

GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S NIGHT DANCER

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Abstract

This article examines gender discrimination in Chika Unigwe's Night Dancer, a novel that highlights patriarchal norms and the limitations they cause to women in contemporary African societies. Despite this novel's rich thematic engagement with issues of gender and oppression, it has received relatively little critical attention in this regard. From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, drawing in particular on Chris Weedon's theory, the study explores two major forms of gender discrimination: the unequal treatment of children, where boys are privileged over girls in education, and restricted decision-making, where women's educational aspirations are compromised by societal expectations. The analysis highlights that girls like Rapu in the novel are discouraged from pursuing education, while boys are motivated, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal prejudices. Similarly, the character of Ezi illustrates how women's choices, particularly in education, are suppressed in favor of traditional gender roles. Drawing on literary and academic sources, the article argues that Night Dancer not only reflects persistent gender inequalities in Africa but also advocates for change and women's empowerment through education and autonomy.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, education, patriarchy, women, child marriage

Résumé

Cet article examine la discrimination basée sur le genre dans Night Dancer de Chika Unigwe, un roman qui met en lumière les normes patriarcales et les limitations qu'elles causent aux femmes dans les sociétés africaines

contemporaines. Malgré le riche engagement thématique de ce roman sur les questions de genre et d'oppression, il a reçu relativement peu d'attention critique à cet égard. Dans une optique féministe poststructuraliste, s'appuyant en particulier sur la théorie de Chris Weedon, l'étude explore deux formes majeures de discrimination basée sur le genre : le traitement inégal des enfants, où les garçons sont privilégiés par rapport aux filles en matière d'éducation, et la restriction de la prise de décision pour les femmes, où les aspirations des femmes en matière d'éducation sont compromises par les attentes de la société. L'analyse souligne que les filles comme Rapu, dans le roman sont découragées de poursuivre des études, alors que les garçons sont motivés, ce qui reflète des préjugés patriarcaux profondément enracinés. De même, le personnage d'Ezi illustre la façon dont les choix des femmes, notamment en matière d'éducation, sont éclipsés au profit des rôles traditionnels de genre. S'appuyant sur des sources littéraires et universitaires, l'article soutient que *Night Dancer* reflète non seulement les inégalités persistantes entre les sexes en Afrique, mais plaide également en faveur du changement et de l'autonomisation des femmes par le biais de l'éducation et de l'autonomie.

Mots clés : discrimination, genre, littérature, misogynie, femmes

Introduction

In Africa, literature has always contributed to tackling social, political, economic, and religious issues that negatively affect people's lives. Literature plays a great role in the reconstruction of African societies through its power to raise awareness for positive change. It dismantles stereotypes, biases, or prejudices that undermine social inclusion.

Among the authors engaged in dissecting the insidious mechanisms of gender-based discrimination is the Nigerian novelist Chika Unigwe with her novel *Night Dancer*. In the novel, Unigwe artistically denounces misogyny in contemporary African societies and relates how patriarchal norms not only limit opportunities for women but also normalize their subjugation, a reality still pervasive in contemporary Nigeria, where 44% of girls are married before age 18 (Molokwu 30). Through the reality of Rapu and Ezi in Nigeria, Unigwe paints

the issue of gender-based discrimination in Africa in general, and sharply projects girls' predicament to urge for a good social change.

In fact, *Night Dancer* has received relatively limited critical attention regarding its treatment of gender and discrimination. Yet, its realistic portrayal of gender-based oppression offers valuable insight into the experiences of women in patriarchal societies. As a brief illustration, Victor O. Ogbeide's essay "Riding the Horse of Speech in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*" explores proverbs as literary techniques that add an aesthetic value to Unigwe's fiction. Furthermore, Ajayi Mercy Adenike and Olatunji Afolasade Temilade's article "The 21st Century Nigerian Women and Marital Challenges in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*" is essentially interested in the perceptions of the marital status of females in modern Africa. Regarding the problem, this research seeks to answer the following questions: What are the forms of gender-based discrimination depicted in the story? And to what extent is the depiction of the forms of gender-based discrimination relevant to contemporary African societies? These questions will be critically and deeply discussed to shed light on the discrimination against females based on their gender, not their abilities. This research aims to highlight forms of gender-based discrimination in *Night Dancer* and their social relevance.

