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The Trope of Apotheosis and Intimations of Self-Immolation: A Deconstructive Interpretation of Mother-Daughter Dynamics in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*

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Abstract

The link between gender and creativity has often been emphasised in scholarly appraisals of women writings. Consequently, the diversity and strong presence of women writings on the scene of contemporary Nigerian prose fiction have centralised gender discourse in the scholarship on recent Nigerian prose writings. This paper scrutinises religious figures in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* towards a deeper engagement with her treatment of mother-daughter relations and gender complexities. Gods and goddesses are deployed as metaphorical tools towards comprehension of the relations of male and female mortals in the narrative. Furthermore, the characters in *Night Dancer* are re-imagined and analysed using religious imagery. This paper establishes that the religious metaphors in Unigwe's *Night Dancer* reflect core fundamental truths of gender relations in the society and serve as grand metaphors through which the trope of the absent mother in relation to the daughter and gender conceptions of the fictive world of *Night Dancer* could be interrogated.

Keywords: Religious Metaphors; Gender Complexities; Chika Unigwe; Third-generation Nigerian women writings; mother-daughter relationship.

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Résumé

Le lien entre le sexe et la créativité a souvent été souligné dans les évaluations scientifiques des écrits féminins. Par conséquent, la diversité et la forte présence des écrits féminins sur la scène de la fiction en prose nigériane contemporaine ont centralisé le discours en matière de genre dans les récents écrits sur la prose nigériane. Cet article examine les personnages religieux dans «Night Dancer» de Chika Unigwe en vue de faire la lumière sur les représentations du romancier des relations mère-fille et de la complexité des relations entre les sexes. Dans le récit, les dieux et les déesses sont déployés comme outils métaphoriques pour une compréhension des relations entre hommes et femmes. De plus, les personnages de «Night Dancer» sont réinventés et analysés en utilisant l'imagerie religieuse. Ce document conclut que les métaphores religieuses dans «Night Dancer» reflètent les vérités fondamentales au cœur des relations entre les sexes dans la société et servent aussi de métaphores larges à travers lesquelles le trope de la mère absente en relation avec sa fille et les perceptions sur les sexes dans le monde fictif de «Night Dancer» pourraient être interrogés.

Introduction

The earliest published creative endeavours attributable to Nigerian women are Itayemi P.A Ogundipe's 'Nothing so Sweet' (1947) and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966). Consequently, Nigerian women writings are schematised into the first, second and third generations (Adesanmi & Dunton, 2008; Obiwu, 2006). Third-generation Nigerian women prose fiction arguably represents the golden age of women writings in Nigeria as the contemporary Nigerian prose fiction scene boasts a formidable array of women writers who continue demonstrating gender awareness in describing the plight of women in a patriarchal and postcolonial society.

Furthermore, it is appropriate to note that it is almost impossible to separate gender from creativity. Yvonne Vera (1997) merely reiterates, albeit in a profound manner, the truism that underpins a true appreciation and conceptualisation of women writings when she asserts that as much as beautiful writing must be of the neuter gender, she has come to discover that she does not have the luxury of writing from this neutral space between the

male and female: "It is true, however, that one writes best on themes, feelings, actions and sentiments one is closely connected with. In this regards [sic], I like to think that I am writing. I am woman. I am writing" (1997: 558).

Ama Ata Aidoo (1988:513) argues that while being an African writer is not devoid of pathos, being a woman African writer comes with even a larger baggage because a female African writer "battles with sensibilities that are struggling ceaselessly to give expression to themselves in a language that is not just alien but was part of the colonizer's weaponry". Aidoo (1988: 517), as a woman writer, avers that "all writers are plagued by fears, real and imaginary, by all sorts of uncertainties and some very solid problems. After all, we are also human. The truth, though, is that some of us suffer a little more, simply because we are African women".

From the foregoing, it may be conjectured that African women writings bleed with the desire to rewrite the female self while being haunted by the shadows of neo-colonialism. Thus, African women writings are a sandwich of a Woolf-like keen perception of gender discrimination and a Fanon-like postcolonial consciousness which any African writer worthy of the name may find difficult to ignore. The double burden of race and gender which bedevils the black African woman is thematised by Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Women writings in Africa cannot but be scrutinised with the gender-consciousness that permeates the writings.

The narrative in focus in this paper is Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* (2012). Unigwe was born in 1974 in Enugu, Nigeria. She got her early education up to the first degree level in Nigeria before relocating to Belgium. Unigwe has a B.A in English Language and Literature from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; MA from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, and PhD from the University of Leiden, The Netherlands. Before *Night Dancer* (2012), Unigwe had written two novels: *The Phoenix* (2005) and *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009). Unigwe has the following literary prizes to her credit: the 2003 BBC Short Story competition, the 2007 UNESCO-Aschberg fellowship and the 2009 Rockefeller Foundation fellowship for creative writing. For *Night Dancer* (2012), which had earlier been published in Dutch in the year 2011 as *Nachtdanser*, Unigwe won the 2012 NLNG prize.

