

## **Gender Relations and Domestic Power Politics**

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### **Abstract**

Issues on gender have gained global significance since the mid nineteenth century largely because of the increasing efforts by women to correct the several social ills of inequality and marginalization that women experience based prominently on patriarchy. The concern of this paper is not necessarily on how the male and the female relate, but really on what they do to gain power at the micro level to be able to operate on complementary bases or to be superior to the other, as the case may be. This study develops from the premise that there are certain activities and tendencies that engender power for a person, and this is enhanced by some factors including educational attainment, professional affiliations, natural endowments, etc. The implications of the power generated within the relationship form the thrust of this investigation, which aims at evolving a paradigm for contemporary African women in relationship with their male counterparts within the family contexts.

### **Introduction**

Current global trends reveal that the politics of domestic power largely determines the nature of gender relations in the family. In other words, the relationship between the man and the woman is influenced significantly by the apportioning of power. Power is here construed in terms of the ability to provide, control and regulate the necessities and resources of the family. From this premise, it must be noted that the ability to provide is not necessarily synonymous with the ability to control and regulate the resources of the family. Thus, one can provide, while another controls and regulates, often unsolicited. On the other hand, one can both provide and control the resources. This study argues that the person that controls and regulates, whether he/she is the provider, reserves the ultimate power – overtly or covertly – within the family. It is important that this study is based on the family, since it fundamentally examines the dynamics of the relationship of the husband and the wife: how power is made manifest and the factors that engender and enhance the sustenance of power at the micro level of the society.

Food is a major factor that influences and conditions familial relations and regulates power. By focusing on food, this research recognizes it as a factor at the core of the existence of man and the nation; a phenomenon of physical and psychological strength; concept that both unites and disunites, enhances and retards progress, frees and dominates, empowers and disempowers, depending on how it is applied. It is also a force that propels action, whether positive or negative, and feature that has generated diverse forms of negotiations, compromises and exchanges at local and international levels of different economies, institutions and groups across the world

As this paper discusses food vis-à-vis power, it touches on the very essence of

many countries and communities of the world, prominent among which is Nigeria, which witnessed an acute food crisis as did many other countries since early 2008. The timing for the treatment of food-as-theme is apt considering the reality that the mention of food is usually accompanied by animations of power, strength, impetus, stimulation, etc. This paper has selected to confine its focus to the manifestations of these issues on the micro level because of obvious reasons. Without any attempts at writing about how women and food relate, it is inevitable that a discourse on domestic power politics cannot preclude food in the domestic context and cannot avoid concerning the woman.

It is also pertinent that wherever food is produced and by whatever strategies it is distributed, it is largely consumed in homes by families. This position does not exclude the fact that food is also consumed on other extraneous pedestals – in the prisons and social welfare homes by the in-mates, as well as in hospitals by the patients. The major distinction between the family and these other homes is that while the former is a simple organization with a hierarchical structure, where the members are bonded by blood and power is distributed vertically, the latter category is acephalous in nature with a paradigmatic pattern of arrangement, with the members not necessarily related by blood.

By implication, members of the family have their positions on a scale of linear arrangements from a base to a peak. While the children constitute the base, the husband/father is located at the peak, with the wife/mother somewhere in the middle. Since ultimate power resides at the top of the structure, the woman's closeness to that repository of power is determined by the disposition of the man himself. On the other hand, the members of the other homes mentioned in the second category above have their positions on a horizontal level; they do not occur on a hierarchy, thus the members are regarded as equals. The two situations here reveal that by the nature of power, it may be more equally shared in the acephalous community than in the family. The peculiarity of the family and the centrality of food combine to make this study both essential and urgent.

