

Child-Marriage Custom as Gender Oppression in Julie Okoh's *Itohan*

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Abstract

This study examines the practice of girl-child betrothal with its implications on women's rights and gender equity as portrayed in Julie Okoh's play, Itohan. The norm of child betrothal where young girls are given out in marriage without consent has deep-rooted socio-cultural and historical significance in many African societies. The study uses qualitative approach in which Julie Okoh's play is read critically and purposefully examined towards highlighting the multifaceted impact of child betrothal on the lives of women and adopts womanist theoretical conceptualization to interrogate the cultural norms that inhibit the rights and equality of women. Through the analysis of the heroines' struggles and triumphs within the play, this study underscores the need for the empowerment of the female humanity in the face of entrenched oppressive traditions. It advocates a re-evaluation of cultural norms, policies, and legal frameworks that protect the rights and the dignity of the girl-child and women in general in society. The study concludes that increased dialogue, awareness creation and intentional action need to be intensified towards breaking the shackles of child betrothal and gender disparity in African society.

Keywords: Child betrothal, Gender inequality, Women's rights, Cultural practices, Patriarchy

Introduction

Child marriage, which refers to the union of individuals under the age of 18, is a pervasive but often neglected phenomenon that mostly affects girls than boys. The wide recognition of child marriage as a harmful socio-cultural practice highlights its dual role as both a catalyst and a consequence of human rights violations. Child marriage involves underage children that are compelled into marital unions with adults without adequate understanding or the ability to give informed consent to such unions. This phenomenon is not like mere socio-cultural issue but a challenge to a nation's ethical, moral development and it also constitutes a violation of women's rights. Child marriage is often rooted in socio-cultural norms that are influenced by various socio-economic, religious, and cultural factors. The perceptions surrounding

child marriage may vary significantly, depending on the culture and tradition of a particular society. These may include the belief that marrying girls at a young age is a way to preserve cultural identity or maintain social order. The study by UNICEF (2001) reveals that one important impetus for marrying girls at early age is that it helps prevent premarital sex. Many societies prize virginity before marriage and this can manifest itself in a number of practices designed to 'protect' a girl from unsanctioned sexual activity. Cultural norms that favour the male child over girls play a significant role in the prevalence of child marriage. Also, in societies, where the female child has restricted access to education and economic prospects, early marriage may be considered as a way to ensure their well-being in the future. In Uganda, according to Chidiebere Ogbonna, Lokawua and Mwaniki:

For the people of Tepeth and Matheniko, one of the most cited reasons for the continued existence of child marriage is culture. Many of the respondents pointed out that children are betrothed even before they are born, mainly for purposes of cementing strategic alliances and relationships between families or communities. Although, child betrothal may have reduced elsewhere due to social changes in the society, yet the practice is still preeminent in Tepeth and Matheniko. The main reason for the continued practice of child betrothal is that families and communities perceive intermarriage as an instrument of sustaining peaceful relationship with other families, clan or communities, thereby favoring child betrothal even though it is not in the best interest of the child. Thus, the girl child is traded to maintain peaceful coexistence among families and clans in Tepeth and Matheniko (8).

In other instances, a girl may be offered to a family as a compensation for the death of a man caused by a member of the girl's family. Chinyere Okam and Chima Anthony Onwuekwe observe that:

In Zimbabwe, for instance, there is the custom of *ngozi*, whereby a girl can be given to a family as a compensation for a death of a man caused by a member of the girl's family. On reaching puberty, the girl is expected to have sexual intercourse with the brother or father of the deceased person to produce a son to replace the one who died. Another custom is *chimutsamapfiwa*-wife inheritance-according to which, when a married woman dies, her sister is obliged to replace her in the matrimonial home. The same practice obtains called *Nkuchi* in Ifite-Ogwari, Southeast, Nigeria (33)

Social structures such as patriarchy, familial and educational institutions, and socio-economic class can either impede or support child marriage. In northern Nigeria, communities exhibit patriarchal traits, reinforcing the dependence of girls on men and linking their value to social and economic implications as if they were articles of commerce.