Night Dancer (2012), which is divided into three parts, begins after the death of Ezi whose only daughter, Mma, is left with more questions than answers. Mma in the wake of her mother's death looks up to Madam Gold, who had been her mother's best friend, for answers about her past. She is particularly keen on clues that will lead her to a reunion with her father. Her mother, a prostitute, had persistently told her she had no father. Thus, Mma bears the stigma of being the fatherless daughter of a prostitute all her life until she embarks on a journey into the world of her mother through the letters the latter specifically leaves for her. The narrative thrives on the letters Ezi leaves behind. Mma must plod through these letters to establish her identity. Being a story centred on the individual's quest for identity, *Night Dancer* may be regarded as a *bildungsroman*. This stance may be buttressed by M.H Abrams' (1999:193) conceptualisation of a *bildungsroman* as a novel whose subject "is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences - and often through a spiritual crisis - into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world".

While Unigwe's *Night Dancer* is hardly a recent book, there is scant scholarly appraisal of it**.** However, reviews abound on it. A very encapsulating review of *Night Dancer* was done by Bernadine Evaristo (2012) of *The Guardian*. Evaristo affirms that *Night Dancer* is a testifier to Unigwe's prowess in "bringing hitherto submerged stories about African women to the fore." She commends Unigwe for her consistency in tracing the plight of the women. For Evaristo, *Night Dancer* is the continuity of the work Unigwe began in *The Phoenix* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. *Night Dancer* (2012) is significant because it contributes to the ever growing corpus of migrant Nigerian prose fiction and the vibrant Nigerian women prose fiction scene. Femi Morgan (2014) is as lavish in his praise of *Night Dancer* (2012) as he is unsparing in his criticism. In addition to observing that *Night Dancer* (2012) is more Nigerian than Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street*, Morgan queries Unigwe's depiction of Enugu: "I strongly feel that Unigwe greatly reduced the variegated values of residents of Enugu. It cannot be true that Ezi did not find someone who had gone through the same experiences she was going through, who could share solidarity with (*sic*)" Morgan (2014) also notes the dominant motif of the work as the persistent

revelation of "cultural balances that have relegated the female gender into irrelevance." Furthermore, Morgan extols the style of the narrative: "It is an exceptional narrative which throws light into lost memories with letters and flashbacks… you will also find fantastic satire, irony and colourful proverbs dotting the work." However, Morgan does not fail to express his particular displeasure at stylistic excesses:

> My grouse with her style in *Night Dancer* is that she throws up these word formations that do not seem to add any stylistic presupposition to the work like M is for 'Mother, Mommy, Mma, Mamanukwu…' Sometimes, Unigwe overanalyses the actions of her characters – perhaps for her foreign audience who could be lost in context.

Morgan (2014) concludes that Unigwe provides a keen depiction of cultural imbalances characterising patriarchy while indicting women for being complicit in the system that subjugates them. Judith Amanthis (2014) is less generous in her enthusiasm over *Night Dancer* (2012) describing it as a disappointing second novel. Amanthis condemns the novel for being grossly predictable and views Mma a weak third narrator. Amanthis (2014) concludes that the over-sheltered character, Mma, is weak for being over-cushioned by the narrator, lacking in personality besides being the opposite of her larger than life mother. In Amanthis'(2014) view, so weak is Mma that she does not survive the narrative.

While, in view of the foregoing, it may be affirmed that *Night Dancer* (2012) has had its share of reviews thematically and stylistically, this paper builds on the groundwork that has been laid by analysing the complex mother-daughter relationship, with particular emphasis on the absent mother, Ezi, in Unigwe's *Night Dancer*. The uniqueness of this paper stems from its exploration of religious codes and symbols as metaphors through which Unigwe's treatment of gender is then scrutinised. Thus, this paper relies on archetypal criticism as a theoretical framework to isolate and study religious symbolism and metaphors as it pertains to mother-daughter relations in Unigwe's *Night Dancer*.

The absent mother has been identified as a dominant trope by several scholars on prose fiction by contemporary Nigerian women writers (Kehinde & Mbipom, 2011:71; Akung, 2012). This trope may be found in

Chimamanda Adichie's novels from *Purple Hibiscus (*2003*) to Americanah (*2013*)*. Besides the novels of Adichie, other examples of narratives where the trope of the absent mother rears its head include Diana Evans' *26a (*2005*),* where the mother, Ida Aubrey "gave the impression of someone who was always leaving and had never fully arrived" (18); Sefi Atta's *Everything Good will Come (*2005*), A Bit of Difference (*2012*),* Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This (*2009*),* Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (*2010*)* Shalini Nadaswaran (2011:26), on the recurrent trope of the absent mother, explains that while these mothers "may not be physically absent, they are emotionally absent in their spiritual connectivity with their daughters."

The trope of the absent mother is not peculiar to contemporary Nigerian women fiction. Nnu Ego's mother, Ona, is absent in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1977). In the same manner, the eponymous character in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) is motherless. Eleanor Birne (2011) observes the recurring trope of the absent mother in English fiction:

> There are weirdly few credible portraits of mothers in English fiction. Eighteenth and 19th-century novels, where one would normally start to look for such things are full of orphans: there are governesses and surrogate mothers such as Jane Eyre or Miss Havisham, but the mother herself is often the hole at the centre of the story. What, you wonder, were novelists avoiding? Is there something about motherhood fiction doesn't like? (1)

Layla Earnest (2011) views the depiction of the absent mother in female writings as the heritage of the patriarchal dominance of literature:

> The absent mother trope has been a part of literature at least as far back as *Beowulf*. The representation of the absent mother has continued throughout English and American literary history in the canonical works of writers, such as Shakespeare, Austen, and Disney films such as *Bambi* and *Cinderella* (2).

