

# Women's Oppression of Women: The Case of Jụọchi in Tagbo Nzeako's *Jụọchi*

Ujubonu Juliet Okide, Ph.D.

Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies

University of Lagos, Akoka, Yaba, Lagos

Tel: 08034004320, 08023024067

Email: [ujuokide@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ujuokide@yahoo.co.uk)

## **Abstract**

*Over time, experiences and discussions in diverse socio-intellectual media and fora have established oppression of women as one of the strong themes of human existence. The condition is considered a problem that spans virtually all aspects of human vocations, including leadership and governance. And its perpetration has solely been attributed to men. A simple observation of general societal politics, right from the family unit, seems to corroborate the view as men's domination of the scene suggests that they had to suppress women's rights to achieve the domination. Yet, a more analytic finding on the problem reveals that women are also culpable in oppressing themselves. White and Kowalski's (1994) theory of myth of female non-aggressiveness corroborates this where it establishes that women aggress on each other, especially whenever and wherever they have opportunity to relate with, lead or govern themselves. Although the tactics which they (women) dispense oppression on each other may not be as physical, overt and direct as that of men, its subtle, covert and indirect expressions delivers the same or even worse impacts. This essay aims at deploying method of analysis to explore the case of Jụọchi in Tagbo Nzeako's *Jụọchi*, particularly with a view to projecting the notion that women oppress themselves especially in leadership positions. It concludes that women need to be tolerant and accommodating of each other so as to aspire to leadership positions and govern society equally with men.*

**Keywords:** Womanhood, Oppression, Leadership, Analysis, Men's domination

## **Introduction**

The quest for women to rank equal with men in society is a recurrent theme in contemporary socio-political, economic and intellectual discourses. The

pursuit is so serious that feminism emerged with a dedication to actualise gender equality. Feminism is the theory which explains the view that men and women ought to and should be treated equally socially, politically, and economically (Hooks viii). It is a movement that “aims at ending sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression” (Hooks viii). This presupposes that there has been gender inequality, but in favour of men, in socio-economic and political conditions of nations. Indeed, history of Feminism depicts that women have suffered inequality from men all over the world in every facet of life. And following that, they have had to struggle to end the oppression, domination, discrimination, and subjugation. The struggle has assumed different approaches, reflecting different objectives of the one cardinal aim. That underpins the reason for availability of various definitions of feminism, which expresses its various objectives, strands, nuances and perspectives. There are, according to Amazon Castle (2004), cultural feminism, eco-feminism, libertarian feminism, material feminism, moderate feminism, gender Feminism, separatist feminism, amazon feminism, and radical feminism.

In explaining each of them, Castle (1-3) further guides that *Cultural feminism* is the theory that seeks to overcome sexism by celebrating women's special qualities, women's ways, and women's experiences, often believing that the “woman's way” is the better way. *Eco-feminism*, on the other hand, is the theory which emphasises the basic principle that patriarchal philosophies are harmful to women, children, and other living things. This is because the theory believes that patriarchy emphasises the need to dominate and control women. *Libertarian Feminism*, which is based on individualism, minimum government or anarcho-capitalist philosophies, focuses on individual autonomy, rights, liberty, independence and diversity. Individualist Feminism also encompasses men and focuses on barriers that both men and women face due to their gender. *Material Feminism* is a movement that focuses on liberating women by improving their material condition. The movement revolves around taking the “burden” off women in regards to housework, cooking, and other traditional female domestic jobs. *Moderate Feminism* “is populated mostly by younger women or women who perceive that they have not directly experienced discrimination. They often believe that the ideals of the feminist movement are no longer viable, and therefore question the need for further efforts.” Moderate feminists, therefore, view feminism as overbearing and too overt and, although they participate in espousing feminist ideas, they do not accept or want to be labeled as

