INTRA-GENDER OPPRESSION AND THE WEAPONISATION OF CHILDLESSNESS IN NIGERIAN FICTION: A READING OF ANN IWUAGWU'S *ARROW OF DESTINY*

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Abstract
This study interrogates the structural roots of intra-gender hegemony within contemporary Nigerian prose, with a specific focus on the weaponisation of involuntary childlessness as an instrument of female marginalisation and domestic displacement. While African literary scholarship extensively captures the socio-psychological trauma of infertility within patriarchal spaces, the intentional deployment of reproductive failure as a localized tool of domination, and the active complicity of female actors in enforcing this cruelty, remains significantly under-researched. To address this critical gap, this study analyses Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* to expose how institutionalised reproductive stigma intensifies the vulnerability of married women, reducing them to the status of existential outcasts. Furthermore, it deconstructs the relational dynamics among the female characters to highlight their roles as primary custodians and enforcers of patriarchal tyranny. Grounded in a tripartite theoretical matrix of Womanism, Focu-Feminism, and Gynojugation, the study employs qualitative textual analysis to decode the ideological undercurrents of the novel. The findings reveal that procreation-oriented benchmarks are so deeply entrenched within the socio-cultural landscape that female characters actively execute peer-on-peer trauma, render harsh moral judgements, and enforce rigid socio-marital norms that induce acute social exclusion and structural helplessness. Ultimately, the narrative demonstrates that childlessness transcends individual pathology or domestic tragedy, operating instead as a systemic mechanism of intra-gender oppression. The study concludes with a critical call for African gender scholarship, literature, and community structures to foster authentic intra-gender solidarity by separating the intrinsic value of womanhood from the biological mandate of motherhood.

Keywords: Childlessness, Gynojugation, Intra-Gender Hegemony, Focu-Feminism, Nigerian Prose

Introduction

In traditional African societies, particularly within the Igbo socio-cultural paradigm, the capacity to bear and rear children, specifically male progeny, functions as the foundational matrix upon which a married woman's social status, economic security, and moral legitimacy are constructed (Frank, 1987; Orabueze, 2010). Within this cultural landscape, motherhood transcends the boundaries of biological self-realization or personal fulfilment. It operates as an institutionalized sociopolitical currency necessary for navigating communal hierarchies and securing ancestral validation. Maternal fecundity dictates a woman's structural positioning within the extended family unit. Reproduction establishes her legal right to patrilineal property inheritance, and serves as her primary armour against existential social stigmas, relational marginalization, and historical accusations of malevolent practices such as witchcraft. Consequently, the socialization of the girl-child is teleologically oriented toward the dual roles of wifehood and motherhood from early childhood. This reinforces a systemic gender socialization paradigm where reproductive fertility is framed as the ultimate benchmark of female achievement and ontological completeness.

This cultural veneration of progeny is deeply embedded in Igbo onomastics (naming traditions), where personal names serve as persistent linguistic, philosophical, and psychological reminders of the supreme value attached to children. These names are not mere identifiers but function as declarative statements that reinforce the societal expectation of reproductive compliance. Empirical examples of this onomastic framework include names such as: *Nwabundo*: A child is a protective shelter; *Nwabueze*: A child is royalty;

Nwakaego: A child surpasses material wealth; *Nwadiuto*: A child is a source of sweetness; *Nwabuona*: A child is a precious jewel; *Nwabugwu*: A child constitutes honour and prestige; *Nwamaka*: A child is inherently beautiful and good; *Ifeyinwa*: Nothing compares to a child. These names demonstrate that within the indigenous worldview, human life is validated primarily through the continuity of the lineage, rendering the non-reproductive body an anomaly within the social order. Within this patriarchal matrix, a married woman's fundamental human rights, domestic security, and systemic protections remain contingent upon her ongoing reproductive output. This structural reality is exemplified in traditional Igbo society by the *ewu ukwu* rite, a public, ritualistic celebration involving the slaughtering of a goat to honour a woman who has successfully given birth to ten or more children, or several sons in succession. This deep-seated custom is well-documented within the African literary canon; as Chinua Achebe records in his foundational text *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo's first wife delivered her third consecutive son, "Okonkwo slaughtered a goat for her as was the custom" (1958, p. 56). Conversely, while moral or behavioural infractions such as adultery are heavily criminalized and typically serve as immediate grounds for public disgrace or marital dissolution, such violations are frequently absolved if the woman has established her utility through reproduction. As Akachi Adimorah-Ezeigbo notes within this cultural framework, a woman can be forgiven almost any domestic or social transgression provided she has validated her presence through successful childbearing (1996).

Because patriarchal inheritance laws operate on a strict patrilineal axis where "fathers rule and males matter" (Chukwu, 2010, p. 559), the inability to produce male heirs, or experiencing total childlessness, manifests as an existential crisis that married women desperately attempt to circumvent. Within this system, a woman who gives birth exclusively to daughters is often textually, socially, and emotionally conflated with the completely childless woman, as neither provides the necessary continuity for the male line. Hegemonic societal structures offer no viable, dignified space for the non-reproductive woman; instead, she is pathologized as a communal disappointment, an arbiter of domestic calamity, and a primary target for witchcraft stigmatization.