As Adrienne Rich (1976:225) explains, the "...cathexis between mother and daughter... is the great unwritten story". Rich (1976: 218) explores the complexities underlying mother-daughter relationships thus: "That earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world"(218).

This paper explores the trope of the absent mother and the complex mother-daughter relations in Unigwe's *Night* Dancer. As the study draws on religious symbols and figures in the texts towards the analysis of the trope of the absent mother in the narrative, the theoretical approach taken to this discourse is archetypal criticism.

Religion as Metaphor: Collective Unconscious Cast in Stone and Texts

Religion thrives on symbols and metaphors which are imbued with the life force and values of a people. This discourse is rooted in archetypal criticism because the archetypal critic investigates "primordial and universal images" that are "…revealed in dreams, artistic and literary productions, primitive religions and mythologies" (David Carter, 2006:80)

Religion is a vast canvas on which metaphoric signs which reveal the primal identity of the people are scrawled. As Gunther Kress explains, "Signs are made and motivated; the signs and the meanings that a sign maker makes are an expression of their disposition, habitus, identity- of their interest" (Lindstrand Fredrik, 2008: 62). In weaving the narratives of their deities, a people's core ideology is condensed and given ultimate expression. As Wole Soyinka (1988) theorises, religion is made up of "...man's images of essence-ideal" (12). These images, being figurative are metaphors which may then be scrutinised for basic truths on the values, weaknesses, strengths and aspirations of the adherents.

The representation of deities in a culture creates texts that palpably express core cultural identities. Presumably and justifiably under Sigmund Freud's (1919:45) schematisation of the evolution of human thoughts into the three phases (the animistic phase, the religious phase and the scientific phase), it may be asserted that the world has shed its cloak of animism and moved into the realm of science. However, the metaphor inherent in religion is of interest to the modern psychologist because it presents an avenue to explore the psyche and the bequest of the ancients which is often tied up with the religious. Religious symbols existing and flourishing in a culture are therefore exaggerations of a people's core, regardless of who bows to the deities or not. As Soyinka (1988:10-11), drawing on a Yoruba proverb expatiates: *Bi o s'enia, imale o si* (If humanity were not, the gods would not

be)... whatever semantic evasion we employ – the goodness, the beingness of god – they remain abstractions of man-emanating concepts or experiences which presuppose the human medium."

Furthermore, religious metaphors, beyond the debate of atheism versus theism, assume their significance in light of Marijas Gimbutas' posture in an interview with James Powell (1989) that religion is a reflection of the social structure. Thus, the elements that are represented in grand intensity in the religion of a people are drawn from the pool of the people's vitality and not the other way round.

This paper situates the gender-conscious analysis of Unigwe's *Night Dancer* into religious-speak. Thus, the religious figures in the narrative are taken as metaphors through which Unigwe's *Night Dancer* is explored. In line with the thrust of this discourse and the belief that the actions of deities as represented in the mythology and religion of a people may be taken as the grand depictions of fundamental truths of human psychology, this study attempts a gender-conscious analysis of Unigwe's *Night Dancer* as a play of the deities, while harnessing repressed religious symbols and metaphors within the text and centralising them in a bid to examine on a grand level the cultural perceptions of gender dynamics and mother-daughter relations in the narrative.

The gods as Protagonist in *Night Dancer*: A Tale of Two Goddesses

While *Night Dancer* (2012) may be considered the story of Mma's journey to identity and self-worth, it may be observed that running concurrently with the narrative as it revolves around Mma is the story of an absent character whose absence haunts the narrative. Indeed, *Night Dancer* (2012) presents a unique study in the aesthetics of absence when we consider that before the story is Mma's, it is Ezi's. Thus, there is an absent story and an absent protagonist. The absent story and protagonist leave their marks on the present story and the present protagonist, until the two are intertwined as they approach the end.

Furthermore, the dynamics of the clash between absence and presence rears its head in the relationship between the trio of Mma and her parents. Ezi is Mma's reality before she fulfils her longing for her father, who may be taken as the embodiment of patriarchy. Thus, the triangle consisting of

Ezi, Mike and Mma becomes, in religious conceptions, the depictions of an acolyte whose only choice is monotheism. Ezi in this construct is a Great Goddess-type, who, as Gloria Steinem maintains, is "…the whole female human being who once lived in pre-patriarchal times – at least in religion and imagination" who has been effaced over time (Bolen,1984: xiii).

However, as Bolen (1984) maintains, all women fit into the goddess typology and may be understood even on a deeper scale when the deified essence of the person is located. Thus, from this point, this study undertakes a goddess-reading of the interactions of the women in *Night Dancer* (2012). This goddess-reading of *Night Dancer* will scrutinise the collision of the physical and the metaphysical in the narrative, especially as it shapes the two female characters, Ezi and Rapu, who will subsequently be understudied as binary constructs. The tale of the goddesses, as explored in this study, begins from Echewa and his family. Unigwe's *Night Dancer*, as construed from this point of view, provides meaning that may be deconstructed as the repressed elements of the narrative. Echewa has lived in poverty all his life, until, presumably, his dead grandmother successfully entreats the gods who decide to smile upon Echewa's family and grant him a daughter. This daughter is Rapu. Rapu, therefore, is believed to be Echewa's re-incarnated grandmother: "Maybe she had come back, tired of seeing her grandson suffer to feed his family, she had nagged the gods until they decided the time was right for her incarnation" (129).