'feminists'. *Gender Feminism*, which is otherwise known as *National Organization for Women (N.O.W.) Feminism* is the theory that states that equality of men and women rests on women being granted some special privileges while men cease to be the central issue or 'barrier' in feminism. Castle (2-3) says that "N.O.W. feminism encompasses only women and fights to offer special privileges to women with the intent of making women equal to men." There is yet *Separatist feminism*, which is often depicted as a group of lesbians. These are feminists who advocate separation from men; sometimes total, sometimes partial. The core idea underpinning this movement is that "separating" from men (by various means) is perceived as that which enables women to see themselves in a different context. Many feminists, whether separatist or not, think that this is a necessary "first step," of personal growth. However, they do not necessarily endorse permanent separation. Also, there is *Amazon feminism*, which focuses on physical equality and is opposed to gender role stereotypes and discrimination against women based on assumptions that women are supposed to be, look, or behave as if they are passive, weak and physically helpless. This movement rejects the idea that certain human characteristics or interests are inherently masculine (or feminine), and upholds and explores a vision of heroic womanhood. "Amazon feminists tend to view that all women are as physically capable as all men" (Castle 3). Finally, *Radical feminism* is the breeding ground for many of the ideas that are popularly feminist. Even though currently its ideas are no longer as universally accepted as they used to be and it no longer serves to solely define the term "feminism," it used to be the cutting-edge feminist theory between 1967 and 1975. This is because the movement views oppression of women as the most fundamental form of oppression – one that cuts across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. Hence, its main intent is on social change (change of rather revolutionary proportions). Castle (3) explains that radical feminism questions why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on gender. It attempts to draw lines between biologically-determined behavior and culturally-determined behavior in order to free both men and women as much as possible from their previous narrow gender roles.

This expose of women's fight for equality with men clearly confirms their disparate ways of thinking that it is only men and patriarchy that oppress them. But that is incorrect, for it is not only men that are guilty of oppressing women. Women themselves also try to dominate, discriminate and subjugate

each other whenever and wherever they have opportunity to relate with, lead or govern themselves. And there are scholarly views that support this alternative view and which this essay relies on as its theoretical framework. Let us discuss them.

### **Theoretical Framework**

White and Kowalski (1994) are prominent for their work titled *Myth of Female Non-aggressiveness*, which presents a theory positing that women are as aggressive or, sometimes, even more aggressive to each other than men perceived as their lone aggressors. The theory is reactionary to existing theories propounded by scholars like Eagly and Steffen (1986), Geen (1990), Simon and Landis (1991), and Bjorkqvist and Niemela (1992), which assert that men alone aggress on women. Eagly and Steffen (19), for instance, perceive society to be better organised, managed and protected by men. Geen (10), and Simon and Landis (11) declare that men personify aggression and, thus, unleash it on women. This is because women are weak. Bjorkqvist and Niemela (12) perceive women to be too weak and submissive and, thus, best suited for domestic roles of wife and mother, than being aggressive. They attribute nonviolence to women as part of their (women's) passive and gentle nature and which renders them (women) unfit for competitive roles of warrior and leadership. And in line with the thinking, Macaulay (qtd. by White and Kowalski 14) identifies some beliefs associated with women's non-aggressiveness. These include women as being naturally submissive, unable to express anger, psychologically distressed if they are aggressive, sneaky in their expression of aggression (if they must be hostile), aggressive only in defense of their children, and motivated to mete out aggression by jealousy.

But White and Kowalski (14) debunk the views, especially those of Bjorkqvist and Niemela, and Macaulay, asserting instead that such view of women being non-aggressive is erroneous and mythical and should no longer be accepted. They submit that the view is based on women's physical appearance being generally perceived as weak in comparison with men's physical appearance being generally perceived as strong. In spite of the appearance of weakness, therefore, the scholars declare that women are actually strong. They have the physical stamina to foment and withstand some forms of aggression. And the aggression is more pronounced when directed at each other. Some women even have the strength to attack and subdue some men. Hence, they (women) should ordinarily not be excused in their capacity for aggression on the basis the existing myth of their non-

aggression.