Child marriage abuses most often go unreported due to its connections with social, cultural, and religious factors. First, poverty has been identified as a factor influencing child brides, and it is also connected with inability to cater for the girl's education. According to Tadema:

Poverty is also another factor responsible for the continued survival of child marriage practices in Nigeria. Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning early marriage. Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older man, a practice common in some societies, is a family survival strategy, and may even be seen as being in her best interests (4).

In cases where educational opportunities are not readily available for girls, it hampers their agency and limits their ability to advocate for change. Child marriage puts an end to girls' education, meaning that the younger a girl is married, the less educated she becomes and the more economically reliant on others she becomes. As a result, the cycle of poverty persists. Furthermore, even when educational infrastructure is present in a community, there may be additional hurdles, such as the community's social norms or cultural values attached to a girl's education. Moreover, there exists an unequal and differentiated gender-based division of labor. Women hold lower levels of social, economic, and political influence. To enhance their power, women are compelled to move from the domestic sphere to the public sphere.

In certain cultures, the societal and economic worth of girls is rooted in dependence. Arranging a girl's marriage before she reaches puberty is perceived as a means for the family to avoid incurring wasted expenses on the child. Typically, such marriages involve an economic exchange, with a wealthy family providing financial compensation to a less affluent family, either to settle a debt or enhance their financial status. Child marriage is hegemonic. The dominant ideology is marrying underage girls against their will for religious or economic reasons. Of course, at tender age that the girl-child is being negotiated for marriage, the girl victim of such arrangement lacks the capacity for resistance. In the West Africa, a research conducted by UNICEF (2001) indicates that economic hardship is encouraging a rise in early marriage, even among some population groups that do not normally practice it. Due to financial constraints, men are delaying marriage, leading to parental concerns about the risk of their daughters having pregnancies outside wedlock. Consequently, any available chance for early marriage is eagerly embraced.

The ideology involves social detractors (poverty, cessation of education and limited access to health services) and social attractors (conformity to religious and cultural norms, a source of income and status). Power is derived from religious and social institutions that permit such practices. Families that take bride price or dowry for a young girl buy into the ideology and girls are forced to marry early for economic, religious and cultural reasons. A notable instance is the controversial case involving

Nigerian politician- Senator Yerima of Zamfara State, who married a 13-year-old Egyptian girl after paying her family \$100,000. Subsequently, the child is deemed "useful" by bearing children and contributing to the labor and income of her new family. Several studies attest to the fact that education holds enduring economic benefits for girls. Onyeansi says that "schooling improves productivity, health, status and reduces negative features of life such as child trafficking, child labour, child abuse and so on" (138). These scholarly investigations demonstrate a correlation between the expansion of basic education, economic development and child marriage in underdeveloped economies. According to Baker "When girls receive formal education, they are significantly more inclined to ensure that their own children attend school, thereby enhancing the education rates for the subsequent generation" (174). Conversely, child marriage typically brings an end to the prospects of the child's education, erecting barriers against the realization of their rights to education. Ghosh states that the practice of child marriage "condemns them to an existence devoid of education, health, safety, and freedom of choice. Early marriage not only subjects girls to accept their domestic and conjugal roles during childhood, but also puts them in a position where they are unable to exercise a choice about their own sexual and reproductive health" (2)