### **The Dynamics of Food and Power**

The essence of this sub-section may be derived from an analogy obtained from the African orature. The Ants Kingdom has diverse categories of members that perform different roles therein. We learn from African oral narratives that when the climate is clement, the ants go out in search of food, collect it and store up for "rainy days." Apparently, the ants know the need to plan for the future when the conditions may not be conducive for food hunt. African oral tradition also reveals that the ants assign themselves into groups to go in different directions to hunt for food. This is evident in the orderliness, cooperation and determination that are usually visible among the ants. It is therefore not out of place for ants to have leaders that are well respected among the followers because of the vision, discipline and consistency of the former. This background indicates that first, the ants are interested in the welfare of one another, especially their young. Second, the entire members of the Kingdom have confidence in the leadership and offer it their support and cooperation.

Unlike the ants, the cockroaches do not act as one or have a common vision, but

struggle each one to be recognized as superior to another. This explains why despite their much bigger sizes, they cannot help one of theirs that is in trouble or that suffers an injury. Rather, the ants in their high numbers would carry the cockroach away as their delicacy. In Tewfik Al Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach*, the King and Queen Cockroaches interact on issues of supremacy as well as the threat they face from the ants:

KING. ...I have an ever-growing feeling that you're always trying to belittle my true worth: ... and my authority.

QUEEN. (...*Sarcastically*) ... Your authority over whom? Not over me at any rate – you are in no way better than me. You don't provide me with food or drink. Have you ever fed me? I feed myself, just as you feed yourself.

KING. In the whole Cockroach Kingdom there is no one who feeds another. Every cockroach strives for his own daily bread. (3)

This is the framework that informs the apparent lack of communality in the Cockroach Kingdom. The politics of domestic power is keen between the man and the woman when the man fails to live up to his responsibility of providing for his family.

Unlike the cockroach that is, however, analogous to human characters, Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* realizes early that a man gains the respect of his family and society if he can provide food for his family. This is why "he had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father." (4) Okonkwo's father, Unoka, "was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back." (5) Unlike Unoka, Okoye who is also a musician, is not a failure for he has "a large barn full of yams and ... three wives," (6) and Okonkwo as a young man has two barns full of yams and has just married a third wife. Nwakibia has three huge barns of yams, nine wives and thirty children. These are indices of wealth, which engender power and authority.

Achebe demonstrates that manhood and greatness are measured by the ability to farm extensively and successfully, provide for one's family, marry wives, have many children and take titles. Okonkwo fulfils all of these. He is reputed widely for his prowess in wrestling and war. His wives respect him and because he wields tremendous authority, plants yam, generally regarded as "the king of crops, a man's crop," (23) which he shares periodically with pride to his wives. According to Achebe, "yam stood for manliness, and one who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed." (33) Okonkwo sustains the respect of his family and community and remains in full control of power over his wives because he provides adequately for his family.

While Okonkwo and his family are on exile in Mbanta, his farm is managed by his friend, Obierika. Obierika collects the farm products and proceeds to Okonkwo in Mbanta:

In the second year of Okonkwo's exile, ... Obierika came to visit him. He brought with him two young men, each of them carrying a heavy bag on his head ... it was clear that the bags were full of cowries. (136)

As their period of exile expires in Mbanta, Okonkwo also demonstrates his full command of domestic power as he decides to have a feast:

When his wife Ekwefi protested that two goats were sufficient for the feast he told her that it was not her affair. 'I am calling a feast because I have the wherewithal. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle.'" (165)

In all, three goats and a number of fowls were slaughtered. There was foo-foo and yam pottage, egusi soup, bitter-leaf soup and pots and pots of palm-wine (165) for all the *umunna*. The *umunna* were very impressed and noted that knowing Okonkwo, they expected a big feast, but it turned out to be even bigger than they expected. They stated that "a man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes." (166) On their return to Umuofia from Mbanta, Okonkwo builds a larger yam barn than the one he had before, because his yams grow abundantly and he is held in very high esteem because of his prowess on his farm.