Bjorkqvist (94) supports the White and Kowalski's view with the averment that sometimes the myth of female non-aggression is erroneously advanced due to difference in strategy or style applicable in expressing the behaviour. He itemises two major forms of strategies, including direct or physical and indirect or verbal, which are applied in aggression. While men's aggression usually takes the form of direct or physical strategy, women's aggression takes the form of indirect or verbal abuses. However, whether direct and physical or indirect and verbal, aggression, Bjorkqvist submits, is aggression. The behaviour is as indirect and verbal as it is direct and physical. Furthermore, Bjorkqvist (99) makes the point that apportioning blame of aggression among the sexes depends on social distribution of the behavioural capacity across sexes. He therefore itemises intra-gender and inter-gender distributive modalities as guide to the spread of the behavioural capacity and condemnation. Accordingly, there are male to male, female to female, and male to female (or female to male) modalities. When attempting to determine which gender is more aggressive, Bjorkqvist explains that that should be done within the context of the modal groupings. Accordingly, it would be discovered that even though women may be weak in the category of male to female (and that is as far as physical and direct strategy of aggression is concerned), they are strong and as aggressive as men within the category of female to female.

With the deconstruction of the myth of women's non-aggressiveness, Dutton and Nicholls (25) posit that the feminist view that men are more aggressive than women or that men aggress on and oppress women is spread from misinformation available to the public. This is because data reporting men's violence against women, particularly at law enforcement offices, are higher than those reporting women's violence against men. Men under-report the victimization they receive from women. They tend to be shy to report such incidents and often choose, rather, to absolve women from the crime involved in the violence. Edalati and Redzuan (20) support this view, submitting that their study of literatures reveals that the rate of women's physical aggression is equal to that of men. Indeed, the scholars further aver that some literatures reveal that women's physical aggressiveness is actually higher than men's. Feminist theories are, therefore, perceived by all the scholars as misguided views instigated by insufficient information from victims. The scholars, therefore, conclude by advising feminists to carry out adequate quantitative

and qualitative studies on the women's behaviour to avoid their incorrect conclusions.

This essay reasons along these lines of thinking, accepting that women are aggressive especially to each other. To buttress its point, the essay deploys Juṣochi's condition of life in Tagbo Nzeako's *Juṣochi* (1981) to show how women oppress themselves, especially when they are in leadership positions.

### **A Synopsis of *Juṣochi***

*Juṣochi* is a novel written by an Igbo author in Igbo language and set in an Igbo community. It narrates how Juṣochi – a young lady of adolescent age who hails from an indigent family background – becomes a housemaid for a woman of wealthy family background (Adamma) and suffers unsavory hostilities from the hostess. With the passing of Juṣochi's father, Ekwigbo, when she was four years old and absolute undertaking of her care by an impoverished mother, Udumma, Juṣochi has no option to advance in life than to go off to work as someone's maid. This is also because Juṣochi's paternal relatives dispossessed Udumma of Ekwigbo's property, which would have assisted in caring for Juṣochi. The dispossession is a cultural practice meted out to any woman whose only child or children is/are females. Juṣochi's culture does not permit female children to inherit their father's property. Indeed, if a woman has an only female child (like in the case of Juṣochi) or female children, she is returned to her kinsmen without any inheritance on the demise of her husband. And this is what happened to Udumma.

It is, therefore, while at her maternal grand-parent's place that life becomes unbearably tough for both Juṣochi and her mother. Her maternal uncles, though are able to build a house for them, cannot afford more than that. Hence, Juṣochi and her mother suffer abject poverty, feeding from meagerly paid jobs that the mother can find from anywhere. With the condition of life, one of Juṣochi's uncles suggests to her mother to send Juṣochi to live with someone as a maid so that life would change positively for them. She considers it a good idea, agrees and even engages her friend, Ikwoma, for referral assistances. One day, while on the road trying to sell bush-meat that Juṣochi and Udumma caught, a prospective female buyer (Adamma) stops to negotiate for the meat and the negotiation digresses to Juṣochi's mother telling Adamma the tales of her sufferings and her desire to find a good person to send Juṣochi to live as maid. Adamma sympathizes with Juṣochi's mother and offers to help. And the excited Udumma subsequently makes arrangements