Studies have also shown that as mothers' levels of education rise, the mortality rate declines, as these mothers are better equipped to manage their child's health and nutrition. Baker asserts that "Schooling has been associated with a decrease in maternal deaths. Girls enrolled in school are less prone to early marriage, pregnancy, and maternal mortality (174). Undoubtedly, there are significant health concerns associated with underage girls giving birth. This leads to the third consequence of child marriage: health and psychological well-being. Often, discussions surrounding health overlook mental and reproductive health. Child marriage increases the risk of diseases such as sexually transmitted infections, cervical cancer, malaria, obstetric fistulas (resulting from prolonged and obstructed labor that may leave the child permanently incontinent), maternal mortality, and mental health issues like depression. Nour points out that "Offspring born in such unions face an increased risk of premature birth, neonatal, or infant death" (51). Given that most child marriages occur in rural areas, access to healthcare is challenging or non-existent. Incidents of rape and suicide are prevalent in these marriages. The community often does not perceive such acts as rape, as the girl is married, and societal expectations regarding the wife's role are presumed to align with the husband's wishes.

The consequences of child marriage encompass aspects such as poverty, education, and health. Hence, it undermines a number of rights guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. There is, therefore, every need to argue for the rights of adolescent girls to prevent child marriage and promote the value of girl child in a society like ours. It is in this context that this study gives a detailed analysis of Julie Okoh's *Itohan* a contextual analysis. Using the play, *Itohan*, the playwright seems to beckons on society to witness the resilience, resistance, and, ultimately, the empowerment of the girl child against the suffocating bonds of an oppressive tradition.

Theoretical Framework

Womanism is a theoretical framework that offers a unique perspective on issues related to gender, particularly, focusing on the experiences and challenges faced by women of color. This term is coined by Alice Walker, a black American who argues that feminism did not encompass the perspective of black women. According to Walker, “the concept “Womanism”, itself, is derived from the adjective “womanist” which means having respect and belief in the abilities and talents of women. Advocates of Womanism identify it as the totality of identifying with women issues and aspirations in its entire ramification. Womanism extends beyond the limitations of feminism by considering the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. This perspective within womanism underscores its role in fortifying the connection between black men and women, fostering the well-being of the entire African community. As per Walker's observations, womanists are committed to the unification of both African men and women. Catherine Acholonu regards African feminism as an essential component of womanism, designed to free women from various layers of repression. This perspective rejects the reduction of women to mere sexual objects and instead aims to create an all-encompassing categorization of feminism. In this framework, women are perceived as individuals unrestricted by race, gender, caste, or societal repression

Fundamentally, advocates of this strand of womanism contend that African feminism serves as a guiding principle for breaking free from subjugation and injustices. These challenges arise from biases evident in education, economics, social-political structures, and cultural norms. By addressing racial, cultural, sexual, and class biases, this approach strives to establish a more inclusive and empowering form of feminism, championing the liberation of women from systemic injustices and inequality.

In the Nigerian context, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, a prominent literary critic and advocate for female liberation, puts forth several reasons for favoring womanism over feminism. According to her “feminism which is smacks of rebellious, fearlessness, political awareness of sexism and unpardonable (from the male point of view) drive for equality and equity between the sexes. The radical feminist can go as far as doing without the macho male to enjoy her liberty (61). She emphasizes that Nigerian women writers are consistently mindful of the negative associations linked to feminism. Ogunyemi suggests that the apprehension of being accused by men of aligning with Western feminism has led many Nigerian women writers to embrace womanism instead. This theoretical framework challenges the prevailing trend in literary works authored by men, where women are often portrayed in relation to male protagonists rather than as independent individuals. By taking this approach, male playwrights frequently fall short of presenting realistic solutions to common female challenges. In alignment with this perspective, Nwapa asserts that:

Nigerian male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwesi, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Ola Rotimi and Elechi Amadi, have all in their earlier works played down the powerful role of women. Unlike Peter Abrahams and Ousmane Sambene, who knew and projected the worth of women, the Nigeria writers have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in their subordination to men. In Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* the woman is presented as prostitute; Wole Soyinka's Amope in *The Trials of Brother Jero* is a ceaselessly nagging woman who makes life intolerable for her husband. Achebe's Miss Mark does not hesitate to put her sex appeal to work in order to attain desired objectives. In J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*, Ebere entices her husband's younger brother into sexual relationship. The focus has always been on the physical, prurient negative nature of women (528).