Thus, Rapu, the opposing goddess to Ezi, is her grandmother given a second chance, having surrendered to the gods, her power by relying on their help to return to the world to help her grandson. Rapu's story therefore begins with male deities and her aims end with her grandson, also male. Rapu's surrender, as a goddess, in the world of the unborn to the gods has been foreshadowed by Echewa's mother-in-law who, earlier in the narrative, has power to control rain until she is made to convert to Christianity. It is significant that the priest who leads her to burn her powers is male:

> The pastor had convinced her to convert to Christianity with gifts and an assurance that she would make it to *his God's* heaven... As part of the deal, she cast her rain stones into the Mmavu and scattered the brooms onto her cooking fire. People said the fire cackled and gave out a sound like the mournful sounds of an old woman (147).

Rapu, when she arrives in the Echewa household, arrives as she has been permitted to, by the gods. Therefore, the foundation of Echewa's confi-dence in Rapu is predicated on the notion that Rapu is a girl backed by the gods, as Rapu is recognised as the favoured one of the gods, particularly, Ajofia. Rapu hears the story throughout her childhood; the story of "how she had found favour with the gods, of how she would lift the family out of penury..." (131). Ajofia, the god, chooses Rapu as the messiah of the family. No one in Echewa's family knows how this will be achieved but they have implicit trust in the promise of the gods, and "It was generally believed that she would stumble upon it, for the ways of the gods are mysterious, but it was also generally known that the gods expect a certain amount of initiative" (131).

Thus, a new character appears at this point; the god, Ajofia, having chosen Rapu, is a distinct character. His attributes are enumerated and highlighted, as the narrative progresses. For instance, he is described as being like other gods who do not just say "Ngwa, let me. Open your mouth. Open wide, let me feed you... no, if you want to eat the food that has been destined for you, you have to open your mouth yourself. Open wide and you'll be fed" (131). Ajofia is fully in support of Rapu. Therefore, whoever will confront Rapu will have to get through the god, Ajofia first. Rapu is complete and empowered by her alignment with the gods.

Ezi, as the binary opposite of Rapu, on the other hand is a self-complete woman. Ezi shares the attributes of the supreme pre-patriarchal Goddess, as has been earlier stated. For one thing, she does not need a man. Beautiful and powerful, Ezi is "one of the few female students" (172) in her department in the University. Thus, we find that Ezi is very unlike Rapu who drops out of school because she does not see the logic of how it is "wear, wore, worn" and not "fear, fore, forn" (133). Ezi knows precisely what she wants. Unlike Rapu, who waits upon the gods; Ezi does not fail to declare her ambition and her intention to fly free:

> 'Times have changed,' she told her parents and she for one was happily changing with the times. 'I am a pioneer,' she said. 'I am one of the few women in my department. It is up to us to encourage other women by staying on and chasing our dreams. and now, those dreams do not include marriage until I have my degree firmly in my hand' (181).

Ezi does not wait for a man to complete her: "When Ezi met Mike, she liked to say she had not been looking for a husband. She had not been one of those women who measured their worth by the ease with which they snagged a husband" (171). However, like the Hera-type of Bolen's (1984) archetypes, Ezi fashions her bonds by falling in love with Mike who holds her down securely and prevents her from flying off as she initially dreams of. Mike, it is said, feels saddened, whenever Ezi broaches the matter of securing a job: "Mike had looked at her with a sad smile as if she had hurt him: "You are my woman. My wife. It is my duty to work and provide for us, and yours to look after us" (176). Although, Ezi is unhappy to be idle, she submits her will to Mike. This idleness, coupled with childishness, causes her to become lethargic. It is not enough for Ezi to be a wife but she fears displeasing Mike. In this regard, we find that beautiful and vibrant Ezi is very different from Rapu, a "spindly-legged waif" (175) who has abandoned formal education, is overjoyed to be a maid and whose sole ambition is to get Mike to notice her. Till the day he does, she lives for that, basking in the warmth of his commendations as she takes Ezi's place in catering to Mike's needs both spoken and unspoken.

The paths of Ezi and Rapu cross when Ezi decides to take on a maid because she is advised by Amara to get "someone the angels would see her taking care of and loving and so bear her silent prayers to God themselves" (175). Ezi and Mike approach Echewa and his wife for their daughter, Rapu. Rapu relocates with Mike and Ezi to Kaduna. She is a very willing house girl who likes being the woman of the kitchen and soon comes to resent Ezi as a taskmaster. She savours Mike's bountiful commendation. Not long after, Ezi begins to feel restless about the rapidly blooming Rapu, whose diligence leaves Ezi no excuse to disengage her. In this atmosphere, Ezi becomes pregnant.