Unlike Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeife, Nnu Ego's husband in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, earns little as the laundry-man to Dr. and Mrs. Meers in Lagos. Nnu Ego finds him to be not only very ugly, but also unable to provide enough money for her to run the family. She finds it hard to respect him and finds him disgusting especially as he washes Mrs. Meers' underpants. She describes him as "a woman-made man" (50), whose "manhood has been taken away" (51) from him. On the other hand, Ezeife feels that Nnu Ego should be happy and contented because he paid her bride price, he has given her a home, he sleeps with her and has got her pregnant. He condemns her ambitious attitude, and wonders what else a woman wants. After Dr. and Mrs. Meers return to England and Nnaife is out of job, he can hardly feed his wife and children, yet he inherits Adaku, the widow of his deceased brother. Adaku and her two daughters move from Ibuza and join Ezeife and his already large family in their one-room residence in Lagos. Ubani assists him to have a job as a grass-cutter with the Railway Corporation. The financial strain that Adaku and Nnu Ego suffer compels them to rebel. One day as Nnaife returns home from work, "instead of food in the carefully covered bowls, his wives had left three pound notes – the month's food money intact as he had given it to them the day before." (134). His wives protest against the meagerness of the food money, and argue that other men give their wives double the amount he gives to them. In rebuking the more vocal Adaku, Ezeife asks her "Don't I sleep with you? What else do you want?" (134)

Evidently, while Nnu Ego and Adaku recognize male power and authority as emerging from the male ability to feed his family as do Nwakusor and other men

in the novel, Nnaife reasons that man's power and authority derive from the man's sexual prowess. Herein lies the divergence in the sense of values of Nnaife on the one hand, and Nnu Ego and Adaku on the other. Nnaife's ideas about male power and authority are different from Okonkwo's in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is apparent that Okonkwo is able to provide sexual satisfaction to his wives, and food for his family. No wonder his power and control over his family are total.

### **The Mechanics of Power in the Family**

It is relevant to highlight Chinweizu's conception of the pillars of female power vis-à-vis man's sense of power. They are "women's control of the womb; women's control of the kitchen; women's control of the cradle; the psychological immaturity of man relative to woman; man's tendency to be deranged by his own excited penis." (14-15) Of these five pillars, the first three are closely related and the most essential in this study, even though contemporary realities have given them diverse and complex extensions.

The womb, the kitchen and the cradle are important control units in the home that guarantee and perpetuate female power. The related dimension that Chinweizu misses in his exposition is that a woman that is in control of these three units but has no corresponding economic power of her own only has ephemeral authority. This is because she may soon become vulnerable and her control consequently gives way and she succumbs to the man's authority and control that are based on economic power. According to Helen Chukwuma:

Latent, idle wives and mothers suddenly become household burdens which the male loathe to carry, or take on so readily... [They] are expected in addition to their traditional wifedom and motherhood to equip themselves for life in the modern times by being not only consumers but producers and co-producers of the family income. (x)

However, where the woman is economically productive, and whose productivity enhances the family, her ability to sustain her power and control is largely guaranteed. It is also pertinent to note Hilary M. Lips' argument that:

Women are often discouraged from exerting formal power or seeking positions of public leadership. Indeed, there is a contradiction between images of femininity and power that is rooted in gender stereotypes. Women are not supposed to have the qualities needed to hold and use power or to be... authoritative figures." (488)

Within this context, we will examine Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1993) to establish what the modern woman can do to gain domestic power, be relevant in the family and community and be in control of the resources of the family.