for her to come and negotiate the permission with her brothers – Juḡochi's uncles. On the agreed day, Adamma, in company of her husband, Ikegwuḡonu, comes to negotiate for Juḡochi to start living with them. But to their amazement, Juḡochi's uncles offer them stiff conditions for giving Juḡochi to them. The conditions, in Ikegwuḡonu's assessment, are akin to bridewealth. Adamma and Ikegwuḡonu are required by Juḡochi's uncles to give them two jars of palmwine, monthly salaries on behalf of Juḡochi – as compensation for the inconveniences of Juḡochi's absence – and yearly Christmas presents comprising a bag of rice, fish, meat and cloths or, alternatively, they are to send Juḡochi to school and merely send food items to Udumma intermittently, while still adding Christmas cloths. Adamma and Ikegwuḡonu object to the conditions. But Juḡochi's kinsmen insist, explaining that the conditions are customary to their community for sending any child of theirs away to be maid for anybody. Eventually, they reach an understanding in the negotiation and Juḡochi is permitted to go and live with Adamma.

### **A Woman's Oppression of a Woman**

Following this essay's position and its theoretical framework which submit that women oppress women, we advance presently to corroborate the position by showing instances of woman to woman hostilities in *Juḡochi*. Since there are other scenes of inter-female aggression in the novel, we limit scope of the corroboration to the specific relationship between Juḡochi (the lead female character in the novel) and Adamma (another female character in the novel). Accordingly, it is to be read in the novel that Juḡochi's life as Adamma's maid is a situation of hatred-on-arrival (Nzeako 2). Given what appears to Adamma as unreasonable terms and conditions of service presented by Juḡochi's kinsmen for taking Juḡochi to be her maid, Adamma dislikes Juḡochi very passionately. Adamma thinks that Juḡochi is virtually as expensive to hire for domestic assistance as man taking a wife. Indeed, the hatred is deepened by Juḡochi's inexperience in housekeeping and her unkempt and primitive behaviours. Adamma felt constant bitterness and frustration for having to “pay” so much to Juḡochi's people for such inexperience and unprofessionality, which she would yet train for an eventual benefit of the same kinsmen. This feeling is excerpted as:

...nwaanyi ahụ jikwa iwe wee kwo si: ugbo a m gara wee kpota ya, ọ dighi iwe ihe ọ maara. Mgbe m ga-agba mbọ ugbua wee kuziere ya ihe niile, ma nyejuo ya afo nke oma, ndi nwe ya abia, kwuo otu ihe wee kporo ya. O buru otu a aghaghi ikpoghachi ya azu, ma o bu a kponye ya onye ozo. Achoghi m

ụdị ụmụaka ime obodo a (Nzeako 33).

The woman with annoyance says: now that I brought her, she does not know anything. When I make efforts to teach her everything and feed her very well, her family will come and give a flimsy excuse to take her away. If it is going to be like that, I have to send her back home now or she should be given to another person. I do not want this type of village child.

Hence, Adamma hurls verbal abuses at Jụọchi at will and restricts her from living the comfortable lifestyle of her home. One of such instances where Adamma restricts Jụọchi from living opulently in the house is where she gives Jụọchi a separate plate for eating and cup for drinking. She warns Jụọchi never to use any other plate or cup in the house except the ones given to her. This is evident where Adamma says to Jụọchi:

...A chọghị m ịhụ gị ka Ị na-eri ihe n'ime efere ọzọ... E jila iko ọzọ wee nụọ mmiri n'ihị n'ọnụ gị ne-esi isi... (Nzeako 35)

...I do not want to see you eat with any other plate... Do not drink water with any other cup apart from this because your mouth smells...