Crucially, women bear the absolute socio-relational brunt of reproductive failure, remaining "always blamed even when the men are at fault" (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 483). This systemic displacement of reproductive blame is heavily reinforced by matriarchal figures, most notably mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, who inherently reject the possibility of male sterility. They operate on the dogmatic cultural assumption that infertility is an exclusively female pathology. This systemic deflection persists despite contemporary medical insights demonstrating that "other factors like biological incompatibility or misaligned timing can also affect conception" (Okpala & Ihueze, 2025, p. 6), alongside the established biological reality of male factor infertility. The intersection of childlessness, institutionalized stigma, and relational control remains a deeply embedded cultural reality that requires rigorous literary interrogation. While existing African feminist scholarship extensively critiques macro-patriarchal oppression enacted by male characters, the specific mechanisms through which *female* characters themselves weaponize reproductive stigma within these socio-cultural structures remains significantly under-researched.

Theoretical Framework

To critically map the complex web of female relationality, agency, and intra-gender power dynamics within the Nigerian socio-cultural landscape, this study deploys a tripartite theoretical framework comprising Womanism, Focu-Feminism, and Gynojugation. Rather than relying on a singular, monolithic critical lens, this interdisciplinary approach allows for a more nuanced reading of the text. Together, these theories illuminate the dualities of female existence in African literature, examining how women simultaneously navigate systemic patriarchy, foster organic spaces of survival, and actively enact or suffer from intra-gender violence and hegemony.

The Theory of Womanism

Coined by Alice Walker (1983) and deeply contextualized within African literary criticism by scholars like Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, the term "Womanism" originates from the Black folk expression, "You acting womanish." This idiom was traditionally used by mothers to describe a young girl who exhibits bold, courageous, responsible, serious, and wilful behaviour. Rather than adopting the purely adversarial, individualistic, and sometimes separatist stance that characterizes certain strands of mainstream Eurocentric radical feminism, Womanism celebrates intra-gender love, historical endurance, cultural roots, and community survival. Walker posits that Black women are among "the most fascinating creations in the world" (1983, p. 251), despite being uniquely marginalized by the overlapping axes of racism, classism, and sexism. Accordingly, she narrates;

> Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in… whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms (1984, p. 241).

This botanical imagery underpins Walker's universalist, holistic view of human relations. Crucially, Womanism diverges from Western liberal feminism through its non-separatist, accommodationist stance. Womanists do not advocate for the erasure of men or the total dissolution of the heterosexual family unit; instead, they fundamentally desire and actively seek a meaningful, restorative union between Black women, men, and children. The theory demands that African and African-diasporic women confront gender inequities without engaging in misandry or fractured identity politics, recognizing that the survival of the entire community is paramount. As Marie Umeh observes, "whereas feminist plots end with the separation of the man and woman… womanist novels are committed to the survival and unity of males and females" (1996, p. 265). To achieve this holistic liberation, Womanism insists that men must also change from their sexist standpoints and actively divest from patriarchal privilege. This collaborative position explains why many African female writers consciously refuse to conclude their narratives with individualistic, separatist feminist victories that leave the home broken or the community fragmented. This deliberate departure from Eurocentric radicalism has drawn varied critical commentary across the decades. Charles Nnolim, for instance, notes that "men and women could have lived comfortably with this ideology if restless feminists did not invent more ideologies" (2008, p. 218), suggesting that the uncritical importation of foreign gender frameworks has sometimes complicated indigenous relational dynamics.

While Walker's foundational framework offers vital tools for self-retrieval, her overt validation of lesbian love remains a major site of ideological contestation, widely rejected as taboo within traditional African literary discourse. Mary E. Modupe Kolawole underscores this epistemological rift, asserting that:

> To the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their worldview. It is not even an option to millions of African women and can therefore not be the solution (1997, p. 115).

To sever ties with these Western liberal attachments, Clenora Hudson-Weems (2010) rejects Walker's nomenclature entirely, proposing "Africana Womanism" as an alternative. This framework is explicitly grounded in ancestral African values, designed to prioritize the unique historical experiences, socio-economic struggles, and cultural desires of continental and diasporic African women (Adimorah-Ezeigbo, 1996).

Concurrently, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi emerged as the pioneer critic to contextualize the term within African literary theory, advancing a model that responds directly to continental realities. Ogunyemi posits that:

> Indigenous African womanism distinguishes itself from both Walker's and Hudson-Weems's models through its structural commitment to what Ogunyemi terms the "four Cs"—Conciliation, Collaboration, Consensus, and Complementarity (Adimorah-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 20).

Yet, while Ogunyemi champions an atmosphere of communal peace and mutual respect across gender lines, she maintains a critical awareness of patriarchal obstructions, a structural reality that Hudson-Weems's model occasionally overlooks. In diagnosing the frictions embedded in heterosexual arrangements, Ogunyemi notes that husbands routinely enact more immediate forms of domestic oppression upon women than fathers, brothers, or sons. Developed through a close reading of pioneering Nigerian female novelists such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, and Zaynab Alkali, Ogunyemi's African womanism seeks to "establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic, geographical, educational, gender, class, religious, military and political differences" (1996, p. 123). Corroborating this stance, Kolawole affirms that womanism represents "the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive ways" (1997, p. 24), serving to "manifest and enhance African woman's collective groupings and positive bonding as opposed to ideological bondage" (1997, p. 27). This organic grounding makes womanism highly attractive to continental writers and activists. By fashioning characters who are "strong women confronting destructive traditions but coming to terms with the limits of individuality" (Kolawole, 1997, p. 39), these authors redefine agency.

