

# The Submerged Powers of the African Woman: An Analysis of Gender Relations in Selected African Cultural Texts

Emmanuel Nchia Yimbu (Corresponding author)

Lecturer, Department of English and Cultural Studies

Faculty of Arts, University of Buea-Cameroon

E-mails: [nchiayimbu@gmail.com](mailto:nchiayimbu@gmail.com)

Clara Mbongo Fodje

MA Student, Department of English and Cultural Studies

Faculty of Arts, University of Buea-Cameroon

E-mails: [clarafodje@yahoo.com](mailto:clarafodje@yahoo.com)

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## Abstract

This paper examines gender and power relations in the African cultural context, challenging the patriarchal assumptions that the power of the African woman is limited to peripheral activities, domestic and household chores. The paper also posits that African women possess significant power, although it may not be overtly expressed and remains submerged within patriarchal societal structures. Drawing inspiration from the works of Chinua Achebe, Chinweizu and Bole Butake, this paper implores Cultural Feminism and Feminist Psychoanalysis to explore and illuminate the different facets of female power and their implications in the socio-political and cultural evolution of the African society. The analyses in this paper help to reshape perceptions and promote a more inclusive and empowering narrative surrounding African women in society. The analyses further reveal that African women contribute to family stability, community leadership, and social movements, showcasing their resilience and agency. The paper therefore emphasizes the complexities of African women's experiences and the need for recognition of their pivotal roles in effecting

societal change.

**Keywords:** the African women, gender, power relations, culture, resilience

## **1. Introduction**

This paper seeks to re-evaluate and analyze the diverse and often ignored manifestation of powers inherent in African women. In the context of African cultural traditions, the role and power of women have often been examined from several perspectives. Thousands of books, publications and critical works have defined and interpreted the role of the African woman in contemporary societies today. Cultural advocates and highly patriarchal societies have used culture and gender to relegate the woman to a peripheral position. In such societies or communities, women are considered as second class citizens, house wives, child bearers, nurses, nannies and in some extreme cases, women have been qualified as property and denied the privilege to engage in political activities and own property. These assumptions and biases have been challenged over the years with an emergence of critical works, debates and conferences geared towards challenging, nullifying, redefining and reasserting the indispensable place and space of the African women in the socio-economic and political evolution of today's society. This paper therefore fundamentally explores the submerged powers of the African woman, while shedding light on the various dimensions of her influence within the cultural and societal frame work. Emphasis will be laid on the revered status of motherhood, to the intricacies of wifehood, the wielded power of the womb, her vital role in food security, the dynamics of sexuality and the underpinning of spirituality. While our analyses will offer an in-depth analysis of the various dimensions of the submerged powers of the African woman, it will be useful preparation to first begin by examining the concept of power within the African cultural context before delving into the different dimensions of power inherent in our African women that remain submerged and to some extent, unnoticeable.

## **2. The Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations**

The major thrust of this paper is to explore the interconnectedness of the concepts of culture, gender and power. Culture shapes our beliefs and practices, influencing how gender roles are defined and understood. In turn, these gender roles affect power dynamics within societies. By examining these relationships, we can gain insight into how cultural norms and values impact gender equality and power distribution. It is germane to note here that the concept of power is central to many fields of study including politics, sociology, psychology, the humanities, social sciences and cultural studies. It encompasses a wide range of meanings and interpretations, reflecting its complexity and the various ways it manifests in human relationships and societal structures. This paper, from diverse perspectives, examines how power is defined, exercised, and contested. It highlights the relational nature of power, where authority and influence emerge through interactions rather than merely existing as fixed attributes. Additionally, we consider the historical and cultural contexts that shape our understanding of power, as well as the critical perspectives that challenge conventional views. By synthesizing these insights; we can gain a deeper appreciation of power's role in shaping individual experiences and broader social dynamics.

To begin with, Chinweizu (1990) explores the concept of power through the lens of cultural identity and self-determination, particularly in the context of African societies. He argues that power is not only about political authority but also about cultural influence and the ability to shape one's environment. According to Chinweizu, power arises from a deep understanding and appreciation of one's cultural heritage which enables individuals to assert their identity and resist external domination. In *The West and the Rest of Us* (1975), Chinweizu critiques the impact of colonialism on African identities and emphasizes the importance of reclaiming cultural narratives. He suggests that power is rooted in the ability to define oneself and one's community, highlighting the necessity of restoring African voices that have been marginalized by colonial and neo-colonial influences. This idea is further elaborated in his contribution to the *UNESCO General History of Africa* (1993), where he discusses the relationship between African identity and economic power, advocating for self-determination as a means of empowerment. Chinweizu also delves into the concept of knowledge and power in his work, "On Ubontology" (2004), where he argues for the significance of African epistemologies in understanding power relations. He highlights how cultural identity can empower individuals and communities, emphasizing that genuine power comes from a shared consciousness and appreciation of one's heritage.

Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiongo's understanding of power focuses on its role in shaping societies and cultures. He emphasizes that power is not just about physical force or authority; it is also about influencing thoughts and beliefs. According to Ngugi (1986), power can be exercised through language, education, and cultural practices, which means that control over these areas can significantly impact people's lives. In his analysis, Ngugi highlights the effects of colonialism as a key example of how power operates. Colonial powers impose their values and systems on the colonized societies, leading to the suppression of local cultures and identities (1986). This process demonstrates how cultural hegemony works, where the dominant culture shapes the norms and values of the society, often making it difficult for marginalized voices to be heard. Overall, Ngugi's conceptualization of power reveals its complexity, showing that it extends beyond political structures to include cultural and ideological dimensions. Ngugi's conceptualization of power resonates with the focus on the submerged powers of the African woman in several ways. His exploration of language, cultural identity and resistance complements the examination of the submerged powers of the African woman. His emphasis on the importance of reclaiming cultural narratives and the role of storytelling aligns closely with the theme of this paper as it highlights how African women can assert their identities and challenge dominant narratives. His insights into the impact of colonialism on gender dynamics further enrich our analysis, providing a contextual framework for understanding the struggles and resilience of African women in society.

Furthermore, Michel Zimbalist Rosaldo (1974) argues that women's power often manifests in various forms, including emotional intelligence, resilience and the ability to foster connections and community. Rosaldo posits that women's experiences, particularly in patriarchal structures, have equipped them with a distinct perspective on power dynamics. She also discusses how women can challenge traditional notions of power that prioritize dominance and control. Rosaldo advocates for a redefinition of power that values

collaboration, empathy and nurturing. Her perspective resonates strongly with our focus on the submerged powers of the African woman, by emphasizing their agency, resilience and essential contributions to social and economic development. She argues that recognizing and valuing women's roles is crucial for driving progress, directly aligning with our exploration of the how African women navigate and assert their identities. Also, her insights into the intersection of gender, culture, and power illustrate the nuanced ways women engage with and challenge traditional power structures. Additionally, Zimbalist advocates for policies promoting gender equality, reinforcing the idea that amplifying women's voices is vital for fostering equitable societies. In conclusion, her perspective enhances our analysis by underscoring the importance of empowering African women as key agents of change.

The examination of gender and power relations within African cultural dynamics necessitates a theoretical frame work that acknowledges the unique historical, social and cultural contexts in which these dynamics unfold. This paper examines the intricate interplay between gender and power, focusing on how cultural norms, practices and structure, shape and influence the distribution of power among genders in diverse African societies. The theoretical perspectives that inform this study is Feminist theory, specifically Cultural Feminism. Cultural Feminism is a branch of feminist theory that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to radical liberal Feminism. It focuses on the idea that there are inherent differences between men and women, and these differences should be celebrated rather than erased. Cultural feminists argue that women's experiences and perspectives are valuable and should be recognized and validated within society. Some of the notable propounders and influential figures associated with Cultural Feminism includes Mary Daly, Card Giligan, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Cultural feminists emphasize the ideas that there are essential differences between men and women rooted in biology and psychology. They also argue that these differences should be acknowledged and celebrated rather than subverted. They equally emphasize the value of traditionally feminine qualities and characteristics, such as nurturing, empathy, and cooperation. They further stress that these qualities should be recognized and valued in all aspects of society including politics, economics and education. Also, Cultural Feminists highlight the importance of women's culture and women's spaces. They are of the opinion that women should have the freedom to explore and express their unique experiences and perspectives without being dominated by male norms and expectations. Furthermore, Cultural feminists emphasize the need for female solidarity and community because to them, women should come together to support and empower each other, creating networks of mutual aid and understanding. Finally, Cultural Feminists critique male-dominated institutions such as patriarchal hierarchies and traditional gender roles. They advocate for changes in these institutions to accommodate and respect women's experiences and contributions.

### **3. The Inherent Power Dynamics of the Africa Woman and The Strength and Pleasures of Womanhood**

As we stated above, the Africa woman exhibits enormous authority and power within her household and community even though these power dynamics are not overtly perceived and sometimes outrightly ignored especially in extremely patriarchal and culturally domineering societies. The paragraphs below will focus on the different dimensions of female power as

they are manifested in the works of Chinweizu, Achebe and Butake.

