RESILIENT MOTHERHOOD: THE CULTURAL AESTHETICS OF ONIEMO IN URHOBO LITERATURE

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Abstract

This article investigates the representations of motherhood in the fiction of Isidore Okpewho, Ben Okri, and Tanure Ojaide through the Urhobo concept of *Oniemo*. Within Urhobo cosmology, *Oniemo* signifies multiple overlapping configurations that extends beyond the close bond between a mother and her children. She is figured as a nurturer, custodian of culture, lineage, moral order and a critique of patriarchal norms. Drawing on Sara Ruddick's theory of Maternal Thinking and Catherine Acholonu's articulation of Motherism, the article demonstrates how these writers depict maternal figures as resilient anchors of survival and continuity, particularly during moments of crisis. Concurrently, the analysis resist idealisation by recognising the restrictive dimensions of *Oniemo*, where women's social values are narrowly defined through sacrifice and caregiving. The study therefore proposes *Oniemo* as a culturally specific lens for engaging maternal representation in Urhobo literature, one that illuminates both the empowering and burdensome aspects of motherhood.

Keywords:*Oniemo*, motherhood, Urhobo literature, maternal thinking,maternal resilience

Introduction

The Urhobo people, one of the major ethnic nationalities of southern Nigeria, currently comprise twenty-four autonomous kingdoms (Erhiurhoro, 2014; Akpodiete, 2018). These kingdoms, each headed by traditional rulers, operate through a patrilineal system that is both political and spiritual in nature. The Urhobo people predominantly inhabit the rainforest belt of present-day Delta State, though communities are also found in neighbouring Edo and Bayelsa States, as well as across the wider Nigerian diaspora. Their cultural identity is underpinned by a rich tapestry

of histories, cosmologies, ritual practices, and oral traditions that are woven into the fabric of everyday social life. This cultural vibrancy has provided fertile ground for literary expression, enabling Urhobo writers to inscribe their communities' lived experiences within the broader body of literature.

Although Urhobo literature is often composed in the colonial language of Nigerian schooling and literary circulation, its thematic concerns and narrative patterns remain deeply indebted to indigenous cosmology and local idioms. Isidore Okpewho and Ben Okri, for instance, both raised in culturally heterogeneous households represent a hybrid consciousness. Their texts embody an interplay of influences, ranging from Urhobo oral traditions to wider Nigerian and global currents. In contrast, Tanure Ojaide, who was nurtured within a fully Urhobo cultural environment, speaks more directly to indigenous epistemologies and ethical frameworks. According to Ojaruega (2015), Ojaide's work:

> *is deeply steeped in Urhobo folklore, a facet shaped both by his upbringing and his extensive study and research into the Udje poetic tradition. Ojaide's oeuvre is richly infused with native Urhobo folklore, drawing on legendary figures such as Ogiso, Arhuaran, Aminogbe, Ayayughe, and Ogidigbo, as well as the fauna and flora emblematic of the region, including the iroko, akpobrisi, uwara, and eyareya. Moreover, he incorporates folk songs and models his poetry on the Udje genre, employing orature to assert a cultural identity that evokes a shared humanity across his works (p. 1).*

The intellectual terrain of Urhobo literary criticism has been reinforced by efforts to integrate Urhobo voices into African and global literary discourses. Godini Darah's *Battles of Songs: Udje Tradition of the Urhobo* offers a foundational study of the Udje poetic form, situating it within wider scholarly discussions on African folklore, oral tradition, and cultural nationalism. Sunny Awhefeada has been particularly instrumental in illuminating how Nigerian literature intersects with the political and ecological crises of the Niger Delta, showing that Urhobo experience cannot be separated from broader regional and national struggles. In addition, the influential work of Rose Aziza and Enajite Ojaruega in African literary and gender studies complements this perspective by expanding the critical space within which Urhobo cultural realities are examined. These scholars' collective interventions affirm the

centrality of Urhobo perspective in discussions about identity, resistance, and the environmental realities in Nigerian literature.

Ojaruega (2014) presents a generational lens for understanding Urhobo literary production, offering a perspective that goes beyond simple chronological categorizations often used in Nigerian literary historiography. According to her, the first generation comprising J. P. Clark, Isidore Okpewho, Tanure Ojaide, Anthony Biakolo, and Ben Okri, pioneered a recognisable Urhobo literary voice in English, skilfully weaving their works into the Nigerian literary landscape while remaining firmly grounded in indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions. The second generation, including Emevwo Biakolo, Onookome Okome, Hope Eghagha, Benson Omonode, Richard Maduku, and Mabel Tobrise Evwierhoma, nurtured this foundation, combining critical scholarship with creative practice to further the reach and depth of Urhobo storytelling. Today, a third wave, represented by Alex Roy-Omoni, Peter Omoko, Emmanuel Esemedafe, (and Stephen Kekeghe)continues to explore new horizons, engaging with globalisation, ecological crises, and the challenges of cultural survival, yet their works remain firmly anchored in Urhobo identity. This generational framework not only traces the evolution of Urhobo literature but also highlights its ongoing dialogue between tradition and contemporary realities (p. 3).