Across its various theoretical iterations, the foundational objective of womanism remains constant: the elevation, emancipation, and holistic liberation of womanhood within a communal matrix. Within this schema, women "associate with men and enjoy a close relationship with them. But it should be a relationship of equals or partners. Not one between a master and a minion" (Adimorah-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 2). As agentic subjects, womanists are frequently characterized as being "religious and having faith in God. They love being women; see themselves as victors, make commitment to men and society and are silent on sex and promote marriage" (Nwaneri, 2014, p. 14). By positioning themselves as victors rather than static victims, womanists claim sovereignty over their destinies. They view men as vital partners in the pursuit of equity, choosing collaborative labour over misandric alienation to preserve domestic stability and communal wholeness. This womanist lens is vital for evaluating how characters navigate the trauma of childlessness, as it highlights how the ultimate goal of the narrative is not individual isolation, but the restoration of community, justice, and balanced partnership.

The Theory of Focu-Feminism

While African womanism primarily focuses on cross-gender complementarity and communal cohesion, Focu-Feminism introduces a sharp, introspective critique of internal gender politics, turning its analytical lens directly toward intra-gender relations. Formulated by Onyeka Iwuchukwu in 2015, Focu-Feminism disrupts conventional postcolonial and feminist discourses that almost exclusively designate men and external, macro-patriarchal institutions as the sole vectors of female marginalization. Rather than directing critical aggression entirely outward, Focu-Feminism demands a radical analytical redirection, arguing that "the real enemy is woman herself," who frequently operates as the primary custodian, sustainer, and enforcer of the very cultural traditions that debase, objectify, and strip women of their humanity.

Iwuchukwu posits that women often hide behind the protective mask of tradition, culture, or societal convention to rationalize, validate, and execute acts of deep intra-gender cruelty against their peers. To disrupt these cyclical patterns of abuse, this framework challenges the individual woman "to journey into the self, see what fruit it bears" to attain true self-knowledge and ethical accountability. Within Focu-Feminism, this critical self-awareness serves as the foundational site of authentic emancipation. By initiating liberation from within the self, the individual woman can accurately assess her own capabilities, accept her identity, and clearly discern her needs alongside the vulnerabilities, rights, and bodily autonomy of the women around her.

Furthermore, Focu-Feminism operates on the premise that society is intrinsically dynamic and that culture undergoes continuous transformation and evolutionary shifts. This conceptual position suggests that oppressive cultural practices are not static or immutable artifacts; rather, they are historically contingent and bound to diminish as individual and collective consciousness shifts. While the framework does not disregard collectivism in the struggle for female emancipation and empowerment, it prioritizes individualized resistance and personal accountability. Focu-Feminism encourages each woman to critically identify her unique challenges and proactively devise personal survival strategies. Because female experiences are fundamentally heterogeneous, fluid, and intersectional, they must be addressed through tailored, specific interventions rather than passive reliance on institutionalized, generic feminist movements or overarching Western macro-theories.

Consequently, women are urged to strive for excellence, self-assertion, and structural autonomy within their respective professional and domestic spheres. Focu-Feminism prioritizes the individual's cognitive understanding and unique perception of systemic issues, advocating for an internalized quest for solutions. While extensive scholarship exists on gender relations, conventional discourses primarily focus on liberating women from external, male-dominated institutions. Historically, few scholars have directly tackled the reality of female-on-female oppression or analyzed the active roles women play as perpetrators of subjugation. Focu-Feminism disrupts this analytical omission by positing that "oppression is oppression, subjugation is subjugation; marginalization is marginalization; exploitation is exploitation" (Iwuchukwu, as cited in Opara, 2016, p. 15). Confronting this reality, Iwuchukwu asks:

> "Do women suffer from these? Yes, but in various forms, shapes, and magnitude. Do these come from men and institutions alone? No, because sometimes women are the perpetrators of these acts as primary agents or willing instruments" (as cited in Opara, 2016, p. 15).

Intra-gender marginalization is as destructive as classic patriarchal oppression; neither is less severe or less traumatic than the other. Unfortunately, mainstream African feminist criticism routinely overlooks this internal dimension, frequently treating women as a uniform victim class. Consequently, female perpetrators of intra-gender violence escape accountability, leaving vulnerable female victims to suffer in isolation. Because intra-gender abuse has not been systematically countered. Its traumatic consequences inflict long-term psychological, emotional, and social damage on unprotected victims. Focu-Feminism insists that the female custodians of these harmful traditions must be forced to confront the nature of their actions. Finally, Iwuchukwu advocates for tangible economic autonomy, recommending that women actively engage in financial and entrepreneurial ventures to secure structural independence within the domestic sphere. Through a combination of critical self-reflection, robust economic empowerment, and the academic exposure of women's complicity in sustaining oppressive systems, female subjugation can be drastically minimized.

Gynojugation: A Framework for Intra-Gender Subjugation

To fully comprehend the dense, multi-layered nature of female relationality within African socio-literary spaces, it is analytically imperative to historicize the overarching paradigm within which these interactions occur. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2023) anchors this discourse within the broader, critical conceptualization of intra-genderism. To conceptualize the complex web of female relationships and socio-cultural power dynamics, particularly within African culture, intra-genderism is proposed as a vital framework that "encompasses the multifaceted associations, connections, interactions, and bonding between women, which can yield both positive and negative outcomes" (p. 4). This paradigm does not merely offer a romanticized reading of sisterhood; rather, it "denotes the varied levels, situations, negotiations, and constructions of gender identity, especially in the context of social interactions between individuals or groups of the same gender" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). By operating as an expansive socio-analytical spectrum, intra-genderism "embodies the ideology, concept, practice, and spectrum of interactions that unite women, while also acknowledging the instances where women are pitted against one another" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). Crucially, for a

study focused on the weaponisation of reproductive failure, the framework provides a precise vocabulary for decoding systemic cruelty, as it "specifically describes the actions taken by women to oppress, harm, traumatize, or disempower other women, highlighting the darker aspects of female relationships" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 5).

