education and her level of social relevance as opposed to the traditional

requirement of domestic proficiency and domiciliary efficiency prerequisite to bear the mark of womanhood.

Considering the consequences of being regarded as unmarriageable, a woman who aspires to be intellectually dexterous and socially renowned will be compelled to excise such ambitions just to meet demands that belittle and sub-categorise her under the man. However, societal norms are dynamic as modifications become necessary to ensure that the *modus operandi* of a particular society accommodates basic principles of humanism grounded on fairness for all irrespective of age, class, race, and sex, among other things. Even so, the women in *The Son of the House* encourage the adoption of snail-like patience and efficiency to maintain man/woman complementarity. Against this backdrop, Onyemelukwe-Onuobia subtly advocates a reevaluation of power distribution between men and women for the accommodation of women's ambition for social, political, and academic ascendancy without repercussions. The actualisation of Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's covert proposal guarantees a woman's personality of high social standing while still accommodating men.

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