The life-long rivalry which begins from the moment Rapu is ensconced in Mike and Ezi's home culminates in the displacement of Ezi, as Rapu also becomes pregnant by Mike. In the resulting events, Ezi throws her out of the house, disappointed that Rapu has been sleeping around. The next time Ezi sees Rapu, Ezi has a baby girl and Rapu is accompanied by Mike's mother

who is beaming over her grandson. While attempts are made to convince Ezi to put up with the new arrangement, Ezi finds it difficult to come to terms with sharing a husband with Rapu. She finds the idea of living under the same roof with Rapu and her new son loathsome. Mike becomes the embodiment of all Ezi detests in men, a man who can sleep with his maid and intimate that a son is of greater value than a daughter. In response to Ezi's fury and heartbrokenness over Mike's betrayal, her mother's caution only serves to fuel her anger at Mike:

> His son! His son! And that, my dear, makes all the difference. You do not want to anger him ooo, do not anger him because at this moment, you're standing only with one leg inside the house. This Rapu has landed on both feet. You're upset now. You're angry but my dear, after the anger, you'll have to think of how to hang on to him (196).

Ezi dismisses this advice and instead, opts to defy parents, friends and love by leaving Mike and Kaduna. While Ezi's defiance might be celebrated as a feminist victory, it becomes Rapu's victory because Rapu simply takes over the home and soon after, has twins for Mike. By all accounts, Rapu's story has a happy end, having been so successful at purging the house of all traces of Ezi. Years later, Rapu can gloat: "Ezi was dead and forgotten. Mike never mentioned her. Their friends that had asked after her no longer did, and some of their wives had begun to see her as the new mistress... She and Mike had expanded their family. Everything was in order" (205).

This is life in her father's house, as Mma would meet it. It is a house where her mother has been thoroughly effaced, as "whatever life Ezi had lived here had been erased" (215). What is more, whereas Mike can barely hide her disappointment that Mma got her degree in theatre arts, he is proud of Rapu's son, a medical graduate. In the competition that is sparked off, in which Mma gets caught up, Mma is driven to lie that she works in a bank to save face, because "with her doctor brother and the twins doing brilliantly at school, she did not want to appear unambitious" (226). Thus, Rapu appears to be the one who ends up better, in the clash between the two, for her fortunes are significantly reversed for good. Ezi, on the other hand, spends the rest of her life as a prostitute and dies without reconciling with her family, the society and her daughter.

Whereas, in some cases, it might be argued that prostitution is an act of self-assertion, this is not the case for Ezi because she does not wilfully choose prostitution but is forced into it, after finding her other plans to eke a living thwarted at every turn. Significantly, Unigwe (2015) in her interview with Laura Pegram, in view of *On Black Sisters' Street*, contributes to this argument as she invites readers to contemplate how prostitution and self-assertion can go hand in hand, asking, "Can one be a prostitute and be feminist? Can't one if one has made that choice herself and feels empowered by exercising that choice?" However, it may be affirmed that Ezi's resort to prostitution is not a feminist choice, as she is driven by a world filled with difficulty to survive as a single mother who cannot take full employment because she does not want to be parted from her baby.

Furthermore, Ezi's fearlessness and hard-heartedness demonstrated by her refusal to live in a polygamous home is undermined by the revelation that she actually returns to beg Mike:

> She came back. She came back once with you. She said it was to give us another chance. I thought that she had changed her mind. For her to have come all the way... I was very happy. I loved her... But it was impossible... Either I kept the two of you, or I kept my son. What sort of a choice was that? (239).

Thus, in the contest between the gods-backed Rapu and Ezi, the independent goddess, the former is the winner in this version of the story. However, Rapu's victory is not merely hers but that of the gods, who in one move achieve two effects. As they move to rescue Echewa from poverty, they also move to settle their age-long scores with the Goddess. Ezi in this context is the effigy of that great pre-patriarchal Goddess against whom the idea of gods has ceaselessly raged. Through Rapu, therefore, the final victory of the gods may be gleaned. When she enters Ezi's household and desires Mike, Rapu, the incarnate, that is on earth on the terms of the gods, rests assured in the gods: "Rapu always knew that whatever the gods had fated, they found a way to bring to pass. That was the greatest lesson her father ever taught her and her father was a wise man. Everything was pre-ordained" (187).

Thus, it is the gods that lead the childless couple to the doorstep of Echewa in their search for a domestic help. If this train of thought is followed, it is the gods who are firmly in charge, when Rapu's mother gives her old wrappers to Rapu as she progresses on the journey to Kaduna with this new couple. Rapu, calm in her trust in the gods and their ways, does not wonder too long at the gift of old wrappers from her mother because she is aware that her mother comes from a line of women gifted with clairvoyance and foresight: "She had no idea what she was supposed to do with it. The reason would come, she was sure. After all, it was said that her mother's family had the gift of second eye. They saw things ordinary people were not privy to" (146).

Thus, it may be inferred that by giving her daughter these old wrappers, she demonstrates an insight into the minds of the gods that the wrappers will lead Mike to her daughter's bed. Meanwhile, the will of God, as Rapu boasts, is that the flat-chested Rapu will suddenly sprout breasts and become a woman, because, as Rapu knows on her first day with Mike's family: "...it was not by God's will that she had underformed breasts. She knew it. It was just a matter of time and hers too would soon start to show" (154).