Despite this vibrant intellectual and creative activities, Urhobo novelists have not received the visibility accorded to Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka, or other figures of Nigeria's canonised generations, who continue to dominate critical attention and often eclipse writers from smaller ethnic traditions. Even when Okpewho, Okri, and Ojaide are celebrated, the uniquely Urhobo inflections in their writing often go underexplored, subsumed by the dominant narrative arcs of the first generation and by postcolonial frameworks. This imbalance may be partly from the critical canonisation of Nigeria's first generation and the institutional influence of postcolonial theory, which, while valuable for interrogating colonial legacies, has often universalised African experience as Gikandi (2010) writes that postcolonial criticism tend to "collapse the diverse trajectories of African societies into a monolithic narrative of colonial encounter," (p. 23). Similarly, Mbembe (2001) challenges approaches that overlook Africa's internal fractures and historical specificities, warning that plurality may be reduced to a narrow narrative of resistance to colonial power (p. 5). Accordingly, ethnic literatures such as Urhobo writing are often swallowed by the homogenising label of "Nigerian" or "African" literature.

This article addresses the critical neglect of Urhobo literature by examining how three major writers, Isidore Okpewho, Ben Okri, and Tanure Ojaide, reimagine the Urhobo cultural philosophy of motherhood, known as *Oniemo*. *Oniemo* encompasses the intimate bond between mother and child, the endurance of maternal sacrifice, and the role of women as moral custodians of the community. For Okpewho, Okri, and Ojaide, *Oniemo* functions as both a cultural resource and a literary strategy for interrogating survival, resilience, and identity. Their maternal figures emerge as central agents whose stories reveal the ethical and spiritual foundations of Urhobo life. These portrayals can be productively read in dialogue with Ruddick's (1989) theory of maternal practice, which emphasises the ethical dimensions of caregiving, and Acholonu's (1995) Afrocentric framework of Motherism, which celebrates motherhood as a site of cultural renewal.

The argument advanced here is that Urhobo novelists deploy *Oniemo* not simply to affirm cultural continuity but also to expose the burdens imposed on women when motherhood becomes the primary index of female worth. Maternal figures embody fortitude, moral authority, and cultural preservation, but they also carry the weight of silence, sacrifice, and suffering. In this sense, *Oniemo* operates as a double-edged philosophy, one that honours women's indispensable roles while simultaneously revealing the gendered costs of locating womanhood almost exclusively within motherhood. Through their reimagining of *Oniemo*, Okpewho, Okri, and Ojaide create a critical space for reflecting on both the cultural significance and the social consequences of motherhood in Urhobo society.

***Oniemo*: The Urhobo Cultural Philosophy of Motherhood**

Motherhood is a natural and sacred female experience, primarily understood as the act of giving birth to, and nurturing children. Akujobi (2011) defines motherhood as "an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby" (p. 2). In many African societies, regardless of whether they are organised along patrilineal or matrilineal lines, motherhood occupies a special place. Children are rarely raised by a mother alone; instead, they grow up within a wider circle of care provided by grandmothers, aunts, and other women, who nurture them, teach moral values, and pass on cultural traditions (Oyěwùmí, 2003). In Urhobo culture, the term *Oniemo*, derived from *oni* (mother) and *emo* (children), is not only about biological mothers but (the mother of all or communal motherhood), in which

mothers serve as nurturers, protectors, and moral anchors, whose influence extends into the ancestral realm. In Urhobo belief system, *Oniemo* represents female ancestors. (*Iniemo*) and their male counterparts (*Esemo*) are guardians of lineage and prosperity. For of her association with fertility, *Oniemo* is often regarded as a goddess of procreation. According to Ofuafo (2018):

> *Oniemo signifies the cult of the ancestress. In most cases, depending on the community and the family, it is represented by a carving of a woman with a baby either strapped to her back or being breastfed, signifying motherhood, fertility, and the relationship between mother and child. This object, which is in three-dimensional formats, is kept in the homes of many Urhobo traditional women. It is sculpted after the death of a woman and venerated during the second burial rites. They are worshipped and honour is given to them (p. 110-1).*

Here, *Oniemo* embodies both the everyday and the sacred Mother. Ofuafo (2012:23) observes that diviners often instruct women struggling with childlessness to carve and venerate a sculpted Oniemo figure in the hope of conceiving. This perspective aligns with a broader African tradition in which motherhood is central to social survival. Among the Yoruba of southern Nigeria, the proverb *Iyaniwura* ("Mother is gold") expresses the pricelessness of maternal care (Makinde, 2004: 174). Similarly, the Igbo saying *Nneka* ("Mother is supreme"), famously recalled in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), affirms the indispensable authority of mothers in times of crisis. Literary scholars such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Birago Diop, and Christopher Okigbo often evoke Africa through the powerful metaphor of a nurturing mother, one whose embrace protects, sustains, and anchors communal identity. When read against this expansive literary and philosophical tradition, the Urhobo concept of *Oniemo* emerges as a deep articulation of maternal essence. It is a worldview grounded in ritual practice, cosmological order, and social ethics, through which the Urhobo community interprets motherhood as both a spiritual force and a lived responsibility.