As a specialized, sharp sub-set of this broader paradigm, Utoh-Ezeajugh (2023,) introduces the term gynojugation to explicitly describe "the subjugation of women by fellow women, a phenomenon characterized by a pervasive denial of rights, violation of personal space, and enforcement of oppressive cultural practices" (p. 4). Rather than viewing female-driven hostility as erratic or individualized behavioural flaws, gynojugation decodes it as a structured institutional mechanism. This phenomenon manifests in diverse and highly destructive variations, including "forced seclusion, verbal and physical violence, body modifications, and genital mutilation, which can be seen as manifestations of internalized patriarchal norms" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 5).

The mechanics of this internal gender hegemony operate through an array of culturally sanctioned disciplinary measures. It encompasses "oppressive customs, such as forced consumption of substances, shaving of hair, and wearing of punitive clothing, often enforced by women themselves, illustrating the complex dynamics of power and control" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4; see also Butler, 1990; Mohanty, 2003). A prime example of this phenomenon within the African continent is found in the rigid maintenance of dehumanizing mourning rituals. The "perpetuation of cruel widowhood practices in many African communities, championed by women, exemplifies gynojugation, highlighting the ways in which women can be complicit in their own oppression" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023; Okpala & Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2018). This reveals a profound sociological paradox that complicates classical radical feminist theories: women frequently act as the front-line enforcers of the very patriarchal apparatus that marginalizes them. Gynojugation accurately captures these "complex dynamics where women, driven by a desire to please men or inflict suffering on peers, support and enforce oppressive norms, customs, and cultural structures that dehumanize and traumatize other women" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4; see also Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000). Derived etymologically from '*gyno*' and '*subjugation*', this framework provides an indispensable vocabulary for "interrogating women-on-women oppression, highlighting the urgent need to address these insidious power dynamics" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 5).

Furthermore, the framework makes a significant contribution to contemporary debates on intersectionality by demonstrating how "women can be both victims and perpetrators of patriarchal systems" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 5). By shifting focus away from a simple, binary model of gender oppression (male vs. female), and examining gynojugation through a poststructuralist lens, scholars can "better understand the complex web of power relations that shape women's experiences and relationships" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). In the specific context of continental African literature and lived experience, the dual lenses of intra-genderism and gynojugation are vital for demystifying "the complex web of oppressive cultural practices that perpetuate women's subjugation" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). The unique vulnerabilities of African women as widows, the emotional and psychological battles built into polygamous domestic arrangements, and the severe maltreatment of domestic servants can all be "effectively interrogated within the framework of gynojugation" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4; Okpala & Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2018).

Furthermore, this analytical tool covers "the maltreatment of the girl-child, the sustenance of female genital mutilation, and other practices perpetuated by traditional African institutions and cultural structures" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). These deeply entrenched cultural institutions function as socio-political tools to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, ensuring that "women remain within their culturally ascribed subordinate positions" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). To break this cycle of internal hegemony, African women cannot remain passive observers of their material conditions. As Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) notes, women must actively participate as "co-partners in social transformation" if they are to successfully challenge and dismantle these deep-seated structures of power.

When trapped within the overlapping matrices of indigenous tradition and systemic patriarchy, women are routinely "pitted against one another, resulting in discordant intra-gender relationships", a destructive reality that is widely dramatized across contemporary African creative and literary texts (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). If left unexamined, the toxic behavioural patterns uncovered by intra-genderism and gynojugation will continue to construct internal roadblocks that directly "hinder women's empowerment" and communal growth (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023).

Ultimately, analyzing female interactions through these twin critical concepts reveals the "complex, often insidious ways women are complicit in their own oppression, underscoring the imperative for collective introspection, consciousness-raising, and targeted interventions to dismantle these oppressive systems and forge pathways for holistic empowerment and liberation" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). Within this study, this framework is crucial for understanding how the reproductive standard is sustained not just by masculine authority, but through the direct, day-to-day enforcement of gynojugatory practices by female characters like Fitimi and Idara.

Literature Review

A significant corpus of contemporary scholarship focusing on childlessness in Nigerian societies has moved beyond early, reductionist paradigms that treated infertility merely as an isolated physiological burden or a private domestic crisis. Instead, current research exposes the complex social, cultural, religious, and psychological dimensions of reproductive failure, demonstrating how the non-reproductive female body becomes a site of intense communal surveillance and disciplinary power. Deploying Womanist Literary Criticism, Gbaguidi and Maurice (2022) examine Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* to demonstrate how childless women are systematically abused within the Nigerian novelistic tradition. They contend that such socio-relational abuse is morally indefensible, particularly when the underlying infertility is entirely involuntary, and they advocate for a narrative re-centring of female autonomy independent of biological reproduction. Similarly, Ikeke (2021) investigates the intersection of involuntary childlessness with traditional religious and socio-cultural systems. His study demonstrates that across historical and contemporary African marital spaces, childlessness, which is routinely and erroneously blamed on the female partner, frequently serves as a primary catalyst for severe verbal abuse, physical violence, systemic humiliation, marital instability, and profound social alienation.