In the narrative, as it may be thus conceived and engaged in mythical metaphors, Ezi manages to delude herself into thinking the gods are on her side when she gets pregnant: "At night, she laid in the crooks of his arms, breathed into his nose and was certain that life could only get better. And that the gods who watched over her did cartwheels and laughed" (181). The gods, however, have no use for Icarian Ezi. Here, she is simply allowed to float on waxen wings till she is cut to size. Perhaps the gods truly did cartwheels and laugh, as Ezi thinks. However, the laughter is at Ezi's expense. For, these gods will later decree that Rapu's breasts will sprout and prove that it is truly a mystical foresight, or better still, their influence that inspires Rapu's mother to give her the earlier mentioned wrappers which she cannot earlier find a use for. Rapu will then choose the wrapper as the covering of choice when she cleans on the significant morning that will represent the turning point of the story, and as these gods who have orchestrated this significant morning have planned from the moment when her mother has the hunch to give her these wrappers. Unsurprisingly, it is one of the wrappers that will fall off Rapu in the morning as she does the

chores around the house that seals the plans of the gods: "A wrapper falling off and allowing him a peek – a short peek because he had beaten a hasty retreat back into his bedroom–...of Rapu's lush womanhood" (183). At this point, Mike's resolve as a faithful and loving husband crashes. Unsurprisingly, the night Ezi spends out of time leads him to Rapu's bedroom. This, as contented Rapu sees it, is the doing of the gods:

> Rapu always knew that whatever the gods had fated, they found a way to bring to pass. That was the greatest lesson her father ever taught her, and her father was a wise man. Everything was pre-ordained. Seeing Uncle Mike in her room, his eyes looking like a man that had not slept in many days, Rapu knew where her destiny lay. If he had not touched her, she might have made the first move (187).

Thus, Rapu, finds that she is saved the difficulty that comes with making the first move and risking a possible refusal, since she does not have to make the first move. Rapu is essentially a passive character who is a mere front for the gods' vendetta. The gods act and Rapu is a shadow figure through whom the gods act and have their way. This may be further buttressed by Echewa's visit to the new home of Rapu. Seeing Rapu enthroned as the woman of Mike's house, he does not consider the triumph to be Rapu's but Ajofia's: "Her father had said that the gods had fulfilled their promise beyond expectations: 'Ah, if only there is a way I can repay Ajofia" (207).

In view of the foregoing, the god, Ajofia is the ultimate protagonist. Ajofia is thus portrayed as the benevolent god, the hero who has successfully eliminated the hindrance, Ezi. Through the gods, Rapu becomes the crowned queen of a man who can barely remember her name, even after several sexual encounters and a pregnancy. Ajofia becomes the protagonist in the tale of the two goddesses, for he has proven himself in a clash against the Goddess, albeit the fight is conducted in an underhanded manner. The gods as protagonists become metaphorical embodiments of the patriarchal conspiracy that thwarts a woman's strive towards self-assertion. They are the metaphor for the hostile society in which Ezi finds herself after making the brave decision to leave Mike. These gods endorse Rapu and humble Ezi, who in the words of Mike, "thought she was the queen of England" (238). Thus, in Unigwe's narratives, where the gods are not regarded as characters, a

world of alternative meaning is unearthed as they are awoken and their roles are interrogated in relation to the entire narrative.

A Mother's Walk to Apostheosis and Manifestations of Self-Immolation in *Night Dancer*

Whereas, Nwapa and Emecheta belong to the earlier generation of women writing and coincidentally explore the dynamics of motherhood or the woes of barrenness, the act of birth and mothering, this modern generation of Nigerian women writers have mostly appropriated the trope of the coming-of-age of the girl-child, thereby becoming spokespersons for the daughter generation, while focusing on re-birth. For them, it is a walk down a close-ended street whose goal is the arrival of the individual woman at self re-creation. Thus, while the physical birth is done first by the mother of the protagonist, the protagonist of the *bildungsroman* form, as has been created by third-generation Nigerian women prose writers, subsequently has to re-birth herself. Therefore, we find the presence of the absent mother, which, in the view of Nadaswaran (2011), is the hallmark of how the women depicted in these narratives have transcended traditional and sociological limitations. In line with this, Nadaswaran affirms that:

> ...this severance of maternal ties does not render the female characters void but instead equips them with emotional fortitude to achieve their sense of empowerment. Young third-generation female characters instead "fearlessly pull out of [themselves] and look at and identify with […] the living creativity" despite the lack of support received from their mothers (26).

In engaging *Night Dancer* (2012) through religious metaphors, this analysis scrutinises *Night Dancer* as the writing of the generation of daughters. The interrogation of the novel, in light of the foregoing, will be premised on the dynamics of mother-daughter relationship underscored by Electra-like complexities. The absent mother who, as drawn from Nadaswaran (2011), has been perceived as one of the obstacles the daughter on the path to self-identity has to surmount, will be re-examined and possibly rehabilitated.

Ezi's story in the narration follows the course of her being accused of witchery then being venerated after her death. Similarly, the constant motif

characterising the Goddess narrative is witch-branding and ante-patriarchal mother-veneration, as mirrored in the patriarchy inherent in the cult of the Virgin Mary, one side of woman effacement. As Vladimir Tumanov (2011) affirms, Eve and Mary are one side of the same coin:

> Eve, the inventor of female sexuality, is repeatedly viewed by the church fathers, e.g., Augustine and Origen, as Mary's opposite. Thus, Eve becomes the embodiment of the whore: both attractive in the context of the promiscuity strategy and repulsive in terms of paternal uncertainty: "Death by Eve, life by Mary" (St. Jerome). The Mary-Eve dichotomy has given a conceptual basis to what is known in psychology as the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy: the tendency to categorize women in terms of two polar opposites (iii).