The sacred value of motherhood in Urhobo society is also reinforced in social rituals that publicly acknowledges maternal achievements. Among the Idjerhe people of Delta State, Nabofa (2009, cited in Ofuafo, 2018)

writes that women who bear seven or more children are honoured in a grand ceremony called *Onirode* ("Great Mother"), during which they process proudly through the community and are celebrated with gifts and songs. Such women are regarded as embodiments of fertility and resilience, having fulfilled both biological and spiritual obligations to their lineage. Upon their passing, a ritual sacrifice known as *ewe ewhu* ("waist goat") is performed: a goat is slaughtered, and its blood sprinkled upon the earth, symbolising a final tribute to their life-giving role and ensuring their smooth transition into the ancestral pantheon. These ceremonies inscribe motherhood not merely as a domestic function but also as a communal and spiritual achievement that commands public honour.

The symbolism of *Oniemo* is also reflected in Urhobo artistic traditions, notably, in Bruce Onobrakpeya's print *Aro Oniemo,* which depicts the supremacy of a mother. Onobrakpeya (as cited in Ofuafo, 2018) employs the anthill as a metaphor for maternal centrality: just as ants instinctively gather around the anthill for protection and sustenance, children cluster around the mother who nurtures and sustains them. This visual representation emphasises the communal and protective aspects of Urhobo motherhood, framing it within a broader cosmological principle of survival and interdependence. Across art, ritual, and oral traditions, *Oniemo* operates both as a metaphor and as a lived social reality, linking family and community within a moral continuum that revolves around the mother.

This veneration coexists with strict societal expectations and sanctions that reveal the ambivalent status of women in Urhobo cosmology. Fertility remains a central marker of a woman's identity, and those unable to bear children often face intense social stigma. Nabofa (1991) writes that infertile women may be assigned derogatory labels such as *Egha* (abomination), *Oshare* (man), or *Orieda* (witch), and accused of mortgaging unborn children to spiritual forces (as cited in Ofuafo, 2018: 111). These practices reveal the punitive dimensions of *Oniemo*: while mothers who bear children are elevated to sacred status, those who are childless are marginalised, their femininity and social worth questioned. The Urhobo conception of motherhood thus embodies a paradox, celebrating maternal strength and authority while simultaneously imposing constraints that can limit women's agency.

In contemporary Urhobo society, women who embody nurturing care, protective leadership, and moral stewardship,attributes that extend well

beyond domestic or reproductive roles may be honoured with the title *Oniemo* as recognition of their contributions to communal stability and wellbeing. Egbedi (2022) notes that figures such as Chief Idiarhevwe, Chief Mrs. Agnes Agbaza, and Chief Mrs. Alice Obahor have been celebrated under this designation for their community leadership, philanthropy, and efforts to preserve cultural heritage (p. 290). Such an expanded application reveals how *Oniemo* has evolved into a category of honour not only for fertility, but also social influence, moral authority, and cultural guardianship. It is this very richness and elasticity that make Oniemo an especially productive lens for literary inquiry. In the works of Isidore Okpewho, Ben Okri, and Tanure Ojaide, maternal figures often emerge as powerful embodiments of resilience, continuity, and spiritual anchorage. Their stories equally expose the sacrifices, silences, and emotional burdens that women bear when motherhood becomes the dominant yardstick for measuring female worth. Through these tensions, Urhobo fiction captures both the dignity and the demands of a cultural ideal that continues to shape women's lives.

Conceptual Approach to Motherhood

Motherhood in African literature is a dynamic space where culture, spirituality, and power converge to shape both individual lives and community life. Sara Ruddick's philosophy of maternal practice offers a Universalist feminist perspective to explore motherhood as an intentional, reflective, and socially significant practice. In *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989), Ruddick identifies three intertwined aims of maternal labour as preservation, growth, and socialization which together cultivate what she terms "maternal thinking." Crucially, Ruddick situates maternal practice within a political framework, linking it to questions of justice, resistance, and power. In African literature, this lens reveals how maternal figures often negotiate hardship and structural inequities with quiet resilience.

Complementing Ruddick, Catherine Acholonu's *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995) foregrounds African women's authority as derived from their maternal roles and their symbiotic relationship with nature. Motherism locates women's strength in their capacity to nurture, preserve life, and mediate harmony. This approach echoes strongly the Urhobo concept of *Oniemo,* which reveres mothers not only as caregivers but also as ritual custodians and pivotal community figures. Building on these theoretical foundations, the concept of *Oniemo* occupies a unique location at the intersection of Ruddick's Universalist

maternal practice and Acholonu's Afrocentric Motherism. Unlike generic notions of motherhood, *Oniemo* designates a culturally specific maternal identity grounded in Urhobo ethics, ritual obligations, and community-centred philosophies of care. It encodes not only the biological bond between mother and child, but also the moral expectations that guide a woman's role in the family, village, and ancestral continuum. The *Oniemo* mother is responsible for the physical survival of children, echoing Ruddick's preservation imperative. She simultaneously embodies the ritual, spiritual, and communal mandates emphasised by Motherism.