Aidoo's *Changes* depicts Esi Sekyi who works in the Department of Urban

Statistics. She has a passion for her job and does not allow her femininity to be her set back as she competes ardently with her male counterparts at work. Her husband, Oko, is a Deputy School Head at a Secondary School. He is recently transferred to another school and promoted to a substantive School Head. The omniscient narrator states that:

He knew she was much respected by her colleagues and other people who knew the work she did. So she should not really be trying so hard to impress. Leaving the house virtually at dawn; returning home at dusk; often bringing work home? Then there were all those conferences. Geneva, Addis, Dakar one half of the year; Rome, Lusaka, Lagos the other half. (8)

The above explains Esi's status in her marriage. She is career lady who is highly committed to her job. To comfortably concentrate on her job, Esi employs a housekeeper/cook to serve the family. Esi has her car, and the bungalow that serves as their residence is her official residence as a Data Analyst of the Urban Department of the government's Statistical Bureau. Esi and Oko have one child, a daughter, named Ogyaanowa, in their six years of marriage. While Oko wants to have more children, possibly male, Esi is on a birth control device, which indicates that she does not want any more children, though she never states so. Esi's decision on this matter gets Oko and his family so worried that Oko's mother and sisters suggest to him to try to have another child outside his marriage, but the idea is repugnant to Oko's sense of decency. He is in love with his wife, even though she pays very little attention to him.

Within the above framework, Esi gains in stature while Oko diminishes, though they are both of the same height physically. Correspondingly, the pendulum of domestic power tilts towards Esi, and this is visible not only to Oko, but his friends as well, who laugh at him because they think he is not behaving like a man. (8) His efforts to behave like a man and get Esi to recognize his authority over her, result in what Esi describes as "marital rape" (11), when Oko forcefully makes love to her while she is preparing for work. In protest, Esi secures a divorce.

Esi's protest and dissolution of the marriage are her means of demonstrating her full control and authority over her body. Oko's unfortunate imposition of himself on her constitutes an attempt to exercise power, but evidently, Esi is fully in control of the kitchen, the cradle and her womb. That she is economically empowered enhances her control. Esi controls the kitchen because the housekeeper/cook is under her charge. She controls the cradle because she refuses to go off the birth control device, get pregnant and have more children, despite the persuasions of Oko, his sisters and mother. She controls her womb as she insists on determining when Oko should make love to her. Indeed, Esi's situation is aptly captured by Betty Friedan because Esi has the "will to power", "self-assertion," "dominance," or "autonomy", yet it does not imply aggression or competitive striving in the usual sense. She is an individual affirming her existence and potentialities as a being in her own right. She displays "the courage to be an individual." (310)

That Oko makes love to her without her consent is tantamount to a deliberate

violation of her rights to herself, for which she punishes him by dissolving the marriage and having him move out of their residence. Esi's calmness even in the face of intense provocation and silent yet powerful actions are indicative of her firm focus and consistent poise, being sure of her goals. She thus confirms Chinweizu's assertion that:

Whereas male power is hard, aggressive and boastful, female power is soft, passive and self-effacing. Whereas male power is like an irresistible force, female power is like an immovable object. Whereas male power acts like a storm, full of motion, sound and fury, female power is like the sun-steady, quiet and uncontestable. Against resistance, male power barks, commands and pummels, whereas female power whispers, manipulates and erodes. (22)

Oko's attempt to impose his power over his wife through sex becomes counter-productive. Esi's independent mind makes her ideas tangential to the fact that "sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Any time. And at his convenience." (Changes 12)

Indeed, Chinweizu's delineation above of the characteristics of gender relations manifests visibly in the relationship between Oko & Esi in Aidoo's *Changes*. While Oko imposes himself & his manhood on Esi to display empowerment, Esi shows empowerment by controlling her affairs. She feels free to relax herself after a hectic working day by going to the Hotel Twentieth Century. The narrator explains that Esi parked and locked her car, and then "strode towards the reception desk of the hotel, her shoes beating out the determination in her mind." (31) She decides to have a beer, thereby smashing the female stereotype:

But she knew this was not really done. A woman alone in a hotel lobby drinking *alcohol*? It would definitely be misunderstood. Then she told herself that she was tired of all the continual misunderstandings. She was tired after a long day in the office, ...She was going to have her beer: misunderstanding or not... (Changes 32)

Esi discloses to her friend, Opokuya that she has separated from Oko, and that "leaving a man does not always mean that it's the woman who has to get out of the house". (36) It is Esi's empowerment that causes the reversal because the convention is that wherever a separation occurs between a couple, the woman usually moves out of the house. The volte-face in the Esi/Oko situation reveals to whose side power resides.