#### 4. The African Woman and the Power of the Womb

The African woman by virtue of her womb exhibits enormous powers. The womb in the African traditional cosmology is a metaphor for procreation with plenty of spiritual implications. Chinweizu opines that African women, contrary to popular opinion, possess various forms of power that, while often indirect or subtle, allow them to significantly influence gender dynamics and male decision-making, challenging the notion of male dominance in gender relations. As he says:

From a male –centred view of what power is, it is easy to be misled into thinking that a female form of power does not exist at all, and even when female power is recognized, it is easy to dismiss it as power of inferior type just because it is not hard, aggressive, or boastful like the highly visible male form. (1990: 23).

He also feels that having others to work in one's interest is a form of power, highlighting the subtle yet profound influence that African women wield. This notion is also echoed by Obioma Nnaemeka (1997), who asserts that “negotiation is a powerful tool that African women have always used to assert their rights and influence. This statement underscores that even in contexts where formal authority may be limited; the ability of women to negotiate and mobilize support reflects their significant power, thus making power a nuanced concept. Power can go largely unremarked but creating significant impacts and such is the case of the inherent powers of the African woman which can best be described by Ernest Hemingway's iceberg theory which states that “what is visible above the surface is merely the tip of the iceberg, while the majority of its mass, lies hidden beneath” (34). This implies that within the context of African culture, the hidden strength of African women often show up quietly beneath the surface. Just like an iceberg has much more underwater than what's visible, their power can be found in everyday actions that seem simple at first. A woman for instance might be seen taking care of her home or working on the farm, but the real importance of what she is doing lies in her quiet resistance to social expectations and her role in supporting her community. Through subtle conversations and interactions, we can see her influence and strength, suggesting that what's unsaid can be even more powerful. Against this background, Chinweizu, expounds on the profound power inherent in the womb and the role of motherhood. He posits that the womb, as the source of human life, endows women with a unique social status and authority, particularly in the African culture where the capacity for pregnancy and childbirth is revered. As he puts it:

Oh womb, your power is great! You are the biological foundation, the taproot of female power. As the goal net into which a man must shoot if he is to procreate, you are of a woman for which he will pay almost any price. And because you are priceless to him, you hold untold power over him, like a fabulous gold seam which rules a prospector's life (Chinweizu 1999:19).

This powerful quote taps into ideas from cultural feminism, celebrating feminine sources of power and the intimate, primal mother-child bond centered on the womb.

From a cultural feminist perspective, this quote celebrates the inherent, sacred power of the female reproductive capacity as the very foundation of life and human continuity as it is described as the “taproot of female power”. Again, the womb is so crucial because it is where new life is created. It is the “goal net” that man must “shoot” into, through copulation, in order to fulfill his desire to reproduce. This highlights the womb’s central importance and the power it confers upon women within the African cultural framework, as the vessel without which men cannot achieve their reproductive aim. The quote says the womb is “priceless” to men, so women can use that to their advantage. The womb is framed as an almost magical, sacred source of power for women as it is being described as a “fabulous gold seam” that controls and shapes the lives of the men who need it. In essence, the womb is being celebrated as the core, foundational source of women’s power and authority within traditional African societies. The analyses above challenge the patriarchal devaluation of women by considering the womb as an irreplaceable, invaluable resource that women can leverage against male power structures.

### **5. The African Woman and the Pleasures of Motherhood**

The strength and power of the African women is also exposed through motherhood. Motherhood being the ability to conceive or carry a pregnancy to life birth as per WHO definition of 1993, has long been a central aspect of the female experience, shaping African women’s identities, social roles, and relationships. This holds true for most African cultures. Within the frameworks of cultural feminism, the celebration of motherhood takes on particular significance as a way to reclaim and empower the woman. Cultural feminists argue that the nurturing, life giving capacities of motherhood should be celebrated and elevated as a unique and valuable aspect of the feminine. They critique the patriarchal devaluation of motherhood and instead emphasize the social, emotional and spiritual importance of the mother-child bond. Cultural feminists also advocate the institutionalization of maternal values, such as empathy, care, and community, as a way to transform societal structures and gender relations. Feminist psychoanalysts like Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Adrienne Rich (1976), have theorized motherhood as a foundational experience that shapes women’s psychology and social position. They view the mother-child relationship as a primary site for the development of female identity, subjectivity and relational capacities. Maria Lowe (1983) on her part says “motherhood is a place where women find influence, especially in their marriage” (34). She points out, quoting Krishnan, that symbolic womanhood in literature is deeply connected to the women’s characters’ and ability to have children, and sterility and the lack of children become a marker of sub humanization” (35). Motherhood is therefore, intricately linked to the power of the womb. This is because in the African world view, motherhood is a function of a productive womb. Moreover, motherhood in the African worldview is imbued with enormous spiritual and social power. The ability to bring forth life is revered as a sacred gift and mothers are seen as the conduits through which ancestral lineages and community continuity are sustained. Beyond the biological act of child bearing, African mothers wield immense authority as primary caregivers, nurturers, and educators of the next generation. Their wisdom,