In Urhobo cosmology, the mother is central to the transmission of lineage, the maintenance of harmony, and the appeasement of ancestral forces. The notion of *Oniemo* thus integrates practical maternal responsibilities with metaphysical duties: the mother mediates between the living (irivwin) and the ancestors (erivwi), ensuring continuity, purity, and moral stability within the household. This spiritualised dimension of motherhood aligns with Acholonu's understanding of women as custodians of life and harmony, yet it also expands her framework by highlighting the ritual obligations, ancestral negotiations, and social accountability built into Urhobo maternal philosophy.

When applied to literature, *Oniemo* becomes a critical lens for analysing how maternal characters are depicted not merely through domestic labour but through their participation in cultural and spiritual systems. In Okpewho's *The Victims*, Ogugua's maternal challenges reveal the tensions between her personal agency and the patriarchal expectations embedded in Urhobo culture. Her struggle to maintain unity and moral order within a polygamous household mirrors the *Oniemo* mother's burden of socialisation and ethical mediation. Ben Okri similarly constructs maternal figures who embody spiritual resilience; Azaro's mother in *The Famished Road* assumes the role of both nurturer and ritual buffer, protecting her family against metaphysical threats in ways that reflect the ancestral dimension of *Oniemo*. In Ojaide's oeuvre, mothers often function as cultural protectors and interpreters of ancestral wisdom, demonstrating how *Oniemo* extends beyond biological reproduction into the preservation of collective memory.

Women, Morality, and Decision-Making in **Okpewho'sFiction**

Isidore Okpewho's fiction presents maternal figures at the heart of both family and communal life. Existing scholarship on Okpewho's *The Victims* (1970) and *The Last Duty* (1976) have primarily examined the

collapse of patriarchal authority, the fragility of polygamous households, and the consequences of male irresponsibility (Maduagwu (2013; Onyemelukwe 2014; Olusegun-Joseph 2021; Ajogbor 2023). While these studies offer important insights into social tension and moral disorder, they give limited attention to indigenous frameworks such as *Oniemo*, the Urhobo philosophy of motherhood. This omission is notable, for Okpewho consistently places maternal labour at the centre of his narratives, not as a peripheral detail but as a driving force in sustaining household and community. His novels reveal women's resilience, agency, and vulnerability, as well as the ethical dilemmas they navigate within Urhobo cosmology and the broader moral landscape of Nigerian society.

*The Victims*takes place largely within the intimate precincts of a polygamous household, focusing on the lives of Obanua Uzoma's two wives, Nwabunor and Ogugua, a setting that functions as a microcosm of Urhobo cultural tensions. Read through *Oniemo*, motherhood becomes both empowering and contested. The household of Obanua is shaped by rivalries over seniority, legitimacy, and authority where maternal figures negotiate with determination and strategic care. Nwabunor, the first wife, epitomises the *Oniemo* ideal. She is not only a biological mother but a custodian of lineage, moral order, and domestic stability. Despite financial hardships and her husband's neglect in the face of violence and the indignities of polygamy, she prioritises her son Ubaka's future: "I will not allow my son to grow up like his father, wandering and wasting his life" (p. 18). Her insistence on paying Ubaka's school fees and investing in his future reflects what Ruddick (p. 17) terms preservative maternal labour, sustaining life in adverse conditions. Similarly, her refusal to surrender her husband's bedroom to a junior wife, "This is my place, and my son's. You have no right to take it away" (p. 28), is a culturally sanctioned assertion of maternal authority as mother of the first son. In these ways, Okpewho portrays maternal identity as a channel of both domestic and symbolic power, showing how women exercise authority within accepted cultural frameworks.

By contrast, Ogugua, the younger wife, destabilises the household through jealousy and manipulation. Her failure to embody *Oniemo* positions her as a cautionary figure, exemplifying how the breakdown of maternal care disrupts family and community. Stratton (1994) observes that African novels often portray women's identities through maternal roles, valorising "good" mothers while vilifying "bad" ones (34). Ogugua exemplifies the bad wife, even though she fulfils the biological role of a

mother through the birth of twin daughters and a son. Her secret affair with Odafe Gwam, while still married to Obanua produces a scandal. This breach of trust severs the spiritual bond expected of the self-sacrificing mother who upholds family unity and moral discipline. The scandal exposes her maternal failure to guide and morally instruct her children: "Ogugua's children were the source of endless trouble, their thefts and lies staining her name" (p. 55). Her failures are amplified by Urhobo belief in the ancestral force punishes women for marital transgressions (Ottuh, 2012; Irogbo & Agbamu, 2024).