As it will be subsequently explored, Ezi's depiction as Eve, self-seeking, flamboyant mother and as Madonna, the self-sacrificing mother reeks of patriarchal stereotypes. At this point, Chinua Achebe's (1988) view is worth re-iterating:

> ...the idea came to Man to turn his spouse into the Mother of God, to pick her up from right under his foot where she'd been since Creation and carry her reverently to a nice, corner pedestal. Up there, her feet completely off the ground she will be just as irrelevant to the practical decisions of running the world in the bad old days... (99)

Thus, as may be inferred from the foregoing, in the swift move that makes a *theotokos* (Bearer-of-God), woman is cast down anew. The journey towards this ironic deification may be better illuminated by a brief foray into the world of Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* (1979). All Nnu Ego ever wants to be is to be the mother of successful sons, a worthy wife to Nnaife and children to hold her hand. She does not get this in her lifetime. When she dies, she is a young woman whose beauty has faded and has aged under the weight of unending sacrifice of self. Her death is borne of an emotional tiredness that drains her so much that she merely "lay(s) down by the road side, thinking that she had arrived home" and dies there (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 1979: 224). It takes her death to bring her children home. After they come home, they give her a very expensive funeral and "a shrine was made in her name, so that her grandchildren could appeal to her should they be barren." Thus, she is made a goddess that will further be at the beck

and call of her children, continuing the same selfless giving after her death. Even in death, she is granted no reprieve. The hallmark of her life is expected to be the glorious funeral she gets after abandonment in her lifetime, "...What else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial?" (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 1979: 224).

What we know of Ezi, before we encounter her in her memoirs, is presented through the eyes of her daughter, Mma, who considers her mother to be blight on her reputation. Thus, Ezi in her life time is present but absent, as her daughter resolutely shuts her out and wishes she were dead. Ezi, however, finds strength in this early absence by becoming stronger in her absence. Ezi drives the narrative by her death and her absence. Her death and absence leave many questions unanswered. In the attempt to answer the questions that assume urgency following her death, the recourse is to follow the clues she has left behind. In this regard, Ezi has devised a means to counter death, which may be regarded as the ultimate absence by devising a means to be present in her absence by leaving letters.

Before becoming acquainted with her mother through these letters, Mma's gaze is planted on the father she has never seen nor known. This is another instance in which the aesthetics of absence drives the plot in the narrative. When Ezi is present, Mike cannot be present because Ezi's presence exists in a binary opposition to Mike's absence. Thus, when Ezi becomes absent, Mma sets out to discover her father because now, her father can be present; the binary construct has been reversed. She pines for the father of her fantasy and having concluded that it is her mother's presence that keeps her father away, wishes that her mother were dead**:**

> She had wanted her mother dead. She had willed it. She had thought several times of what it would be like to mix otapiapia in her mother's food. The day her mother had complained of cramps... Mma was sure she was to blame. How else to explain the cramps that started after Ezi ate the fufu and soup that she had made? (223).

Mma's selfishness rears its head at different points during the narrative. Ezi is resented by Mma for amassing her fortune through prostitution. Although Mma despises her mother for being a prostitute, she resents being "a wayward woman's daughter" (65), yet this does not stop her from

thinking proudly of Neni House as hers while selfishly luxuriating in the wealth her mother amasses from prostitution. After her mother's death, as she plans to thwart her mother's plan of building a dream home in order to "rile" and "torture" her mother's spirit, Mma looks on the comfortable nest she has been left by her mother and feels content: "She was not strapped for cash. In fact, she had more money than she would ever need. She tried not to feel grateful to her mother for the inheritance. After everything her mother put her through, setting her up for life was the least she owed her. It was only fair" (90).

With her mother securely out of the way**,** Mma, as a mother-killing and father-worshipping Electra, proceeds to seek an unencumbered relationship with her father. However, to Mma's chagrin, it has not been the life of her mother that keeps her father away from her but her mother's displacement by Rapu and her own displacement by Rapu's son, who is worth more to her father than her, his daughter. Therefore, Mma's visit to her father leads to disillusionment, for her father is not what she expects him to be. She finds that the true loss in her life has not been her father but her mother who was there and for whom Mma had spared no patience. Therefore, a shattering of figurative Electra-like expectations occurs. Mma's situation can be better understood against the backdrop of Rich's (1976:220) assertion: "…as my father's daughter, I suffered the obscure bodily self-hatred peculiar to women who view themselves through the eyes of men". Mma finds herself groping in a world away from Ezi. Ezi, in her absence as Mma's first deity, assumes greater significance as the world away from her, which Mma arrives at, is a world characterised by violence, religious crisis and gross discontent.

Having experienced disillusionment where she expects to be warmly welcomed by her father, Mma seeks to return home to build her mother's house. Consequently, it may be inferred that thwarted figurative oedipal expectations, not repentance, drives Mma to return home. Not being able to get exclusive attention from her father, Mma, who appears to be driven by cupboard love, returns to her mother. It takes rejection in her father's house for her to be able to declare, in retrospective repentance: "I killed her, Obi. I wanted her dead... I never understood her... I didn't even go to see her in the hospital when she was sick. And she asked for me! She asked for me!" (241).