In response to this ongoing trend of portraying women in a degraded manner, Omolara Ogundipe encourages women to strive and ensure that they do not lag behind men in humanity's collective effort to transform society.

However, the emergence of female writers on the Nigerian literary scene has undeniably signaled the necessity for a more focused consideration of gender issues that were previously given negative attention in Nigerian literature. Writers such as Tess Onwueme in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Stella Oyedepo in *On His Demise*, Tracy Utoh Ezeajugh in *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, Zulu Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods*, and numerous others have played pivotal roles in reshaping the representation of women in contemporary Nigerian drama. These literary works aim to challenge the misconceptions about women. Consequently, female writers have stepped forward to foreground the challenges of their fellow women in their literary works. Womanism emphasizes the importance of recognising the unique struggles faced by women in diverse cultural settings. In the analysis of child betrothal, a womanist perspective would likely address how this practice impacts the lives of young girls within the specific cultural framework as projected in Julie Okoh's *Itohan*. Moreover, womanism places a strong emphasis on women's struggle and empowerment. This study examines how the characters in Julie Okoh's *Itohan*, especially women and young girls, resist the injustice and oppression associated with child betrothal.

Education as a potent tool for liberation in Julie Okoh's *Itohan*

The play, *Itohan* revolves around the eponymous heroine, Itohan and her husband, Emiator, who are forbidden to marry each other. Itohan's father arranges a marriage of convenience for her with an elderly man named Okharedia, against her wishes but she refuses to sacrifice her love for Emiator. *Itohan* is a play that showcases the strength and determination of women, illustrating the necessary mind-set and unwavering determination required to achieve freedom within a patriarchal society. The play is set in Benin, a post-colonial society with setting in the Southern part of Nigeria after the period of colonial rule has ended. Within this setting, the fictional Akugbe community represents a patriarchal society that is beginning to encounter the influences of Christianity and Western education as they transit into the modern era. In the

play, Julie Okoh makes a statement that the instituted oppressive norms, customs and traditions that have limited women over the years must be surmounted.

The opening scene takes place in the front of the king's palace where the king is pre-occupied with the conferment of chieftaincy titles on three worthy sons of the community. Here, a female character, Othibo who is also Itohan's daughter is introduced to us as one of the attendants of this important chieftaincy award ceremony. Her handbag has just been snatched from her by a drunkard. Luckily for her, Usifo, who witnesses the robbery, accosts the drunkard and succeeds in recovering the handbag from him. This incident plays a major role in fostering a mutual relationship between her and Usifo. Othibo takes her new found lover home to Itohan, her mother. At this point, the playwright employs a flashback to portray Itohan's intense bitterness and pain as she narrates how the popular ceremony among her people has brought untold hardship and difficulties into her life. The hopelessness of the girl child's situation in a patriarchal society is powerfully dramatized, as Itohan presents us with a bizarre account of man's insensitivity and subjugation of women. Okharedia Arebamhen's lifelong ambition of being conferred with a chieftaincy title was denied, simply because he couldn't sire a son with his wife. His sudden interest in Itohan, who was betrothed to him, some years back, reflects his innate desire to actualize his ambition. This is because Itohan, although married to Emiator Osakue has a son, which traditionally, is a very important criteria for making him a chief in the community. The fact that Usifo is not his biological child does not stop Okharedia either. Okharedia says "According to our customs and traditions, if a woman is betrothed to a man, that man owns the woman and the issues from her womb.." (47).

The case of intimidation and violence is significant in *Itohan*. Okharedia is seen in the play text as a despicable character, which can go to any length to get what he want. His wicked tendencies are seen in the way he plans the brutal manhandling of Itohan and the kidnap of her son. Okharedia resorts to physical violence by bringing in his thugs to accomplish it for him. Julie Okoh describes the dreadful scene of the violation:

Lights dim slowly. Cut to the front of Osakue's house. Accompanied by some thugs, Okharedia comes into the compound. The DRUNKARD, who is passing by, stops to witness the following scene of kidnapping)

OKHAREDIA (pointing to USIFO): That's him over there. Get him!