Apart from this, Adamma also makes Jụọchi live in a store-room close to the bathroom. She sleeps on an old torn cloth. She is prevented from playing with Adamma's children. When serving her soup, Adamma gives Jụọchi the topmost oily and watery part, without fish or meat. She also gives Juochi a very small portion of garri, which would not satisfy even her children who are younger than Jụọchi. In justification of the maltreatment, Adamma, while serving Juochi the food mutters something like:

Ọ na-eri nke ha otu a n'ụlọ ha? (Nzeako 34)

Does she eat this much in her home?

Even when serving tea, Adamma puts sufficient milk for her children but very sparing quantity (more like drops) for Jụọchi. That is followed with the comment:

Ọ na-anụ nke dị otu a n'ụlọ ha? (Nzeako 34)

Does she drink this type in her home?

Also, when Adamma is to wake Jụọchi in the mornings, she does not call Jụọchi by name, rather Adamma fetches water with a cup and sprinkles it on Jụọchi. This is regardless of conditions of extreme cold, which is intensified by the near-bare floor that Jụọchi sleeps. This is evident in:

...kute mmiri wee fee ya n'ebe ahụ ọ na-ehi ụra... (Nzeako 35)

...get water and sprinkle it on her where she is sleeping



When guests visit and gift Jụọchi money, just like Adamma's children, Adamma collects the money from Jụọchi – leaving the other children with theirs. At such times, she mutters the following to Jụọchi:

I na-akwụ ụgwọ ihe oriri I na-eri n'ụlọ a? (Nzeako 37)

Do you pay for what you eat in this house?

There is a Sunday that Adamma and her entire family goes out for a picnic but without Jụọchi. And Adamma deliberately starves Jụọchi. This is excerpted in the novel as:

Ọ bụ eziokwu na nwaanyi ahụ esiela ihe oriri tupu ha pụọ, ma o nyeghi ihe nke ya, ọ bụla mgbe ọ maara nke oma na ha agaghị aloghachi n'oge... (Nzeako 40)

It is true that the woman has made food before leaving the house, but she does not give Jụọchi her portion, even when she knows that they will not return early...

On their return, they meet Jụọchi sleeping. They knock the door repeatedly and Jụọchi did not hear it. Eventually when she hears and opens the door, a furious Adamma slaps her (Jụọchi) twice in quick succession. And the slap dazed Jụọchi. This is excerpted as:

Ozigbo ọ na-emegehe ụzọ ahụ, Adamma maa ya ụra abụọ chara acha. Nke a mere ka Jụọchi hụ igwe kpakpando, mekwaa ka ihe niile ọ na-ahụ, gba mkpi. Jụọchi bido ọbọ aka ya abụọ n'akụkụ ntị aka ekpe ahụ ọ mara ya ụra wee tie oke mkpu akwa, chọọ ka ọ gbapụ ọsọ. (Nzeako 41)

Immediately she opens the door, Adamma gives her two hot slaps. This throws Oluchi into disillusion. Jụọchi places her two palms on her left ear, where she was slapped and screams. She feels like running away.

All of these constantly torture Jụọchi both physically and mentally. It makes her (Jụọchi) constantly feel inferior and denied. Additionally, Adamma is totally disinterested in training Jụọchi in any way. If not for Ikegwụonụ's insistence, Adamma would rather want to return Jụọchi to her (Jụọchi's) people than teach her anything or take care of her. At some point, Jụọchi longed to return home to her wretched life of peace.

It may be argued that given Adamma's wealthy lifestyle, she would behave in the same way with any house-keeper, irrespective of gender. In other words, if Jụọchi were a male, Adamma would still behave the same way with him.

This means that it is not because Jụọchi is a female (a fellow woman – as this study presents, since the study is about women to women oppression and subjugation) that Adamma behaves the way she does. But this study holds Adamma culpable of inter-female hostility because as a mature woman who carefully chose to hire the services of Jụọchi (a girl and not a boy), it is to be taken for granted that she had specific reasons why she had to choose a female instead of a male. She – as a woman – ought to empathize with Jụọchi the difficulty of growing up as a female, especially from such an indigent and primitive cultural background. Adamma ought to keep her temper down and mentor Jụọchi to gradually maturity and experienced womanhood. As a woman Adamma ought to understand female stages of growth and development, much more than she would a male (or boy). But Adamma does not. Instead, she seems to loathe the growth and development. In fact, Jụọchi disgusts Adamma (Nzeako 35).