Further complicating this landscape, Olumati (2019) utilizes a qualitative phenomenological approach to reveal how the theological doctrines and pastoral strategies of modern Pentecostal institutions, specifically deliverance ministries, intensive prayer protocols, and prosperity gospels, frequently clash with deep-seated cultural expectations that link reproductive fertility with marital validity, property inheritance, and geriatric security. Olumati argues that the purely spiritual or therapeutic solutions offered by these religious spaces are often structurally insufficient for addressing infertility rooted in biological, medical, or complex sociological factors. Consequently, he advocates for the broadening of conceptualizations of the African family, moving beyond rigid reproductive metrics to prioritize protective, economic, and communal functionalities. Expanding this academic inquiry into contemporary coping mechanisms, Nnoruga (2026) documents the strategic hybridization of intervention mechanisms within contemporary Igbo families. Confronted with intense social pressure, these families simultaneously deploy traditional rites, including indigenous religious rituals, herbal medicine, and divination protocols, alongside modern biomedical interventions and formal child adoption to navigate reproductive stigma. Utilizing ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with affected couples, traditional healers, and medical practitioners, Nnoruga demonstrates that navigating childlessness demands a culturally grounded, multidimensional coping matrix that bridges traditional belief systems and modern science, rather than relying on a singular medicalized path.

From a socio-demographic perspective, Saliu, Abubakar, and Ojumu (2024) investigate the root causes and socio-cultural ramifications of childlessness among married couples within the Zaria Local Government

Area of Kaduna State. Drawing on an empirical sample of four hundred respondents, their findings reveal that while public perception increasingly frames infertility through a biomedical lens, citing etiologies such as low sperm count, ovulatory dysfunctions, uterine damage, fibroids, and sexually transmitted infections, the relational consequences remain highly gendered. Notably, the study observes that the wife's biological relatives and external peer networks frequently serve as vital sources of positive social support, leading the researchers to advocate for community-wide medical education and joint familial coping strategies to foster empathy and reduce insular domestic hostility.

Similarly, Aruna (2025) utilizes structured questionnaires with a purposive sample of 113 respondents to track contemporary shifts in reproductive accountability. Her findings reveal a gradual decline in the automatic, uncritical vilification of women for reproductive failures, alongside a critically low level of communal awareness regarding formal child adoption. Consequently, Aruna highlights the urgent need for collaborative spousal medical evaluations and intensive community sensitization to destabilize lingering social stigmas while expanding public knowledge on alternative paths to family-making. The direct correlation between reproductive failure and psychological deterioration has also been robustly established within quantitative behavioural research, demonstrating that infertility acts as a pervasive mental health hazard. Aruevbose and Obarisiagbon (2025) provide statistical evidence linking involuntary infertility to severe mental health declines, clinical anxiety, and depression among married couples. Their empirical insights lead them to recommend that state actors prioritize the integration of specialized psychological counselling and mental health services within public healthcare and maternal health frameworks.

Furthermore, Kwaghtser (2023) employs a cross-sectional survey of couples in the Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State to examine institutionalized coping mechanisms. The data indicates that individuals facing reproductive challenges routinely rely on emotional self-regulation strategies, cognitive reframing, and mediated social support, including mass media networks, to mitigate the acute sense of alienation and structural displacement associated with infertility.

Synthesis and Research Gap

A critical synthesis of the existing literature reveals a foundational academic consensus. Within the African socio-cultural imaginary, the reproductive act operates as an institutionalized mechanism to secure patrilineal continuity, validate property inheritance, and define a woman's social architecture. Hegemonic patriarchal norms systematically designate the female subject as the default culprit for reproductive failure, particularly regarding the absence of male progeny, a dogmatic bias that women themselves are structurally conditioned to internalize and protect. However, a significant gap persists within contemporary gender studies. There is a profound scarcity of research interrogating how women actively weaponize their own reproductive compliance, or the non-compliance of their peers, as a tool to execute intra-gender hegemony and assume localized dominance over other women. Existing gender studies and research should prioritize promoting female solidarity, in line with the theories of Womanism, Gynojugation and Focu-Feminism, as a critical initiative to combat reproductive injustice that is based on structural oppression. Yet, before solidarity can be forged, scholarship must first demystify the internal gender hierarchies that disrupt it. While the literature covers the patriarchal oppression of women by men and macro-institutions, it routinely overlooks how women function as primary agents or willing instruments of this very subjugation. This study addresses this critical gap by analyzing the subtle, insidious dimensions of intra-gender hegemony and female-driven violence in Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny*, providing an essential critical vocabulary to unpack how reproductive ability is transformed into an intra-gender firearm.

Methodology and Synopsis of *Arrow of Destiny*

This study adopts a qualitative, text centred analytical approach, deploying literary hermeneutics to interrogate the text. The primary source of data is Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny*, a contemporary prose work that critiques postcolonial domestic politics and reproductive trauma. By treating the novel as a cultural map, this methodology uses textual analysis to uncover hidden power dynamics, tracking how

social realities are constructed and resisted through language and characterization. The reading is guided by the tripartite theoretical framework already established, filtering textual evidence through the critical lenses of Womanism, Focu-Feminism, and Gynojugation. This allows the analysis to move beyond manifest plot movements to uncover the latent structural tension that define internal gender hierarchies.

Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* is a 245-page novel that serves as a literary critique of contemporary domestic politics and reproductive trauma. The narrative charts the trajectory of Cynthia, an orphaned young woman raised by her maternal grandmother in a rural setting while her parents worked abroad. Following the successive deaths of her parents and later her grandmother, Cynthia is dispossessed and violently displaced from her ancestral home by her uncle's wife, Fitimi. This early displacement sets the stage for her entry into an arranged marriage with Idris, an employee of Agip Oil in Port Harcourt. The union represents economic mobility but quickly turns into a site of surveillance.