experience and decision –making power within household and community are deeply respected. Furthermore, motherhood confers a transformative status upon women, elevating their social standing and granting them a respected voice in the affairs of the family and tribe. Sherry Ortner (1972) notes that in belief systems that emphasize women’s ability to bear children, women are seen as embodying the creative, life sustaining forces of nature through their capacity for childbirth. This association with the generative powers of nature, he notes, can grant women increased ritual importance and authority in these cultural contexts. The importance of a mother cannot therefore be overemphasized given the weight it is given worldwide and being the only universally imposed role in Africa in particular. At the neonatal section of a hospital I visited in India sometime in the past, a beautiful inscription on the wall read: “life comes with a mother and not with a manual”. This goes a long way to reinforce Chinweizu’s stance that the mother is the source of life and it is through the womb that women have the power to create and nurture life. **Remi Akujobi** in “*Motherhood in African Literature and Culture*” examines Motherhood as a sacred as well as a powerful spiritual component of the woman’s life. John S. Mbiti cited by Akujobi, recognizes the concept of mother when he says that it is central to African philosophy and spirituality. Akujobi affirms this by saying that motherhood in Africa is seen as a God-given role and for that reason, it is sacred. **Chinyere Grace Okafor**, on her part, recognizes the spiritual power of women especially as mothers, noted Akujobi. Feminists in Africa, according to Akujobi, have agreed there are powers, privileges, and entitlements that come with motherhood even in the act of giving birth. The womb \ motherhood become one of the most celebrated statuses in Africa. Motherhood in Africa has been profoundly shaped by social context and culture. According to Remi Akujobi, “it is one striking term in women’s discourse that is given prominence”.

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* portrays a society where motherhood is deeply revered and central to individual and community identity. The Igbo culture projected in the novel places a high value on motherhood, seeing it as core part of a woman’s role and social status. This is exemplified through the reverence for the Earth goddess, the rites and rituals of passage that mark a woman’s transition to motherhood, the elevated respect afforded to mothers who bear many children, and the significant authority and wisdom vested in older women and mothers within the family and community. Ani, the Earth goddess is worshipped as the source of all fertility and giver of life. The reverence for the feminine is expressed in the complex relationship between the Ani, the female deity and the hyper-masculine protagonist Okonkwo which is quite revealing especially when examined through psychoanalytic feminist lens. On the surface, Okonkwo embodies a hyper-masculine, patriarchal ideal within the Igbo culture. He is renowned for his physical prowess, fierceness in battle and unwavering commitment to the traditional masculine values and social order. He sees any display of feminine weakness or softness as ultimate disgrace. However, even this hyper-masculine Okonkwo deeply respects the female goddess Ani, who is seen as the most powerful and important deity in Igbo religion and culture. Okonkwo obediently follows Ani’s laws and traditions despite his dominant male persona. This suggests that despite the outward appearance of male dominance, there are deep seated feminine forces at work that undermine and complicate simplistic notions of patriarchy. From a cultural

feminist perspective, this dynamic shows that true power and authority in this maternal-centred Igbo culture, ultimately resides with the feminine, maternal figure-in this case, the goddess, Ani. Even the most stereotypically “masculine” man like Okonkwo cannot escape the overarching power of the feminine divine. This confirms what Chinweizu means when he says in the African cultural context, “the matriarch holds the power behind the authority of the patriarch” (Chinweizu, 112). This means the woman is the real head with more of the actual power, while the man is the figurehead, with more of the aura of authority and that “this matriarchy operates everywhere no matter how ubiquitous the façade of patriarchy may be” (114). This contributes to our understanding of gender roles and power structures in this society. Thus, revealing the complex nature of gender and authority in the African cultural context.

Similarly, in *Lake God*, a mother's role is seen through the characters of the women's cult, the Fibuen led by Kimbong. These women are an embodiment of strength and resilience and central figures within their families and communities. They play crucial roles in preserving cultural challenges and challenging oppressive systems. They are able to contest the power structures put in place by patriarchy. These women challenge the authority of the men folk as they are faced with problems of food insecurity. They enforce their power through their spirituality and sexuality to challenge their husbands to become reliable partners in their fight against food insecurity. The women are thus seen as caretakers and community leaders.