Ogugua does not fully actualise the *Oniemo* ideal, which requires her to protect, guide, and morally elevate one's children within the collective structure of the community. As a second wife, her desire for love and attention manifests in romantic betrayal. While she seeks to assert herself, the methods she employs (deception, infidelity, and manipulation) alienate her from the very community she seeks validation from. The tragic climax of the novel, where both mothers and children fall victim to poisoning, serves as a grim moral commentary on the breakdown of sacred motherhood: "The poison took its toll swiftly; the children and mothers alike fell victim to the bitter feud" (p. 158). This devastating outcome stresses the spiritual and communal cost of undermining *Oniemo*. When the sanctity of motherhood is disrupted by rivalry, betrayal, and moral lapses, the consequences extend beyond the individuals involved to envelop the entire household in destruction. Thus, Ogugua's character provides a cautionary contrast to Nwabunor. She represents the vulnerabilities of women, who, caught in the crossfire of societal expectation and emotional deprivation, fail to live up to the revered *Oniemo* model. The novel thus becomes a critical reflection on the resilience and contradictions of motherhood, revealing its cultural significance as both a source of strength and a site of struggle for Urhobo women.

The Last Duty extends Okpewho's vision by relocating motherhood into the public and wartime sphere. It centres on Aku, a mother whose unwavering dedication to her child exemplifies the Urhobo philosophy of *Oniemo***.** Maternal figures act as ethical arbiters, their decisions shaping both children's survival and communal cohesion. Critics have read the novel variously as Juvenalian satire, exposing wartime corruption (Annin, 1985), as a reflection of postcolonial violence (Obasi & Ukam, 2003), or as feminist commentary on women's marginalisation during conflict (Ofie, 2014). This section addresses that gap by rereading *The*

Last Duty through *Oniemo*, which positions motherhood as central to social and moral survival in times of upheaval.

Aku, the central female character, embodies the community's maternal guardian under siege. Her husband, Mukoro Oshevire, is wrongfully imprisoned for alleged collaboration with rebel forces, leaving her to face isolation and hardship alone while raising their son, Oghenovo. Aku's sacrifices reflect the deep-rooted *Oniemo* values of maternal perseverance and selflessness. Even when confronted with hunger, social ostracism, and emotional suffering, she remains steadfast, embodying the maternal spirit that protects and nurtures life against all odds. Aku becomes the father and mother of her son, Oghenovo. Her survival depends on the scant provisions given by Chief Toje, her husband's rival (pp. 45, 102). Aku's acquiescence to Toje's advances captures the complex realities faced by mothers under extreme hardship. Her decision to give in to Toje is deeply painful, but it becomes more understandable when seen through the lens of *Oniemo*, the Urhobo idea of a mother who would do anything for the well-being of her child. This was not simply a moral failure, but a desperate choice made by a mother who could no longer bear to watch her son starve. Her love for her child outweighs her concern for her dignity. With her son's life hanging in the balance, she chooses what she sees as the only way to protect him. As Palmer (1993) puts it, "she has no choice (because) Toje offers the only protection she has in a very dangerous situation and only he stands between her starvation and death" (p.30). Aku's actions reflect not weakness, but the quiet strength and courage of a mother who sacrifices herself for her child. In embodying *Oniemo*, Aku becomes a powerful symbol of maternal love and endurance, one who suffers not for herself, but for someone more vulnerable, someone she loves more than life itself. Viewed through *Oniemo*, Aku's agency lies in her moral reasoning under constraint, illustrating the adaptive, strategic nature of maternal practice. Her persistence exemplifies what Fonchingong (2009) terms "female agency in war novels," where women, though lacking formal authority, exercise practical power to maintain continuity.

Okpewho's restrained style and multi-perspectival narration grant visibility to women's choices, investing them with moral weight. By centring Nwabunor in *The Victims* and Aku in *The Last Duty*, he affirms *Oniemo* while challenging the assumption that public prominence equates to true power. His fiction suggests that maternal labour, though often unseen, is the foundation of both household and society. The duality

of *Oniemo* thus emerges clearly. Maternal figures embody foresight, courage, and agency, aligning with both Ruddick's maternal practice and Acholonu's Motherism. Even so, these same figures also reveal the burdens imposed by cultural expectations: mothers are celebrated for endurance but harshly condemned for failure, while men evade comparable scrutiny. Ogugua's transgressions in *The Victims* and Aku's compromises in *The Last Duty* illustrate the ethical costs of situating women's value primarily in maternal terms. Through these narratives, Okpewho demonstrates that motherhood is not a passive biological role but a morally charged, contested position. His fiction projects the struggles of Urhobo women, who, even amid marginalisation and upheaval, enact *Oniemo* as a principle of survival, moral guidance, and cultural continuity. *The Victims* and *The Last Duty* function as both literary and cultural interventions: they affirm the centrality of indigenous epistemologies while interrogating the ethical demands and gendered inequities embedded in maternal labour.

Urhobo Cultural Identity and the Cosmic Mother in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) has long been celebrated for its deployment of magical realism, Yoruba cosmology, and postcolonial allegory (Quayson 1997; Cooper 1998; McCabe 2002). One aspect that remains relatively underexplored is the representation of motherhood, particularly when viewed through the Urhobo philosophical lens of *Oniemo.* Reading the novel against this cultural framework illuminates how Okri embeds maternal figures at the heart of his narrative, not merely as caregivers but as agents of moral, spiritual, and communal labour.