When the marriage faces reproductive delays, Cynthia is automatically presumed infertile. This structural assumption results in immense psychological anxiety and exhausting financial expenditures on futile medical and spiritual interventions. Conversely, Idris routinely refuses to undergo biomedical potency evaluations, relying on patriarchal privilege to shield himself from scrutiny. Taking advantage of this domestic vulnerability, Idara, a manipulative undergraduate student driven by material ambitions, displaces Cynthia. She moves into the matrimonial home, claiming to carry Idris' children, though they were fathered by another man. Heartbroken, physically evicted, and thrown out of her home, Cynthia responds to this domestic trauma by relying on strategic patience, psychological resilience, and existential agency. Refusing to remain a static victim, she secures a lucrative job, achieves financial autonomy, and remarries Mr. Boma, ultimately birthing a set of triplets. The narrative concludes with a classic womanist restoration of justice. Idara's reproductive deception is exposed when the biological father of her children, David Ikem, comes to claim his family. Idris is left abandoned, socially isolated, and medically confirmed as impotent. This plot structure provides the data for examining how reproductive ability is transformed into an intra-gender weapon.

Textual Analysis: Women Marginalising Women in Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny*

Patriarchal structures have dictated the socio-cultural realities of African societies since the consolidation of organized communities, enforcing traditions formulated by male actors to the systematic detriment of women (Daniel-Inim, 2015). Since the foundational shifts in African feminist consciousness, contemporary female writers have used creative literature to dismantle these oppressive frameworks. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* remains a foundational literary pacesetter, actively debunking the marginalized roles and diminished representations historically imposed on Nigerian women within male-authored canons (Orabueze, 2010). *Arrow of Destiny* builds significantly upon this tradition by centring the domestic realities of family life while positioning the material conditions of women as its core critical concern. Through the ordeals of her protagonist, Iwuagwu explores the internal agonies of the African woman, specifically focusing on the internal agents who perpetuate intra-gender violence.

In line with Akachi Adimorah-Ezeigbo's concept of "Snail-Sense Feminism," Iwuagwu crafts a protagonist who utilizes "natural intuition, soft nature, and stereotypic frames to subvert agents of patriarchy" (Ezeifeka & Ogbazi, 2014, p. 4). To achieve this subversion, however, the text must first expose how women operate as the direct, localized enforcers of violence against their peers. Under the analytical lens of gynojugation, this female-on-female cruelty is decoded not as an isolated behavioural flaw, but as a systematic "subjugation of women by fellow women, a phenomenon characterized by a pervasive denial of rights, violation of personal space, and enforcement of oppressive cultural practices" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4); Oyěwùmí, 2002). This intra-gender hostility is vividly captured in Cynthia's childhood lamentation regarding her aunt, Fitimi:

> She saw nothing good in all I did. She called me a witch and accused me of killing my mother and grandmother. There were times I didn't eat because she wouldn't give me food. There was no difference between morning and night, I worked until everyone else had gone to bed before crawling into mine. There were bruises all over my body. How could I tell my uncle, that I had lost peace in his home? (p. 37).

Fitimi exemplifies the insidious mechanics of gynojugation; she functions as a performative hypocrite who cloaks her structural malice in a false veneer of maternal care to achieve her abusive objectives. Within this domestic space, every new day brings escalating trauma, manifesting as "verbal and physical violence" which can be seen as direct "manifestations of internalized patriarchal norms" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). As Cynthia recounts:

> While she was flogging me with a food turner, she knocked out my tooth. She wanted to flog my hand but mistakenly placed them on my face. She hit my mouth and my tooth flew out with a trail of blood (p. 37).

Crucially, Fitimi's domestic aggression does not occur in a vacuum; it is actively reinforced by external female collaborators who sustain this localized hegemony. This support network includes a complicit female friend and a dogmatic prophetess who weaponizes spiritual authority to validate Fitimi's cruelty, publicly branding Cynthia a witch responsible for Fitimi's own inability to bear a child. According to her too, she used the same mystic power to kill her mother and paralyze her grandmother. Paul is compelled to believe their tale and sends his niece away because he is desperate to have a child.

Fitimi's targeted domestic hostility is fundamentally rooted in her own internalized patriarchal anxiety regarding childlessness. To divert communal scrutiny from her own reproductive challenges, she projects a narrative of supernatural malice onto Cynthia. This demonstrates a key tenet of Focu-Feminism where women frequently hide behind the protective mask of tradition, culture, or superstition to execute acts of deep intra-gender cruelty against their peers (Iwuchukwu, 2015). Fitimi's behaviour reveals the "complex dynamics where women, driven by a desire to please men or inflict suffering on peers, support and enforce oppressive norms, customs, and cultural structures that dehumanize and traumatize other women" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). Succumbing to this calculated intra-gender manipulation, Paul accepts their supernatural rationalizations and expels his niece from the household, driven by a desperate, patriarchally enforced desire to protect his lineage and secure progeny.

Similarly, the structural subversion of Cynthia's agency continues through the actions of Mrs. Isa. While Mrs. Isa's initial intervention to facilitate Cynthia's marriage to her only brother, Idris, appears to be an act of matriarchal benevolence, it quickly devolves into systemic hostility once reproductive delays manifest. Across many African vernaculars and indigenous belief systems, "a woman is nobody, a wife is everything and a mother is next to God" (Spock, 1992, p. 39). In her foundational critique of African marital spaces, Katherine Frank notes that:

> In African culture, barrenness is perhaps the worst affliction (even crime) a couple can endure (or commit), and it is almost always attributed to the woman. In traditional society for a woman to lack reproductive power is to lack all power, indeed, to be deprived of her very identity and *raison d'être* in life (1987, p. 20).