The methodology for conducting this study is essentially rooted in documentary research, such as books, articles, magazines, scholarly journals, and reliable websites, to have access to strong information or knowledge. Moreover, the selected novel will be explored through a feminist approach, particularly Weedon's poststructuralist. The use of the feminist approach allows for a deep understanding of the biases, stereotypes, objectification, oppressions, and discrimination women undergo in male-dominated societies, and particularly reveals how patriarchal discourse naturalizes gender roles, as seen in Echewa's

dismissal of Rapu's education. This article mainly explores two forms of gender-based discrimination in the novel, namely unequal treatment of children and restricted decision-making.

1- Unequal Treatment of Children

Unequal treatment refers to privileging and caring for one child more than another one. It also consists of giving an opportunity or advantage to a child relying on his or sex. In *Night Dancer*, Chika Unigwe through Rapu's story denounces how women are encouraged to drop out of school whereas boys are motivated. Unigwe's narrator recounts that Rapu's father Echewa did not care about her education. He was unmindful about it including her future life. Abandoned, Rapu decided to leave school only "after her second year at the local mission school. [She] told her parents she never wanted to go back" (141) to school again., Rapu was unaware of the danger of abandoning school education that could change her life. She did not like going to school because she ignorantly found it difficult. As a little ignorant girl, her father, Echewa, could have convinced her to go back to school because it could lead her to economic independence. Echewa could have encouraged and advised his daughter to seriously learn whatever is taught at school and to be proud of going to school because her future depends on it. Surprisingly, Echewa fails to show Rapu the necessity of education in today's life. Rapu was not encouraged to go back to the local mission school because her father:

saw this as a sign of resilient independence, an indicator that she had the strength of will required to pursue all their dreams, and was glad, frankly, not to have spent money on school fees for her. She did not need an education to save them. (141)

This passage indicates how Echewa has not been capable of guiding his daughter. Rapu is welcome to abandon school rather than being convinced to go back to school. While one might initially attribute Echewa's neglect of her daughter's education to a general disregard for education, his contrasting investment in his son's schooling rather reveals a case of gender-based inequality treatment. Indeed, while Echewa believes that "school [is] the best place" (143) for his son, who "dreams of a big job in the city" (144), he thinks that his daughter Rapu, does not need education: "No. no need for school. What does a girl need school for?" (143). Echewa awkwardly appreciates girls' education owing to the stereotypes that his culture developed towards girls. His audacious words in this interrogative sentence explicitly show his disagreement with Rapu's education and in general, puts into question girls' education in Africa. . In other words, his words connote that a girl's education is unimportant. Echewa's bias about his daughter is linked to his phallocentric education. His septic opinion about his daughter's education corroborates with Chris Weedon's ideas in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. In this book, Weedon argues that "patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In [a] patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to the male as norm" (2). Weedon reveals built-in cultural narratives around biological differences on which men rely on to discriminate and subordinate girls. In patriarchal societies, biological sexual difference plays a significant role in the attribution of power and supremacy. The biological sex allows to set boys (norms) above girls (secondary) in society. Rapu's situation evokes the violation of the girlchild's rights to better education in African countries. The right to education in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, is still a myth and utopia. A lot of girls like Rapu do not go to school in Nigeria because they are victims of gender-based discrimination in their communities. To

substantiate this issue, Newman Enyioko in his 2021 article titled “Gender Equality and Educational System in Nigeria” highlights that:

57% of the 72 million primary school aged children who do not attend school are females. Additionally, girls are 4% percent less likely than boys to complete primary schools. In every income bracket, there are more female children than male children who are not attending school. Generally, girls in the poorest 20% of household have the lowest chance of getting an education. (4)

Regrettably, the above gender-based discrimination stems from prejudices and stereotypes in society. Within the same context, Dorothy Ofoha argues that “most African countries are patriarchal in structure – structure that is based on inequality and injustice. Patriarchal attitudes lead to gender stereotyping” (1). She shows that stereotypes about girls’ education have a direct link with patriarchy. In addition, Theophile Houndjo and Akinola Monday Allagbe point out that “social imbalances between men and women are the bedrock of injustices women encounter in the world, particularly in African societies” (18). For them, the gap between men and women is not a utopia in Africa but a pure reality. Sadly, these stereotypes can affect the female to the point of transforming her into somebody's property or domestic slave. Unigwe’s portrayal of the stereotypes through Echewa’s attitudes calls for a collective awareness against girls’ discrimination in Africa and around the world. Indeed, Unigwe through *Night Dancer* depicts that there “still exist significant gaps in all areas, especially education, economic empowerment, and decision making” (“Gender,” 4) in African societies. Unigwe’s depiction stands as a motivation to take a stand for gender equality, particularly girls’ education in sub-Saharan

nations. In addition to the issue of unequal treatment of children, the novelist sheds light on the issue of the restriction of freedom to make decisions.