ITOHAN: (runs to the children) Leave my children alone.

THUG 1 (picking up USIFO): What about the girl?

OKHAREDIA: Ignore her. I have four daughters already.

ITOHAN: Give me my child.

USIFO: Put me down (Kicking his legs, struggles to set himself free) Put me down! I want to take care of my sister. Put me down!

THUG 1: Shut up!

ITOHAN (dragging USIFO with THUG 1): Give me my child! Put him down!

DRUNKARD: (counting) One, two, three. Three hefty men are fighting one tiny woman. Hey, you! Put down the child!

OKHAREDIA (from his pocket, he brings out a revolver, points it at the

DRUNKARD: (*menacingly*): You drunkard, get out of here at once. Be gone!

DRUNKARD: Ok ok! Don't kill me. I'm already gone.

OKHAREDIA: (to the THUGS): You guys hurry up! Let's move out of here quickly.

(ITOHAN struggles with THUG 1 for the child. From behind, THUG II pulls ITOHAN to the ground, gives her hard kicks on her waist, which makes her to scream: "Aie!")

He corks the gun, points it at ITOHAN saying:)

THUG II: Woman be still. If you dare move, I'll scatter your skull. (71-72)

A lot of patriarchal attitudes of Okharedia, especially, his use of physical violence on the Itohan and his complete disregard of the Itohan's protest are gendered. His thugs know nothing but brute force. Their job is to crush the women, to intimidate and subdue them into accepting the rules made by men. The second thug wastes no time in doing just that as he kicks Itohan's waist from behind and she falls down, a violent assault which Okharedia sees as virtually nothing. Ifi Amadiume's claim that "The sanctity of motherhood meant that women are to be treated with respect" has no place in Okharedia's treatment of women in the play. Contemporary society has eroded much of the privileges that women once enjoyed in pre-colonial Africa, resulting in the current state of crisis in gender relations. Usifo was forcefully taken away to Lagos, despite the struggles of his parents to rescue him from the hands of his abductors.

In the play, marriage is portrayed as a domain that poses a great challenge for women within the African traditional culture. Itohan is made angry, humiliated and treated unfairly when her father tries to force her into a marriage which she strongly detests. As a result, she elopes and got married to her lover, Emiator. Usually, marriages are influenced by personal interests, but Isibor Aghenta assumes responsibility for choosing a spouse for his daughter. He rejects Emiator who seeks to marry Itohan, possibly as a way of asserting his dominance and control. Isibor considers Itohan's rebellious act as being unforgivable and disowns her. Isibor's conversation with Ebakota, his wife demonstrates this:.

ISIBORAGHENTA: She humiliated me before friends and foes. She made me a laughing stock in the whole community. How can I forgive that?

EBAKOTA: She did what she did because you were too adamant in your decision. She was in love with the young man. She tried to explain to you, you wouldn't listen to her. She sent people to beg you, you wouldn't change your mind. The boy's parents even came here, you drove them away. Some members of the church came here to beg you. You still refused. What were you expecting her to do when all these attempts failed to touch your heart? (23-24).

The existing African conviction in the superiority of male descendants allows a man to have multiple wives. Okoh's play suggests that if a wife fails to bear a son for her husband, societal judgment doesn't question a man's decision to marry another wife. Okharedia vows to make Itohan return to him no matter what it costs him to do so. Therefore, he uses intimidation and control. Gregory Okorobia notes that "the woman is regarded and used as a "spare tyre" this is a most unfortunate way of regarding a human being. Almost all reasons for polygamy are for the benefit of man, even though out of vanity some women opted for polygamy, the whole idea is for the pleasure of man (443). This distinctly elucidates the disadvantages women encounter in marriages, as African customary laws favour men, permitting them to practice polygamy.