Sara Ruddick's tripartite framework of maternal labour preservative, nurturing, and training practices provides a useful lens for interpreting Azaro's mother (Ruddick 17, 82–104). Her preservative labour is immediate and urgent: she sustains her child against the persistent temptations of Abiku existence, the harshness of poverty, and the dangers of a volatile environment. Azaro's unnamed mother, who emerges as an archetype of the African mother: resilient, sacred, and entrusted with responsibilities that extend well beyond biological reproduction. Okri crafts narratives where the physical and spiritual worlds coexist. Central among these is the belief in the *Abiku* myth, the spirit child who is born repeatedly but is continually called back to the spirit realm. This duality between worlds is a key element in his works, especially *The Famished Road*, where the protagonist, Azaro, embodies the tension existing

between life and death, and between the material and spiritual realms. The *Abiku* narrative remains firmly rooted in the spiritual worldview of Okri's Urhobo heritage. Azaro's mother exemplifies the *Oniemo* ideal through her relentless endurance amid the cyclical suffering caused by Azaro's identity as an *Abiku*. The *Abiku* myth, central to the trilogy, symbolises the cyclical nature of birth and death and the mother's repeated suffering and hope. This mythological framework enriches the portrayal of *Oniemo* by emphasising motherhood as a continuous, often painful negotiation between the realms of life and spirit. Her son, an *Abiku*, exists in a liminal space between life and death, and her rituals to anchor him in the mortal world reflect Oniemo's sacred duty: "She washed me with herbs and whispered incantations, her voice a low hum against the spirits that called me back" (p. 56).

In addition to her spiritual role, Azaro's mother bears the economic weight of the family, selling goods in the marketplace while enduring domestic violence and neglect. Her silent suffering critiques the gendered burden of the *Oniemo* ideal, which often glorifies maternal sacrifice without addressing its exploitative aspects. The "famished road" is a metaphor for life's hardships and spiritual journey. Azaro's mother labours tirelessly to feed and care for her family despite poverty and political unrest: "She worked doggedly and always found the time and energy to cook and clean for her husband and son." Her resilience in the face of scarcity reflects the life-giving and sustaining power of *Oniemo*, where motherhood is a source of hope and continuity amid deprivation. Azaro is aware that he is an *abiku* and must die before reaching adulthood. Nevertheless, he does not wish to leave his mother because of his deep love for her. He expresses this affection when he says: "…to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother" (p. 42). Throughout his childhood, Azaro was repeatedly separated from his parents from being kidnapped during a riot, afflicted by fatal fevers, and visited by visions of death. Each time he is separated, he returns to his mother, stressing the bond between the spirit child and his mother.

Okri, nevertheless, complicates this maternal ideal by emphasising its costs. Azaro's mother is often depicted as exhausted, frustrated by her husband's despair, and overburdened by the unrelenting demands of sustaining a household in conditions of precarity. His portrayal reveals the complex reality of Oniemo: mothers are celebrated as moral anchors and sources of guidance, with their freedom to act often limited by the heavy demands of social and economic expectations. Through the character of

Madame Koto, Okri interrogates the social construction of motherhood and its implications for women's identities. Madame Koto's childlessness marginalises her within the community. However, her surrogate maternal relationship with Azaro challenges this norm, suggesting alternative forms of motherhood and *Oniemo* that emphasise nurturing and social roles beyond biology. Madame Koto, a bar owner, embodies *Oniemo*'s duality. She provides food and shelter to children, as reflected in the line "her peppery soups warmed our bellies" (p. 89). By adopting Azaro, an *Abiku* (spirit-child), she exemplifies the African ideal where motherhood transcends biology. Her *persona* symbolises the Urhobo concept of *Oniemo* (mother-spirit). This portrayal broadens the idea of *Oniemo* to include the social and cultural dimensions of motherhood. Throughout *The Famished Road*, Azaro's mother and Madame Koto together embody the Oniemo concept, a sacred, resilient motherhood that nurtures life, bridges spiritual and physical realms, and leads social and political resistance.

Sacred Femininity and Subversive Motherhood in Ojaide's *Stars of the Long Night*

Tanure Ojaide, a distinguished Urhobo poet and storyteller, has gained international acclaim for his works, receiving honours including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and Nigeria's National Merit Award. He is known for blending Urhobo oral traditions with contemporary literary forms to address social and ecological injustice. *Stars of the Long Night* (2016) has often been read through socio-political lenses, linking women's suffering to patriarchal oppression (Simon et al., 2020; Dossoumou et al., 2021). These readings, however, tend to overlook maternal identity. Examined through the Urhobo concept of *Oniemo,* the novel reveals motherhood as an ethical, ritual, and political vocation, where women as central agents in sustaining both life and social order.The narrative vividly embodies the *Oniemo* ideology through its portrayal of the often unseen yet vital roles that women play within the Agbon community. Central to his reimagining of Urhobo motherhood are the characters of Nene, Kena, and Oyege, who personify distinct facets of the Oniemo archetype. Together, they reshape the historical narrative of the Okpara lineage and, by extension, the wider Agbon community where the writer comes from.