In reaction to Esi's sense of power, her mother and grandmother feel that Esi is mad to leave Oko considering that he never beat her, his body and/or mouth was not smelling, he did not deny her money, or make her to spend her earnings to keep the house, feed and clothe him. (38) Her mother calls her a fool.

Symbolically, the features that qualify Esi as a foolish and mad woman before

her mother and grandmother are really what attract her to Ali Kondey. Esi's sense of power accords her the freedom and ability to be at ease with her body. She feels free to walk naked in the house, especially after she and Ali have made love. Also, Esi enralls Ali with very delicious meals:

'Food. Another source of pleasure when you were with Esi.' Ali was thinking. 'She cooked like nobody else he knew or had known. In fact, until he met her, he had not considered fish as an edible protein. Now he wondered how in his previous existences he could have done without fried fish, stewed fish, grilled fish and especially softly smoked fish for so long...'  
(76)

Thus, apart from her physical allurements, Esi's adeptness in the preparation and presentation of food is another prominent factor that empowers her in her relationship with Ali.

Unfortunately, Esi perceives that her relationship with Ali is anti-climactic as Ali becomes unavailable to her. She refuses to be blinded by the numerous valuable gifts that he gives to her from many parts of the world. She feels free to tell Opokuya afterwards that "she decided she was just fed up... And can't go on like this... This is no marriage ..." (158) She shows that female power is not only complementary to the male, but also pivotal to man in creation, procreation, re-incarnation and human existence within the circular flow of time. (Jell-Behlsen, Sabine 165)

Generally, Esi resists being diminished in any relationship she finds herself. Her grandmother's counsel to her on gender relations seems to be her guiding principle "...a man always gains in stature any way he chooses to associate with a woman... But in her association with a man, a woman is always in danger of being diminished." (164) In calling off her marriage to Ali, Esi still believes him when he tells her that he loves her very much, but she feels that his way of expressing his love to her is inadequate, obnoxious and unacceptable to her. She objects to complacency and whatever may make her seem to be an "occupied territory." (91)

## **Conclusion**

Esi's display of power in her two marriages derives not necessarily from the centrifugal force, but from the centripetal force, thus negating Chinweizu's assertion that:

Male susceptibility to female beauty gives women a great leverage in their dealings with men; this leverage is further increased by women's artifice. Their determination to make the female body even more provocative has led to women's preoccupation with that delusive self-beautification which is commonly known as glamour. (36)

In Esi's situation and the process of her empowerment, she really does not require to use her physical endowments to attract the men. Her courage in completely dissolving



her first marriage and separating from her second husband indicates that she is actually the pivot around which her men strive to revolve, and her sense of freedom enables her to start, sustain and end a relationship as she feels necessary. She stresses that the woman should determine the fate of her encounters with men for that will prove that the balance of power can shift from being entirely and always on the male side.

She affirms Karla Hackstaff's contention that the divorce culture is a cause or effect of gender equality. The beliefs about gender equality and divorce culture have complemented one another because they share similar presuppositions. (39) As a result of Esi's freedom, she surmounts Kate Millet's observation that "the female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power. She may do this either through appeasement or through the exchange of her sexuality for support and status." (54) Esi clearly demonstrates her ability to sustain herself. She neither desires a man to sustain her, nor does she need to trade her sexuality to obtain her sustenance. Her determination to be an individual makes her surmount every set back. Consequently, she proffers a paradigm for contemporary women to pursue economic empowerment as a prelude to the attainment of a total freedom of the mind and a motivation for hard work. Herein lies the essence of her empowerment and the challenge facing the twenty-first century African woman.

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