The thematic thrust of *Itohan* is rooted in an aspect of Akugbe tradition, which dehumanises women.

The play advocates the abandonment of cultural practices that foster gender inequality, irrespective of cultural beliefs. It explores gender issues within the African traditional society, shedding light on how men wield power in various aspects of their society. Specific attention is given to three cultural practices – domestic violence, male child preference, and girl-child marriage. Itohan says:

ITOHAN: I beg you all, let's face reality. Culture and traditions are not static. They are always changing. It is true that the betrothal of the girl child to kings, rich men and friends has been in practice from time immemorial. It was once in vogue in ancient Jewish, Greek and Roman civilisations. It also once flourished in traditional communities all over Africa. But today, societies have evolved tremendously. Since the declaration of human rights, based on the principle of natural laws, the ideas of liberty and self-determination are now encouraged for both men and women. Let us try to live according to the demands of our time. The time of slavery is over. Child betrothal is a form of slavery. (51-52).

Itohan's experiences mirror the harsh reality faced by numerous girls who endure physical assaults from influential men in their communities. The existence of patriarchal power structures in many societies poses a significant obstacle for women and girls seeking justice or speaking out against various forms of violence. This highlights the systemic discrimination and inequality faced by women, perpetuated by gendered power dynamics and societal norms. Despite Itohan's protests and pleas for assistance, Okharedia is shielded by his status and influence. The situation becomes even more complex and bewildering for Itohan when Okharedia's thug forcibly takes away her son, adding to her confusion and distress as a young woman. Itohan's life is marked by oppression, particularly through patriarchal customs like child marriage. Okoh's play, *Itohan*, scrutinises this entrenched African tradition, emphasising its unjust treatment of women.

On the other hand, the preference for male children underscores the patriarchal construction of gender roles in traditional African society, where a woman's worth is determined by her ability to bear sons for her husband. Okoh unequivocally condemns masculine thinking and its treatment of women through this play. Thus Itohan explicates the struggles to liberate herself, and indeed women, from the obnoxious customs and traditions of her people. She is a modern, educated woman who is prepared to liberate herself from oppression. She represents the robust female character that Ezenwanebe considers essential in contemporary African drama. Demonstrating a logical prowess in argument, she dismantles Isibor's unfounded assertion that children should “obey thy father and thy mother in all things big or small” (24) Her battle against subjugation of the girl child starts from her father's house. She challenges Isibor's stance on the right of a parent in choosing a partner for their children is met with a fierce response. She boldly says:

ITOHAN: You have no respect if you trample on the law of nature. It was not nature that stipulates that a daughter should be forced to marry a man she does not love.

Neither is it the law of God. Even the Bible says a man and a woman shall leave their father and mother to become one flesh. What brings them together is love. Love is a natural feeling. And I love the man I married. If I had married a man, I didn't love, my life would have ended up in pain and sorrow. That's injustice. (25).

Itohan is able to transcend limitations by virtue of her education. She uses education as a precious weapon to secure her individual empowerment at a critical period in her life. In Julie Okoh's *Itohan*, the education of the eponymous heroine helps to propel her to achieve financial independence. It also gives her voice to assert her rights, express her aspirations, and resist societal pressures that may lead to early marriage. *Itohan* is a play that represents educated women who are capable of advocating for themselves, earning their own income, and engaging in equal relationships with men, where love, respect, and opinions hold significance. Okoh contends that women can liberate themselves from societal constraints, even when rooted in cultural and religious norms, by relying on education. The playwright portrays education as a reliable avenue for female empowerment, enhancing women's standing in society. She asserts that education is the key to securing women's independence from the dominating tendencies of men.