This structural trauma echoes the laments of Amaka in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, who grieves that "God has deprived me of the greatest blessing bestowed on a woman, the joy of being a mother," before critically interrogating her existential worth: "was that really the end of the world? Was she useless to the world if she were unmarried?" (1981, p. 23). As Florence Orabueze observes, despite a woman's high socioeconomic profile within her husband's family or broader society, she is frequently reduced to a cipher

if she fails to achieve the culturally mandated metric of motherhood (2010). Iwuagwu systematically dismantles this patriarchal bias, arriving at the moral conclusion that it is ethically and logically indefensible to default to blaming the wife for reproductive failures. The text insists that subjecting the female partner to severe psychological and emotional torture without subjecting the male partner to biomedical potency evaluations is an artifact of institutionalized misogyny. In *Arrow of Destiny*, Dr. Chukwudalu serves as a narrative agent of scientific demystification, confirming that:

> Infertility is not only found in woman, but in men too. Our African mentality has deceived a lot of men, who felt that they cannot possibly be the cause of their childlessness. With the sensitization programmes going on, men are still living in [the] stone age. Even if a man is found to be infertile, medical treatment can help to boost it (p. 239).

Despite this biological reality, Mrs. Isa, driven by the pressure of being the eldest sister to the only son in a polygamous household, refuses to listen to the voice of reason. Desperate to keep her maternal lineage alive, she actively cooperates in undermining Cynthia's marital security, illustrating how "women can be both victims and perpetrators of patriarchal systems" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 5). Although she acknowledges Cynthia as a rare gem possessing ideal marital qualities, Mrs. Isa confesses: "I confess today that I supported my brother in bringing in Idara because we desperately wanted a child" (p. 105), adding later, "I regret my secret support to push you away for Idara to be in full control" (p. 106). Deploying a model of womanist conciliation, Cynthia forgives her sister-in-law without preconditions, articulating a deeply internalized defence of the very system that marginalized her:

> Who am I not to forgive you? You did what you did because your blood brother and your parent's lineage were at stake. Who wouldn't do what you did? I only felt you should have let me know you were involved. Don't worry ma, it is all in the past now… (p. 106).

Cynthia's rhetorical rationalization, "Who wouldn't do what you did?", signals a disturbing level of patriarchal bargaining. Even as the direct victim of this domestic displacement, her response implies an acceptance of the cultural dogma that involuntary childlessness is an unforgivable offense, thereby validating its deployment as an intra-gender weapon. Within this sociocultural framework, a woman's humanity is quantified by her reproductive efficiency, particularly her capacity to deliver male heirs. If she is childless, she is branded an essential failure (Chukukere, 1995). Her reaction underscores the precise socio-literary reality that "interrogating female relationships through the prism of gynojugation and intragenderism reveals the complex, often insidious ways women are complicit in their own oppression" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 5).

Consequently, contemporary Nigerian women across various literary texts, such as Cynthia in *Arrow of Destiny*, Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough*, and Ije in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, experience reproductive delays as an existential stain and a systemic failure to fulfil their roles as institutional reproducers of the patrilineage. Iwuagwu deliberately contrasts Cynthia's submissive adherence to the "virtuous woman" archetype with the predatory machinations of Idara, a ruthless undergraduate student who weaponizes the vacuum of childlessness to secure economic mobility. Upon learning of Idris' marital anxieties, Idara manufactures a pregnancy narrative to secure access to his corporate wealth. Recognizing that "hooking him would mean goodbye to poverty and the hardship she had suffered all her life" (p. 198), she applies strategic domestic pressure, claiming that her mother would enact severe consequences if the man responsible did not immediately pay her bride price. Aware that childlessness is constructed as the ultimate masculine misfortune in African society, Idris surrenders to Idara's demands.

Once installed in the matrimonial home with her two children, Idara initiates a harsh regime of gynojugation, reducing Cynthia to an enslaved subject in her own domestic space. This internal tyranny highlights "the actions taken by women to oppress, harm, traumatize, or disempower other women,

highlighting the darker aspects of female relationships" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 4). This intra-gender hegemony expands into a collective matriarchal assault as Idara's mother and siblings routinely visit the home to issue disrespectful orders to Cynthia, while Idris grows increasingly cold and emotionally distant. The climax of this displacement occurs following a domestic accident in which Idara's child, Henry, scalds his hand with hot water. Using this event as a catalyst, Idara instigates Idris to physically evict Cynthia. Driven into homelessness, Cynthia departs for an unknown destination, relying on the resilient tenets of "Snail-Sense Feminism" to survive. Through this narrative trajectory, Iwuagwu condemns the cultural frameworks that tie female personhood exclusively to reproductive output. Concurrently, the author uses Idara and her familial network to offer a blistering critique of the materialistic decay within contemporary Nigerian society, proving that these "cultural structures often serve as mechanisms for reinforcing patriarchal norms, ensuring that women remain within their culturally ascribed subordinate positions" (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2023, p. 5).

Deconstructing the Agents of Trauma: Who Oppresses the African Woman?

The multilayered abuse inflicted upon Cynthia, enacted by her uncle's wife, a complicit female friend, a dogmatic prophetess, Idara, and Idara's mother, raises critical questions regarding the primary sources of female trauma in African literature. It forces an interrogation of whether the primary engine of female oppression is directly male-driven, or if women possess localized forms of power that they routinely weaponize against their peers. As Chinweizu controversially asserts regarding the mechanics of gendered power:

> If the essence of power is the ability to get what one wants, the women are far from powerless. Women do get and always did get, what they want – be it riches, or throne, or the head of John the Baptist, or routine exemption from hardships and risks which their men folk are obliged to endure. That women operate by methods which often differ from those available to men does not in any way mean that women are bereft of power (1990, p. 11).