## **6. The African Woman and the Power of the Cradle**

Chinweizu has explored the inherent power of the African woman as being imbued in the power of the cradle as he says “the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rocks the world”. *The Online Cambridge Dictionary* emphasizes that women have a strong influence on events through their children” (22). Women’s power as mothers is acknowledged to the extent that they shape not only the present but future generations. Chinweizu argues that women possess an inherent power and authority over men by virtue of their role in childbearing and child-rearing. He contends that the cradle power gives women a privileged position in society and allows them to exert control over men. He extends this idea to the realm of child rearing asserting that a woman’s role as the primary caretaker of children further reinforces her power and influence, suggesting that a child’s early years are formative. Hence, “the hands that rocks the cradle, rules the world” and the mother’s shaping of the child’s values, beliefs and worldview by implication grants her a significant degree of control over the next generation. Chinweizu thus, acknowledges the significant, yet unrecognized influence that women wield through their nurturing and care giving roles. In Africa where the family and the community are central to cultural identity, the African woman’s role as the primary care giver and shaper of the next generation can be seen as a source of immense power and influence as the power of the womb and the influence of the maternal figure are deeply ingrained. This power can shape the course of individuals, communities and even the larger society. This as Chinweizu says is because “the way the twig is bent, that way the twig will grow” (*Anatomy*: 20), suggesting that the way the child is nurtured during their formative years typically by the mother will determine the trajectory of its growth and development.

Also, in *Things Fall Apart*, the relationship between Nwoye and his mother provides an insightful examination of the concept of the “cradle power” as discussed by Chinweizu. Nwoye’s, father Okonkwo is a highly respected and powerful member of the Igbo community known for his masculinity and prowess. However, Nwoye is portrayed as a more sensitive and introspective young man who is often at odds with his father’s expectations. The mother is however depicted as a nurturing compassionate figure who provides Nwoye with the emotional support and understanding that he does not receive from his father. The mother’s “cradle power” is manifested in her ability to shape Nwoye’s values, beliefs and worldview during his formative years. Nwoye’s mother is shown to be a devoted Christian convert and it is through her influence that Nwoye eventually also embraces the new religion. This represents a significant divergence from his father’s traditional Igbo beliefs and practices which Okonkwo fiercely defends. The power of the cradle is further highlighted in Nwoye’s destiny and the trajectory of his life. Nwoye’s decision to convert to Christianity, reject his father’s way of life and get education thereby fulfilling his mother’s wish can be seen as a direct consequence of the maternal influence and “cradle power” exerted by his mother on him. His path deviates from the expected norm of following in his father’s footsteps, a clear manifestation of the mother-child relationship. Nwoye’s mother’s ability to shape Nwoye’s identity and beliefs despite the patriarchal structures of Igbo society demonstrates the profound influence that women can wield within the domestic sphere and its subsequent societal implications. Achebe’s portrayal of Nwoye’s trajectory shaped by the “power of the cradle” of his mother offers a deeper understanding of the dynamics of gender roles and the subversive potential of maternal influence in the Igbo society.

### **7. The African Woman’s Body, Beauty and Sexuality**

In his critical exploration of African identity and beauty, Chinweizu highlights how the body, beauty and sexuality serve as subtle yet powerful forms of agency for the African woman. The body beautiful refers to cultural ideals and standards of physical beauty. It encompasses attributes such as body shape, skin, tone, and overall appearance often shaped by societal norms and media representations. The body beautiful can vary across cultures and historic contexts reflecting specific aesthetics value. Chinweizu argues that through their body, beauty and sexuality, African women navigate patriarchal structures strategically using these attributes as tools of empowerment and social influence. He emphasizes that investment in their physical appearance (the body beautiful) allows them to challenge societal norms and assert their presence in a male dominated world. Thus showcasing that beauty is not merely superficial but a strategic means of exercising submerged powers (36-40). Chinweizu’s perspective on the body compliments those of many other scholars who see the body as a site of resistance. These scholars argue that the body serves as a battleground for challenging dominant norms, power structures and societal expectations. Kerry Harnet in “Appearing Modern: Women’s Bodies, Beauty and Power in the 1920s” gives an insightful analysis of the ways in which women’s bodies and beauty were constructed and understood in the United states in the 1920s. Harnet argues that the 1920s was a period of significant change in the ways that women’s bodies were perceived and represented. She notes particularly the

ways in which women's bodies were linked to power in the 1920s and argues that women who were able to conform to beauty standards of the time were able to gain a certain degree of social and cultural capital and that this capital could be used to challenge traditional gender norms and assert a degree of agency and independence. Conversely, women who did not conform to these standards were often marginalized and excluded from positions of power and influence. Harnet's work thus sheds light on the ways in which cultural constructions of femininity and beauty are deeply intertwined with larger societal changes and power dynamics.