Thus, it takes the death of her mother and the inability of her father to fill the void created for her to return to erect a temple for her mother – as symbolised by the desire to build her mother's dream home. It takes the realisation that her father is not hers any longer to get her to rue her mother's absence in song:

> *Obu onye ga-di ka nne m*
> *Nne m oo*
> *O bu onye ga-di ka nne m*
> *Nne m o* (223)
>
> Can there be anyone like my mother?
> My mother oo
> Can there be anyone like my mother?
> My mother oo

Mma's deification of Ezi after death is not different from her grandfather's grant of posthumous forgiveness to Ezi. Ezi is rehabilitated by her father, after her death following a lifetime of rejection by her parents: "My daughter buried in a cemetery! I heard that... We have to do another ceremony. A re-burial. Give her spirit some peace" (104). By singing in praise of a mother who is dead and is despised in her lifetime, Mma becomes, like Okonkwo of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) who returns to his mother's house after his father's village has dealt him a hard blow. Mma behaves like *Akara Ogun* of D.O Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale* who cries out praises to his mother, the witch, after she has been killed by his father when he finds himself in dire straits. Mma becomes the children of Nnu Ego who leave their mother to die, lying by the road side, with no child to hold her hands and no one to talk to, despite having given her whole life to them. If Ezi could tell the story of her life after death, it would be a similar story to Nnu Ego's, it would be a story of betrayal by her husband, of desiring a child because she believes a child will complete her, of giving her all to the child and being left to die alone, as though she had no child, although, "she asked" for her (241). It will be a story of being rejected by her daughter to whom she labours to give a good life and leaves a vast inheritance. It will be a lament over having a daughter who does not even give her a befitting burial from the vast wealth she labours and accumulates in her lifetime. As Madam

Gold laments, this act is made even more evil because Ezi leaves enough wealth and property behind: "Madam Gold had told her that such a deed could not go unpunished as the earth to which her mother was returning to its womb was a woman.' Nature will find a way to take its revenge'" (58). Mma scorns this warning from Madam Gold and luxuriates in the choice she makes to bury her mother shabbily: "Everybody knew that her mother had left enough money to bury her properly, and so if she did not, it was a matter of choice. She did not care what they thought of her, she knew that all she wanted was to excise herself from her mother" (58).

In the end, just like Nnu Ego's children who erect a shrine to their mistreated mother, worshipping and demanding so much from her in her death, Mma's song in praise of her mother at the end of the narrative happens only after the latter is safely dead. Mma waits until "the palm bears fruits at the end of its leaves" (Achebe, 1988:99) before she sings in praise of a dead mother. Mma writes the story Nnu Ego's children would have written.

The tragedy of Ezi, is that her posthumous veneration makes her a deity that should be content to "...live on, immortal but presumably infertile, causing earthquakes and making volcanoes erupt, but...no longer appear(ing) on the surface of the earth…" (Bonheim, 1994: 248, parenthesis mine). What happens at the end of the narrative, as Mma fiercely declares her allegiance to Ezi is not enough vindication for Ezi.

However, Mma fails to learn that Ezi is a reflection of her future. Her mother, Ezi, represents a journey through space and time for her. Ezi's absence, we may conclude, is therefore, further cast in stone by her ultimate veneration because just as the deified Nnu Ego of Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* cannot answer prayers, the deified Ezi has nothing to offer Mma who is placing too great a burden on her. In the ultimate absence of Ezi that is inherent in the final deification of Ezi by Mma, there is core identification with patriarchy, as has been earlier explored. Mma thinks she has found her mother but her mother is irretrievably lost to her. Thus, what we have is a view of Mma being cast adrift. In singing praises to a dead mother and vowing to build her dead mother's house, Mma makes a deity of her mother and thereby becomes absent herself; for her mother is her future. Therefore, what Mma has done is to immolate her future self in the land of patriarchy

where the gods hold sway; the gods, being metaphoric embodiments of the power the patriarchal society wields over the independent woman. At the end of the narrative, therefore, where Mma thinks she has attained awareness, she is deluded. Mma's dead-end is mirrored in her being held in Kaduna, her father's land against her will because of the riot. At the moment of her supposed arrival at self-awareness when she decides to return to build her mother's house, she is caught in a rioting town. The gravity of the riot is captured by Rapu: "Your father's shop, you think democracy will save it? Or this house if our neighbours turn against us?" (237). Who can tell if Mma will ever make it back to mother-land to re-build her mother's house amidst these dire predictions in a father-land in the grip of a bloody riot?

Conclusion

This study has viewed the absence of Ezi, Mma's mother using religious symbols drawn across the narrative as scrutinising lens. *Night Dancer* (2012) problematises identity and mother-daughter relationship. Ostensibly, *Night Dancer* (2012), like several other novels by third-generation Nigerian women novelists – as Ogaga Okuyade (2010) points out – is centred on the girl-child quest for identity and eventual arrival at personhood in a patriarchal setting. While it appears that Mma is put forward as the heroine of what at first glance, a scrutiny of the narrative through the metaphors inherent in the being and displacement of the Goddess, proves that neither Mma nor Ezi is the protagonist of the narrative. It is not even Rapu who displaces Ezi, since she is a mere replacement by the gods. This analysis therefore puts forward the gods as protagonist in *Night Dancer*. The gods are perceived as metaphorical depictions of patriarchal influences that inhibit a woman's will to self-assertion. In the end, Mma, the unwitting heir to patriarchy, is caught in a dead end and has not truly achieved the goal of self-liberation as a daughter.

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