This affirms the reality of inter-female aggression, especially from the point of view of leadership and governance. Adamma – a leader in this case – oppressed, dominated, discriminated, and subjugated her fellow woman, Jụọchi – a follower – with her (Adamma) privileged position. With Feminism, one would expect a man to behave the way Adamma behaves toward Jụọchi. But that is not the case. In fact, Adamma totally throws feminine empathy to the wind. She is less-concerned about the joint-womanhood that she shares with Jụọchi. She is unfriendly, intolerant and unaccommodating to a fellow woman.

### **Conclusion**

From Jụọchi's case and our theoretical framework, the point is made that women are as aggressive to each other as men may be to them or, sometimes, even worse than the feminist's perception. Although the tactics with which they dispense oppression to each other may not be as physical, overt and direct as that of men, its subtle, covert and indirect expressions deliver the same or even worse impacts. Even in the home and places of work where women ought to join forces together and fight against domination and oppression from men, their 'sword' is best directed at one another. This situation carries on from generation to generation to a level where, in contemporary times, it is common to find women saying “I don't keep female friends”. And the reason for this is usually connected to the inherent dislike for one another.

This does not mean that, as human beings, women cannot dislike each other. It does not mean that they cannot quarrel. They can and are free to do so. It is natural for human species to be that way. Men dislike each other too. They quarrel. But, for the most part, men have intelligent ways of managing their dislikeness or temper such that does not escalate into outright, absolute and permanent intolerance like women. Women need to be tolerant and accommodating of each other especially when they are in leadership positions so that they can jointly govern society equally with men. Right from the home, the unit of society, if women distinguish themselves as people with top-notch emotional intelligence, they can take the reins of leadership from men. Men still seem to occupy leadership positions like their birthright because women appear incapable of handling it. Women should learn to channel their anger, disappointments and frustrations for each other to more positive uses. This way, they would sustain friendly relationships with each other that can be very resourceful in their testimonial for governance.

### **Works Cited**

- Bjorkqvist, Kaj. "Sex Differences in Physical, Verbal and Indirect Aggression: A Review of Recent Research." *Sex Roles* 30.3 and 4 (1994): 177-188. Print.
- Bjorkqvist, Kaj and Pirkko Niemela. "New Trends in the Study of Female Aggression." *Of Mice and Women: Aspects of Female Aggression*. Eds. Kaj Bjorkqvist & Pirkko Niemela. New York: Academic Press, 1992. Print.
- Castle, Amazon. "Feminist Theory: Examining Branches of Feminism" (April 28, 2004). Available on <http://www.amazoncastle.com/feminism/ecocult.shtml> (Accessed 10/05/2021).
- Dutton, Donald G. and Tonia L. Nicholls. "The Gender Paradigm in Domestic Violence Research and Theory: Part 1 – The Conflict of Theory and Data." *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 10 (2005): 680-714. Print.
- Edalati, Ali and Ma'rof Redzuan. "Women Physical Aggression (A Review)." *Report and Opinion* 2.4 (2010): 1-6. Print.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 2000. Print.
- Simon, Rita J. and Jean Landis. *The Crimes Women Commit, the Punishments they Receive*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1991. Print.

*Ujubonu Juliet Okide, Ph.D.*

- Sultana, Abeda. "Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis." *The Arts Faculty Journal* 4 (2012): 1-18. Print.
- Nzeako, Tagbo. *Juochi*. Lagos: Macmillan, 1981. Print.
- White, Jacquelyn W. and Robin Kowalski. "Deconstructing the Myth of the Nonaggressive Female: A Feminist Analysis." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18 (1994): 477-498. Print.