2- Restricted Decision-making

Giving less freedom to somebody to make decisions means limiting one's ability to act independently. Indeed, it consists of acting under somebody's control and rules. African literary works, notably *Night Dancer*, depict how men unilaterally make decisions for girls rather than taking into consideration their choices. Unlike Rapu's case, the female character Ezi wanted to pursue her university studies to be financially independent, yet her parents forced her to get married. They disregarded her education because they judged marriage better for her. Ezy "had bigger plans, ambitions" (184) to create a better future for herself. Sadly, Ezi's parents compelled her to stop dreaming and demanded that she search for a husband. In commenting on school, Ezi's parents said "education was good, they agree, but that came secondary to a husband" (184). Ezi's parents' words indicate the restriction of Ezi's choice. These words point out how Ezi's parents prevented her from pursuing her dreams. Regrettably, this familial perception negatively restricted Ezi's ambitions, particularly her dream of being autonomous in society. Her parents' cultural expectations of marriage affected her life. The independent woman she expected to be in society turns into an illusion. The narrator shows Ezi's parents' restricted perception of a university degree as follows:

'Some men like to flaunt their wives' learning, even if the women do nothing with the degrees at the end of the day. To work with your diploma is not the goal,' she would remind Ezi. 'So why act like

getting it is the most important thing of all? Girls nowadays are too greedy! In our day, we were happy just to serve our men. (184)

The passage shows Ezi's parents' pessimistic comprehension of girls' education in modern society. They are lackadaisical about her fate and see the pursuit of education as an excessive ambition for women, while younger women like Ezi view it as empowering and a primary condition for creating a better future for themselves. The statement "we were happy just to serve our men" reflects the traditional, submissive role assigned to women, where service to men was seen as the pinnacle of female achievement. Ezi's parents criticize modern women for seeking more and call the desire for education "greedy". The above excerpt evokes how some school girls are forced into marriage in Nigeria and, by extension, in Africa. Forced marriage is one of the burning issues in today's Nigeria and by extension Africa. As an illustration, Chuks Cornelius Molokwu, in his 2021 article titled "Child/Forced Marriage and Human Rights of Women in Nigeria: A Legal Anatomy," shows that:

the prevalence of child marriage varies wildly among Nigerian regions, with figures ranging from 76% in the Northwest to 10% in the Southeast...It has been reported that 44% of girls in Nigeria are married before celebrating their eighteenth birthday, while 18% of girls are married before the age of fifteen. (30)

This practice jeopardizes girls' lives and reduces them to men's property in society. So far, Molokwu argues that the causes of this practice include poverty, illiteracy, family pressure, "mundane cultures and diverse customary laws operating in Nigerian societies" (31). Talking about poverty, the report titled

Fact Sheet on Child Marriage in Ghana highlights that “for some people, marrying off their daughters is a solution to reducing the family’s economic burdens” (4), which is essentially a violation of women’s rights. In a nutshell, Unigwe, through Ezi’s sad story, criticizes the phenomenon of forced marriage by calling for the promotion of girls’ education in Africa and around the world.

Conclusion

In summary, this analysis has highlighted two forms of gender-based discrimination in Chika Unigwe’s *Night Dancer*: unequal treatment of children and restrictive decision making. The analysis through Rapu and Ezi’s image, particularly the analysis of patriarchal biases in education and marriage shows how the girl child’s rights to education are violated because of patriarchy. By the same token, the analysis points out through Ezi’s situation that women are forced to get married because marriage stands as a primordial aspect in a girl’s life. Moreover, it needs to be said that gender-based discrimination stands as an abuse because it potentially brings about women’s subordination, oppression, and objectification. Unigwe’s novel *Night Dancer* raises the question of how long half of Africa’s potential can be compromised by the practice of gender discrimination.

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