Bole Butake also explores the concept of the body beautiful when he says "the charm of that woman will unnerve any man" (*The Survivors*, 63), referring to Mboysi, the lone female among a group of five survivors who is coerced into using her charm to negotiate food from a military officer on behalf of the group. This statement reflects how women's beauty and allure are connected with their power, aligning closely with the concept of the "body beautiful" as it emphasizes that physical appearance can be a source of strength and influence. Mboysi therefore, is seen as an archetype of holistic beauty as her beauty transcends allure into a deeper kind of beauty. Mboysi's willingness to sacrifice her integrity for the sake of others shows her caring nature and responsibility as a leader and her story is a reminder of the strength and agency of African women. Thus emphasizing their crucial role in both survival and the shaping of their communities even when faced with adversity.

Besides body beauty, sexuality is also a powerful weapon of empowerment within the African cultural dynamics of power. Rachel Spronk, defines sexuality as "the qualities of 'being sexual', a concept depicting the social arena where power relations and moral discourses are played out, and it also refers to sexual desire" (2011:03). This implies that, 'sexuality' encompasses a broader range of issues including sexual orientation, sexual identity, desires, behaviours and how individuals experience and express their sexuality. It also involves the dynamics of attraction and intimacy. African sexuality, unfortunately, despite its relational potentials has always been narrowly appreciated especially by Westerners because they have deficient knowledge of African sexuality. In a critique of the prevailing "pain paradigm" surrounding African sexuality which often perpetuates colonial and racist stereotypes portraying African sexuality as primitive, hypersexual and dysfunctional, Spronk argues that this narrow focus on pain and victimhood neglects the pleasurable, empowering and positive dimensions of sexuality that exist within African cultures. She emphasizes that by framing Africans primarily as victims in need of Western intervention, this paradigm overlooks the agency that individuals possess in their sexual lives. She thus advocates for a perspective that celebrates pleasure as an integral part of African sexuality, allowing women to reclaim their desires and identities. This shift according to her, not only challenges harmful stereotypes but also positions African women as active agents in navigating their sexualities. Thus reinforcing the idea that the body, beauty and sexuality can be powerful tools for empowerment rather than mere instruments of oppression. This perspective complements those of Chinweizu, Achebe, Butake and those of many other scholars. While Chinweizu may not focus exclusively on sexuality, he does explore how the "body beautiful" and societal beauty standards influence sexual dynamics

and empower women by encouraging a deeper understanding of how beauty and sexuality intersect, particularly within African cultures. He argues that the African woman recognizes the power dynamics inherent in their sexuality and uses it strategically to assert control over men as he uses the adage: “the way to a man’s heart is below his belt”. This emphasizes how emotional connections can influence a man’s feelings. For the African woman, using intimacy can be a powerful way to connect with men on a deeper emotional level. This approach can allow them to navigate relationships more effectively, leveraging their understanding of intimacy to create strong bonds and influence dynamics in their favour. In many African traditions, intimacy and sexual connection are seen as sacred, integral components of a strong, stable marital union where intimacy is all about the profound emotional and relational bond that physical intimacy can foster between partners. The idea that a joyful, content attitude is often attributed to positive sexual rapport between spouses speak of how sexuality is viewed as a source of nourishment, happiness, and endurance for the household and family unit. It is for this reason that Spronk (ibid) emphasizes that African sexuality should not be studied through the lens of pain as it can lead to feelings of shame, fear and disconnection between partners, inhibiting open communication about desires and needs and ultimately affecting emotional and physical intimacy. By challenging this paradigm, Spronk advocates for a more balanced understanding of African sexuality that includes joy, pleasure, and mutual fulfillment, thereby, fostering healthier, more intimate relationships. This aligns with Chinweizu’s perspective as he emphasizes the strength and resilience of African women, suggesting that when their sexual needs and pleasures are acknowledged, it helps them reclaim agency within their relationships. By shifting from narratives that focus solely on pain and dysfunction, both Spronk and Chinweizu advocate for recognizing the positive aspects of sexuality which can enhance intimacy and allow African women to assert their power and influence in relationships.

Chinua Achebe also acknowledges the inherent powers in the African woman’s sexuality. Maria Lowe (ibid) argues that women transcending oppressive spaces in *Things Fall Apart* are further explored by Ekwefi. Before, becoming Okonkwo’s second wife, Ekwefi was married to another man, Anene, but unwilling to stay in her marriage, she runs away to be with Okonkwo. Ekwefi, takes this decision on her own without Okonkwo’s knowledge. Nonetheless, he doesn’t object to her decision and fully embraces her, consummating the relationship when she shows up at his door (65). Lowe argues that this scene gives Ekwefi ownership over her future and body where she has the full sovereignty of who she shares them with and that it points to the possibility of Ekwefi leaving Okonkwo if she so desired. Ekwefi’s choice to leave her first husband for Okonkwo may not only highlight her personal agency but also acknowledge the inherent power of sexuality among African women. Achebe illustrates that sexual desire and emotional connections are vital forces that can challenge societal norms. By depicting Ekwefi’s pursuit of love and fulfillment, he recognizes that women’s sexuality is a source of strength, enabling them to navigate and sometimes defy traditional constraint. This portrayal suggests that African women’s desires are not merely subordinate to cultural expectations but rather, they possess a transformative power that can shape their identities and relationships. Based on the above analysis, it follows that a woman’s sexuality and influence can be powerful tools for challenging and

changing traditional power structures dominated by men.