In framing the execution of domestic malice, Orabueze further argues that: "There is no way a man can think out evil or carry it out against a woman without an active connivance of another woman. It does not lie in his nature" (2010, p. 167). While this assertion may risk oversimplifying the structural realities of systemic patriarchy, *Arrow of Destiny* provides compelling textual evidence of how women actively devise and execute the destruction of their peers through the mechanics of gynojugation. Idris' marital dissolution begins when he encounters Idara at a nightclub. Operating as a transactional call girl alongside her friend Nnenda, Idara targets married corporate employees because they offer greater financial extraction than young university bachelors. Upon discovering Idris' domestic vulnerabilities, Idara consciously transforms his wife's assumed infertility into a targeted intra-gender weapon, as her eventual confession reveals:

> I tried getting pregnant by you, but to no avail. I made sure I slept with you during my ovulation; it still didn't happen. I sought advice and somebody said that I should sleep with another man to see if I would get pregnant. It was then that I met David Ikem who promised to help. We agreed that I would pay a certain amount of money, which I did. One month after, I conceived the twins and claimed they were yours. After watching you for two years, I knew that the trouble is not your wife but with you… I thought it wise to meet David again so that the children would be fathered by one man (p. 201).

This shocking revelation exposes the lengths to which a female actor will go, including hiring a biological surrogate father, to systematically displace, humiliate, and disenfranchise another woman. Viewed through the critical lens of Focu-Feminism, this behaviour challenges the habit of automatically holding macro-patriarchy or male actors exclusively accountable for female suffering. Idara's actions are particularly

egregious because she operates with the full awareness that Cynthia is completely innocent of reproductive failure. She deliberately destroys a fellow woman's domestic peace, actively driving Idris to evict his wife, while repeatedly reminding her of her misfortune. This intra-gender violation is further reinforced by Idara's mother, an experienced schoolteacher and maternal figure who rather than counselling her daughter against the exploitation of a fellow woman's grief, actively joins the conspiracy, compounding Cynthia's alienation by publicly castigating and dehumanizing her.

Idris' capacity to oppress Cynthia is enabled by the active involvement of Idara, her mother, and the secret support of his sister, Mrs. Isa. Idris is formally the head of the household, but Idara functions like the neck that directs and turns that head. If Idara had not entered the picture, Cynthia would likely have lived with her husband until a medical or social solution to their reproductive delays was collectively sought. Idara clearly understands the transactional value of reproductive compliance in a patriarchal setting, where:

> The pursuit of a fertile womb, capable of producing a male heir, often drives male behaviour, sometimes leading to drastic actions, such as in the case of Henry VIII who broke with the Roman Church to secure a new marriage (Chinweizu, 1990, p. 19).

This study processes childlessness in *Arrow of Destiny* as a weapon of intra-gender domination, where female characters like Idara reinforce patriarchal norms to punish and exclude women. It argues that this, while seemingly exaggerated, reflects the intense social stigmatization and marginalization of childless women in the Nigerian society. The study ultimately calls for the application of Womanism, Gynojugation and Focu-Feminism to separate womanhood from motherhood and to address and dismantle intra-gender violence, foster solidarity, and reform communities.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In Igbo socio-cultural contexts, childbearing remains a critical, institutionalized determinant of a woman's social status, bodily autonomy, and economic security. As this study demonstrates, involuntary infertility is frequently transformed from a private biological reality into a public weapon of intra-gender hegemony and systemic subjugation. Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* serves as a profound literary critique of these oppressive cultural frameworks. It illustrates that the existential crisis of reproductive failure is not merely maintained by macro-patriarchal systems, but is actively enforced by women against other women. The study applied the tripartite theoretical framework of Womanism, Focu-Feminism, and Gynojugation to expose how internalized patriarchal norms turn female kin networks, domestic rivals, and religious actors into primary agents of peer-on-peer trauma.

The structural trajectory of the novel's protagonist, Cynthia, reveals that the marginalisation of the childless woman relies heavily on the active complicity of female collaborators like Fitimi, Mrs. Isa, and Idara. Through their actions, the text exposes how women use reproductive stigma to secure localized dominance, protect patrilineal property, or pursue individual economic mobility. This intra-gender enforcement of fertility expectations challenges monolithic, romanticized views of universal sisterhood often found in early feminist scholarship. Instead, it highlights the complex internal hierarchies where women simultaneously function as victims of patriarchy and direct perpetrators of its most violent manifestations, such as malicious witchcraft accusations, emotional alienation, and physical domestic eviction.

The novel *Arrow of Destiny* shifts contemporary academic discourse beyond traditional critiques of male-centred oppression. It attempts to expand the vocabulary of African literary criticism to address the hidden dimensions of intra-gender violence. To dismantle these deeply embedded cycles of reproductive trauma, the study calls for a structural application of womanist conciliation and the radical self-reflection championed by Focu-Feminism. To achieve authentic liberation, African gender scholarship and grassroots community programming must prioritize the deconstruction of female-driven hegemony. Contemporary African societies must work to conceptually separate the intrinsic value of womanhood from the biological

mandate of motherhood. The rights, dignity, and existential security of childless women would be fully preserved through deep intra-gender solidarity, shared spousal accountability for fertility, and robust institutional and policy reforms.

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