The play condemns the cultural prejudice against women. Itohan, as key character in the play, is at crossroads because of her father's belief in an ancient tradition that negates the right of women, and interferes with the freedom, education and integrity of women. Hence, Itohan is being treated like a minor simply because she is a woman. Not even her father's exposure to Western values could save her, because Isibor Aghenta was among those who got early contact with colonial masters in his community. His wealth of experience made him aware of the growing influence of Western education. Therefore, he sent Itohan to school so that she would acquire Western education. Itohan also imbibed Western culture and suddenly developed freedom of will that thwarted her father's intentions. She rejects the life of servitude that denies her the opportunity to make decisions and achieve freedom. The pinnacle of showcasing her independence of thought and the resilience of her character is exemplified by her decision to reject any suitor presented by her father, and instead, she insists on making her own choice in marriage. She envisions marriage as a connection that should be characterised by mutual understanding and equality, rather than subjugation or captivity. Looking at Okoh's play without doubt, child-marriage is not to be encouraged because of its negative and destructive influence on characters in the play. Itohan's marriage almost collapses when faced with the stress emanating from Okharedia's sense of entitlement. He defies all odds and visits Itohan's matrimonial home with the mind-set to force her and her children to return to him. This is despite the fact that Emiator, her husband is still alive. After witnessing the unfolding drama between Okharedia and his wife, Emiator questions his wife's fidelity and orders her to leave their matrimonial home, but for the timely intervention of Ebakota and Isibor Aghenta, who informs him that Itohan was betrothed to Okharedia. When this blackmail fails, Okharedia, holding onto the tenets of tradition, rallies round the elders, and the meeting is presided over by King Ojeaga. Okoh uses the conversation between Okharedia and elder Ihama to illustrate the obsolete and outmoded customs and traditions of the people:

ELDER EZOMO: Let me explain. We discovered very late that you didn't fully meet the requirements for the title.

OKHAREDIA: What requirements? Each year, I give scholarship to five indigent students of this community to attend any university of their choice, in this country. The community health centre was built by me. The borehole providing water to the

whole community was my pet project. In preparation for the chieftaincy title ceremony, I renovated the Onogie's palace. I gave each and every one of you fabulous gifts. Haven't I contributed enough to the development of the community? Tell me.

ELDER IHAMA: Agreed, our community has benefitted a lot from your generosity. But our customs and traditions stipulate that the aspirant for the chieftaincy title must have a male child. To the best of our knowledge, you only have four daughters (48).

Here, Okoh draws attention to a world where greater importance is attached to the male child. Irrespective of the various contributions Okharedia has made towards the development of his community, he is still being denied the chieftaincy title, simply because he does not have a son. Even when Okharedia rightly points out that his four daughters “are as good as any son. Two of them are medical doctors” (48). The elders claim the need, as vanguards of the society, to protect and preserve tradition from collapsing. Elder Osuma states: “ We know that your daughters are doing very well. But tradition is tradition” (48). The representation of male child preference is not peculiar to Okoh's play. The issue of male child preference to the detriment of the females is also highlighted in Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*. Asiedu says that “This preference for sons is very much a reality in Nigerian and other African societies” (175). The widespread inclination toward favouring male children is deeply ingrained, resulting in a subdued level of excitement when female children are born. This is rooted in the societal belief that a female child is considered a temporary member of the family, destined to eventually depart through marriage to another family. Ezeibunwa attests to this phenomenon in his book titled *Male Child-Syndrome and the Agony of Motherhood* among the Igbo of Nigeria, when he says that “Male-child preference has remained one of the most lasting cultural values of the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria” (220). This phenomenon is prevalent in societies where male children receive better treatment compared to their female counterparts. In Patrick Nwagbo Obi's *When Women go Naked*, Oganaiigwe, a male character in the play, embodies the mind-set shared by numerous Igbo men, claiming that without male offspring, their family lineage would cease to exist. This belief stems from the notion that only male children are deemed capable of perpetuating the family line. This agrees with Akpan's view in his essay, *The Male Factor and Family Size in Rural Development*, where he says that:

A man who died without a son lived a worthless life; he is inherited by his brother, and is soon forgotten since his branch of the family tree has ended...also, in traditional Igbo society, the status of a man is assessed in part by the number of his sons, a man with many sons is viewed as a wealthy or an accomplished man, his neighbours cautiously avoid confrontation or litigation with him and he is assured of a befitting burial at death. For a woman, the birth of a male child is of paramount importance as well, because it establishes her firmly in the family She is said to have “taken root” or established a solid foundation when the first son arrives since the birth of a son ensures marital security, given prevailing high childhood mortality, just a son is not enough. The desire to ensure that at least one survives his father encourages prolific childbearing (6).

This belief is rooted in the patriarchal nature of the society, with little or no effort made to address this systemic bias. Okoh thus tends to call for a comprehensive reform of the tradition and customs of most African societies so as to generate sustainable development. Akhigbe, one of the male characters says:

AKHIGBE: Not until we learn to change the mental models that are holding us back. It is only when we change the way we think that we can develop new attitudes, behaviours and capabilities that will generate development and progress (69).

Therefore, in *Itohan*, the author is not content with raising the consciousness on the plight of women in a hostile societal setting alone; she does more. She believes that an equitable coexistence of both sexes will be achieved through a defiant confrontation with patriarchy. While the play predominantly revolves around themes such as child marriage, violence against women and male child preference, the playwright also endeavors to delve into the concepts of perseverance and shared accountability. Significantly, she underscores both the collective and individual contributions of women in confronting the issues of gender insensitivity, exemplified by the character of Okharedia, portrayed as the embodiment of male oppression. Through the conversation with his wives, King Ojeaga becomes aware that the women of the community threaten to stage a nude protest if Itohan is ever made to go back to Okharedia. The women are quickly rallied together by Itohan and the wives of King Ojeaga, who after considering the discriminatory stance of the king have to come together for a unifying action of resistance. Therefore, the women's protest empowers Okoh to denounce cultural practices that impede the freedom of the girl-child. Interestingly, and her commitment to breaking cultural obstacles against women's empowerment through formal education which aligns with goal three of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in addressing issues of development, equality, participation, protection, and women subjugation in Africa. As the curtain falls, Itohan reconciles with her long lost son and Okharedia apologises for his misdeeds. Despite going through the most enduring and most profound suffering any woman could face, Itohan chooses to forgive Okharedia. As a typical womanist, Okoh demonstrates a world where love conquers male chauvinism. While the play sheds light on the mistreatment of women by men, its predominant focus on resilience and love, culminating in a positive conclusion, sets it apart from the familiar narratives of feminism and women's liberation.

Conclusion

This study throws light on the multi-faceted impact of child betrothal, touching on the realms of education, freedom, and participation pursuant to societal expectations. The analysis illustrates the play's advocacy for societal transformation and the need to break free from the shackles of harmful cultural practices, especially as it concerns child betrothal. The play, *Itohan* serves as a warning on the consequences of such customs, urging readers to confront the problem of gender inequality in its various forms. Moreover, the play serves as a call to action — the playwright demonstrates in the play that it is only through a collective effort that the patriarchal structures that sustain child betrothal will be dismantled. *Itohan* as a womanist play emphasises the role of education as a tool for empowerment. It also stresses the need of advocacy for legal reforms, and the cultivation of a mind-set that values the rights of every

individual, regardless of gender. *Itohan* serves not only as a work of fiction but as a mirror reflecting the harsh realities faced by countless young girls subjected to the constraints of child betrothal. As readers engage with the play, they are moved to question societal norms and contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding gender equality. Through the analysis of this play, we are made aware of the transformative potential of drama and its ability to foster awareness and inspire meaningful change. The journey of the heroine, Itohan becomes emblematic of the collective struggle against child betrothal, inviting readers to envision a future where the rights and dignity of every woman and girls really matters and are celebrated.

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