## 8. The African Woman and Food Security

The African woman's domain over the kitchen and her control over hunger and food security represent a significant, yet often underappreciated source of her social and emotional power within the traditional African societies as highlighted by the perspectives of Chinweizu, Achebe and Butake. Agnes Riquisimbing et al, emphasize the critical role women play in achieving food production, processing and preparation by highlighting their vital contributions not only for family nutrition but also for broader community food systems. They however note that these women face many challenges despite the fact that they account for about 70% -80% of household food production in Sub-Saharan Africa and are the principal actors in the sustainable production of food which is the first pillar of food security. Food security based on the 1996 World Food Summit is defined as when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life. (<https://www.worldbank.org>)

Chinweizu emphasizes that the kitchen is the central hub of the African household where the woman reigns supreme, wielding authority over the preparation and distribution of meals. He argues that the kitchen wields significant power over hunger, a force capable of breaking wills and compelling obedience. He adds that hunger has been historically exploited by military leaders, torturers and even within households thereby demonstrating its profound influence. Sara Finnerty commenting on the concept of hunger says "the word hunger implies pain and desperation and can be a portal to that underlying empty space so close to freedom". This suggests that hunger goes beyond just a physical need for food as it also represents emotional and psychological suffering. The word evokes feelings of pain and desperation, highlighting how intense hunger can drive people to their limits. It also implies that hunger can reveal deeper feelings of emptiness or longing for freedom. Thus, the kitchen which can both satisfy and deny food positions the person in charge, often a woman, as a key figure who can manipulate others through this control over sustenance. Chinweizu highlights how the power of food translates into social and personal influence when he states that:

The power of the kitchen is also great, for it is the power over hunger. Hunger can break the hardest will; can reduce the headstrong man to whimpering obedience, can scatter a mighty army without wasting a bullet. Military commanders use hunger against besieged cities, torturers use it, wives use it. Since the power of hunger is terrible, whatever holds power over hunger is great indeed. And the kitchen holds power over hunger...it holds the power to sate as well as the power to starve; and it wields that power every day and the woman who is the commandant of the kitchen can manipulate any man. (*Anatomy*: 19).

Chinweizu's discussion of the kitchen's power and the idea that hunger represents pain and desperation highlight the deep emotional and psychological implications of food. While hunger can drive individuals to a state of vulnerability and yearning for freedom, the kitchen

serves as the battleground where this power is played out. The person who controls the kitchen not only addresses physical needs but also has the ability to manipulate the underlying emotions tied to hunger. This shows how the management of food can influence not just behaviour but also emotional states, reinforcing the idea that those who wield power over hunger like the commandant of the kitchen can deeply affect the human experience of pain, desperation and the quest of fulfillment. One is therefore not surprised when Chinweizu concludes that “the way to a man’s heart is through his belly” (*Anatomy*: 15), suggesting that providing food can create bonds and affection. This emphasizes the idea that those who control access to food, often women in traditional African settings hold significant sway over others especially men.

Achebe elaborates on the notion of women and food security by asserting that the African woman’s mastery of agricultural techniques and her ability to cultivate food items reinforce her indispensable position in maintaining food security. In *Things Fall Apart*, women play a crucial role in food security and sustenance by managing the cultivation of essential crops like yams and subsistence crops like maize, melon and beans which are vital for their families’ survival. They are responsible for growing and preparing food. Despite their hard work and significant contributions to agriculture, women often remain undervalued. Maria Lowe, emphasizes that Achebe portrays women as vital to food security by highlighting their essential roles in agricultural production and the management of household resources despite facing social marginalization. She notes that although not as obvious, Achebe complicates the roles of the other women in Okonkwo’s village as they hold duties out of their homes. Achebe writes that “As the rains became heavier, the women planted maize, melons, and beans...the women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late” (*Things*, 22). Lowe adds that women gain agency through these prescribed duties because it turns them into essential providers for their family unit, delivering a wide variety of food. Women play a vital role by weeding the yam farms despite the concept of it, being the king of crop and symbol of masculinity. The women thoroughly carry out this responsibility and do it “neither early nor late” (*Things*, 22). Yet Okonkwo neglects their duty and occupied space in the production of yams; although the yams are the subject in which he measures his wealth. Lowe submits that these women partaking in the development of yams reinforces the idea that “the truth behind women’s agency and roles hides behind the image of masculinity”. This suggests that societal perceptions of masculinity often obscure and complicate the understanding of women’s agency and roles, implying that traditional male ideals can overshadow women’s contributions and autonomy. This notion is reinforced by Okonkwo’s reaction towards his wife. Okonkwo’s violent reaction to his wife’s decision to plait her hair instead of preparing his meal during the week of peace shows his fear of losing control and power. Food and cooking are important because they connect to a woman’s ability to support the family. By beating his wife over this, Okonkwo intends to prove his strength and control but at the same time, it also reveals how fragile his masculinity is. This moment highlights how women, despite being undervalued, hold significant power through their roles in providing food and care which are crucial elements in societal stability and it also critiques the toxic aspects of masculinity in the maltreatment of women.