Nene's position as a high priestess of the Agbon kingdom elevates her status in the novel; she embodies the *Oniemo* philosophy, a fusion of sacred motherhood and moral authority that lies at the heart of Urhobo

cultural values. Nene represents what Akujobi (2011) describes as "feminine spirituality" (3),a system in which spiritual power transcends the bounds of biological motherhood and extends into realms of governance and social regulation. Through Nene's character, Ojaide not only reclaims the historically overlooked place of women in Urhobo historiography but also presents an Indigenous feminist framework in which social and sacred powers converge within the maternal archetype. Nene's intercessory role resonates deeply with the Urhobo cosmology's *iniemo* (ancestral mothers), revered as mediators between the human and divine realms. She bears the solemn responsibility of counting the days leading up to the great *Edjenu* Festival using cowries, a ritual central to communal spiritual life like Ezeulu in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Nene announces the festival's date, held every thirty years, which symbolises the community's hope for protection against both natural and human-induced calamities: "Of the twenty-eight cowries, she would be taking one away Through this disciplined practice, Nene's authority derives from a "mothering principle" that complements male leadership rather than opposing it. She nurtures the community's spiritual well-being, ensuring continuity and harmony, aligning with Acholonu's (1995) vision of Motherism as a moral and cultural imperative. Every day until the calabash was emptied. The day after the last one was removed from the calabash would be the first day of the festival" (p. 92). This cowrie-counting ritual sacralises her position further, echoing African traditions where women hold authority over sacred temporality and cyclical time. Nene's authority is communal and institutionalized. In her role as an intercessor, "she stands between the people and the wrath of the river gods" (p. 118), particularly exemplifying the *Oniemo* spiritual ideal, where motherhood and feminine power serve as a sacred buffer between the community and cosmic forces. This aligns with Urhobo veneration of *iniemo* (ancestral mothers) as mediators between human and divine realms (Ofuafo, 2018). Unlike episodic charismatic figures such as Chielo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Nene's maternal priesthood is institutionalised, anchoring women's authority in communal continuity rather than personal heroism.

Furthermore, the broom dance, traditionally symbolic of women's domestic labour, is transformed under Nene's guidance into a potent ritual of empowerment and social cohesion. This ritual innovation heralds the new moon and symbolically "sweeps away cobwebs from the face of the sky" (p. 207). In her capacity as high priestess, Nene sanctifies the broom

dance, elevating it beyond mere cultural performance to a spiritual act that embodies purification, unity, and the collective strength of women. The broom, a humble tool for cleaning and cleansing, becomes a metaphor for dispelling oppression and restoring moral equilibrium, mirroring Nene's role as custodian of both cultural and ethical order. By legitimising the broom dance as a form of women's liberation through the expressive Ewheya style, Nene asserts female solidarity and resistance, underlining the intersection of spirituality, gender, and political agency central to the *Oniemo* concept.

The mandated broom dance inverts patriarchal labour norms by compelling men to assume childcare responsibilities, a radical act in the traditionally patrilineal Urhobo society:

> *"Those who had husbands should leave the children with them. Let Okpara men, for once, take care of children. Let them clean the children and throw away their shit. Let them be pissed upon. Let them suffer the disquiet of their children's cries. Let them feed the children when hungry before their mothers' return. Let the men bathe the children after soiling themselves at play"* (p. 203).

The refrain, "Let Okpara men for once take care of children" (p. 203), echoes contemporary Urhobo women's protests where domestic implements such as brooms have become potent symbols of resistance against male-centric exploitation. The broom dance enacts a deliberate role reversal for the duration of the ritual; men undertake feeding, bathing, and soothing children that traditionally fall to women. This inversion is not merely practical but deeply symbolic. It forces men to walk in women's shoes and to confront, albeit temporarily, the emotional and physical labour inherent in motherhood and caregiving. More importantly, it confronts years of ridicule. Previously, men mocked women with derisive songs during the dance. This time, however, the women refuse to be silenced or shamed. Their voices rise proudly in song and dance, unyielding. Through the broom dance, Ojaide vividly illustrates women's strength not only as nurturers but as leaders and agents of change. The broom dance becomes a metaphorical act of sweeping away archaic customs that confine women's roles, clearing a space for a future in which their contributions are recognised and their voices amplified.

The Mother Mask symbolises the universality of maternal authority: "everybody comes from the mother's womb" (p. 99). In the novel, men gradually recognise and respect women's ritual authority, particularly when Kena adopts the Oni-edjo mask to heal her sick son. This moment represents a profound act of Motherist agency: "Both women were eager to wear it… she drew the mask to herself from Kena's hand… with tears of joy suddenly running down her cheeks, she lifted the mask and placed it over Kena's head" (p. 244). Kena's assumption of the mask is not rebellion for its own sake but a reclamation of the maternal role as central to cultural continuity. Her authority challenges patriarchal monopolies over ritual power while affirming the ethical and spiritual dimensions of motherhood.

Oyeghe stands out as a figure of loyalty and resolve, offering Kena the encouragement she needs to embrace the Oni-Edjo mask. Her quiet strength recalls women like Nwabunor in Okpewho's *The Victims* and Azaro's mother in Okri's *The Famished Road*, whose endurance embodies the communal and spiritual dimensions of Oniemo. Oyeghe's constant presence during Kena's ordeals highlights her faith not only in Kena's capacity to carry out her sacred duty but also in the power of women to preserve harmony within the community. Her eventual conception and the birth of twins, a boy and a girl, directly counter Okotete's mother's scornful remark that "a hen incapable of laying eggs might as well be a cock" (p. 58). In doing so, she challenges the narrow patriarchal measure of women's worth, turning motherhood into a sign of agency rather than limitation.

When Kena is widowed, she rejects the custom of levirate marriage and returns to her father's home, asserting a degree of independence within the Urhobo *Omoteogbe* system. The pivotal moment comes during the rare Edjenu festival, when she enters a trance and is chosen to wear the Oni-Edjo mask, a role previously denied to women. The narrator captures the significance: "She was no longer Kena… Her poise was godly… she had taken on the mantle of the mother-mask, the sacred symbol of life and continuity" (p. 247). Undertaking "what no woman dared to do" (p. 244) is not mere rebellion; it represents a redefinition of leadership grounded in maternal care. As Ojaruega (2015) writes, Ojaide "consistently depicts women as protectors, nurturers, and harbingers of good luck in life" (148). These roles are not to dismantle tradition but to protect and renew it. *Oniemo*, in this context, functions as leadership defined by care, renewal, and communal stewardship. Oyeghe reinforces this vision, guiding Kena

to accept the mask and navigate communal scrutiny, thus enacting a shared ethical and spiritual responsibility.

The final analysis of the narrative reflects this broader social transformation, as the men of Okpara learn to treat women with renewed respect. Women who enter male spaces, such as the Ohwarha recreation centre, are now met with respect. The men recognise that a single bold step can *"reverse outdated customs"* (p. 262). Through Kena's defiance of custom, Ojaide presents *Oniemo* not merely as private maternal care but as communal responsibility. Her maternal authority doubles as a social critique, linking her to the archetypal African mother who protects, nurtures, and resists forces of destruction. Kena's actions demonstrate that women are not passive but vital actors in shaping spiritual and social life, as Ofuafo (2018) essay suggests that Urhobo ritual practice often places women at the centre of fertility, continuity, and cosmic balance. Ojaide's fiction translates this cultural principle into narrative that portray mothers as custodians of sacred authority within both family and community.

Across the works of Okpewho, Okri, and Ojaide, women emerge as agents of transformation. Okpewho's realist narratives portray Nwabunor and Aku enduring the pressures of domestic rivalry and wartime scarcity (Okpewho, 1970, 1976). Okri elevates motherhood to the metaphysical: Azaro's mother safeguards life against both material and spiritual threats, while Madame Koto represents corrupted maternal power aligned with social exploitation (Okri, 1991). Ojaide is the most ritually explicit: mothers occupy central roles in cultic time (cowries), sacred office (Oni-Edjo), and liturgical renewal (broom dance), making maternal care integral to communal spiritual life. Despite differences in medium, realist ethics, magical-realist cosmology, and ritual-political dramaturgy, all three authors converge on mothers as moral voices and bearers of continuity. *Oniemo* consistently articulates a civic ethic rather than a purely domestic role. In Ojaide, it assumes a theological dimension: the mother wields authority over sacred time, office, and communal cleansing. Nene sanctions and directs communal energies; Kena dons the mother-mask to heal and lead; Oyeghe's twins seal the covenant of renewal. Across these works, mothers emerge as ethical anchors and pillars of communal life, their care and guidance essential for the survival and flourishing of both people and culture.

Conclusion

Motherhood in Urhobo fiction emerges not simply as a domestic role but as an ethical, spiritual, and political responsibility, articulated through the philosophy of *Oniemo*. In the works of Okpewho, Okri, and Ojaide, maternal figures such as Nwabunor, Azaro's mother, Nene, and Kena sustain households, mediate between the living and the divine, and preserve cultural continuity. Their actions embody Ruddick's notion of preservative love while also resonating with Acholonu's Afrocentric vision of Motherism, situating maternal practice at the heart of communal survival. However, these portrayals are marked by ambivalence: *Oniemo* empowers mothers as custodians of life and moral order while simultaneously binding them to ideals of sacrifice and endurance that risk obscuring their autonomy. This tension underscores the broader stakes of reading *Oniemo* as both cultural philosophy and literary strategy. On one hand, it affirms motherhood as a force of resilience, continuity, and ritual authority; on the other, it exposes how maternal labour is exploited, romanticised, or rendered invisible. By placing *Oniemo* at the centre of their narratives, Urhobo novelists extend the boundaries of African feminist thought, demonstrating that motherhood is not a marginal theme but a primary metaphor for survival and resistance. Their fiction insists that maternal figures must be read within culturally specific frameworks that reveal both their power and their constraints. In this way, *Oniemo* becomes a lens through which African literature interrogates gender, spirituality, and communal ethics and offering a balanced vision of motherhood that is both empowering and critically aware of its burdens.

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