Bole Butake highlights the critical role of women in managing resources and driving social change by controlling food and leveraging hunger as a tool for negotiation. Paulme (1963), referenced by Rosaldo, talking about women and leveraging food as a tool of empowerment says: “her control of foodstuffs permit her to influence men...women can manipulate men and influence their decisions by strategies as diverse as refusing to cook for their husbands (1974:37). In *Lake God*, women, unite under the “Fibuen”, an all –women’s secret cult to confront the looming threat of food insecurity exacerbated by the unchecked rearing practices of certain cattle owners particularly the Fon, and overseen by a cattle herder named Dewa. Their struggle takes a bold turn as they decide to arrest Dewa which becomes a critical step in reclaiming their agency. To further their case, they employ a provocative strategy: they deny their indifferent husbands both food and intimacy. This is meant to galvanize the men into action by urging them to unite against those responsible for the destructive practices threatening their community. Unpacking the actions of the women reveals a lot about power dynamics and how they assert their influence in a challenging socio-economic landscape.

The strategies of the women in *Lake God* vividly illustrate the submerged powers of African women, showcasing their agency and influence within both the household and community. First, we see the kitchen as a symbol of control. The kitchen is traditionally seen as a woman’s space. By controlling what is prepared and served, women assert their influence over the household and the family’s well-being. The men in the play are being denied food by their wives. Forgewei says “he had not eaten for four days” (*Lake God*; 27). Lagham requests that his wife cooks him some foo-foo which he would eat upon his return from the farm and the wife responds that she would have no time as she would be going to Ngangba to “ensure cattle don’t destroy the rest of the crops” (*Lake God*: 27). Maimo asks his wife about food and she says there is no soup and when he provides resources for soup, the wife says, there is no foofoo; simply put, the wife denies him food (*Lake God*: 29-30). All of these, is to provoke the men into the necessary action. We see that food is a powerful tool for negotiation, demonstrating that access to it, is not just a necessity, but a means of asserting authority.

We also see the strategic use of hunger. Withholding food serves as leverage to inspire action, illustrating that women’s roles extend beyond cooking to making critical decisions affecting family and community. This is manifested in one of the husbands’ declaration as he says: “...The women want to get justice by starving us. Unable to withstand hunger, we will put pressure on the Fon” (*Lake God*; 28). Food thus serves as a powerful tool for resistance. The women in the world of *Lake God* seem to understand what Sara Finnerty means when she says, “food can be a portal to that underlying empty space so close to freedom” (2018). This suggests that food represents not just physical nourishment but also the women’s struggle for justice and agency. By linking hunger to their demands for accountability, the women highlight how deprivation can force change, revealing the intricate power dynamics at play in their quest for liberation.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper has proven that understanding the submerged powers of African women plays a significant role in promoting gender equality, empowering women and fostering cultural appreciation. By recognizing and valuing these powers, African societies can tap into the immense potential of their women and create more inclusive and equitable places and spaces for them. Moreover, this knowledge can contribute to challenging stereotypes, dismantling oppressive structures and amplifying the voices of African women within their communities. It is therefore recommended that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners continue to explore and support initiatives that elevate the submerged powers of African women. Summarily, this paper highlights the significance of acknowledging and celebrating the submerged powers of African women within African cultural dynamics. By so doing, we can pave the way for a more equitable and inclusive society that harnesses the immense potential of African women and their contributions to their communities and beyond. In addition, this paper has drawn examples from *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Survivors* and *Lake God* to analyse and interpret the diverse expressions of female power from the social, cultural and economic dimensions which often operate beneath the surface of patriarchal norms and expectations. Our analyses equally illustrated how women navigate and resist patriarchal constraints, showcasing their resilience and agency within oppressive systems. Emphasis were laid on the revered status of motherhood, the intricacies of wifhood, the wielded power of the womb, her vital role of women in food security and the dynamics of sexuality to prove that the African woman occupies a powerful position within the African traditional cosmology and can be a veritable instrument of societal change and development.

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