

**Conflict of Piety and Personal Desires in Nigerian Literature: A Study of Okey Ndibe's
*Foreign God INC...***

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Abstract

This study examines the glaring conflict between piety and personal desires as represented in contemporary Nigerian literature, with particular focus on Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc...* The research explores how the author dramatizes the tension between cultural or religious devotion and the individual pursuit of personal aspirations. Using textual analysis, the study investigates the socio-cultural, religious, and economic factors that contribute to this conflict, as well as the psychological and emotional consequences experienced by characters that grapple with such dilemmas. In the text, the conflict is clearly illustrated through Ikechukwu Uzundu's attempt to reconcile his financial desperation with his inherited reverence for ancestral piety, thereby exposing the tension between tradition, modernity, and global capitalist exploitation. The study reveals that Nigerian literature does not merely portray these conflicts as personal struggles, but as reflections of broader societal realities. Issues such as religious orthodoxy, cultural identity, economic pressures, and patriarchal structures significantly shape the choices and inner turmoil of the characters in the text. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the psychological and emotional burdens of negotiating between piety and desire often result in alienation, guilt, and tragic consequences. By interrogating these themes, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Nigerian literature mirrors and critiques societal norms, while also giving voice to the struggles of individuals caught between devotion to faith or culture and the longing for personal gratification.

Key words: Piety, Pious, Desire, Religion, Conflict.

Introduction

Piety and personal desires are fundamental components of human existence, and the tension between them has been a recurrent theme in human history and literature. Piety generally means devotion to religious duties

and moral uprightness. A pious person is expected to obey religious commandments, respect family and cultural traditions, and put others before themselves. In African societies, and especially in Nigeria, piety includes loyalty to family values, cultural

beliefs, societal norms, and religious teachings. Piety is highly respected and seen as a measure of a person's honour and dignity.

On the other hand, personal desires refer to the individual's inner wishes, ambitions, dreams, and longings. These may include desires for love, freedom, personal growth, happiness, wealth, education, or self-expression. Personal desires are natural human instincts and are often based on personal needs and emotional satisfaction. Piety, commonly understood as devoutness or reverence toward religious, cultural, or moral principles, often calls for self-restraint, sacrifice, and alignment with collective expectations. It encompasses religious obligations, societal norms, familial expectations, and cultural codes that dictate how individuals should conduct their lives. On the other hand, personal desires are the individual's intrinsic wishes, passions, and aspirations that are often driven by emotion, self-interest, and personal fulfillment. The clash between these forces piety and personal desires creates an intense internal and external conflict that is widely explored in literature, particularly, within contexts where tradition and modernity intersect.

Piety is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs, religious doctrines, and social structures. It is reinforced by communal living and the prioritization of group harmony over individual pursuits. Personal desires, particularly those that challenge established norms, are often seen as rebellious or morally questionable. These conflicting expectations are heightened in modern Nigerian literature, where characters are frequently portrayed as caught between the demands of faith, culture, and societal roles, and the pursuit of personal happiness, freedom, or ambition.

Piety is often upheld as a social virtue, celebrated and rewarded by communities, especially in contexts where communal values are prioritized over individual liberties. It is associated with discipline, sacrifice, and honor. However, it may also result in emotional suppression, loss of autonomy, and inner conflict, especially when it demands the rejection of personal truth or aspiration. Individuals who are perceived to deviate from pious norms may suffer ostracization, guilt, or even spiritual crises.

Personal desires, conversely, are tied to self-expression, identity, and agency. They represent the human longing for happiness, purpose, and achievement. While desires

may include noble goals such as the desire for education, romantic love, or career growth they may also take forms that are socially or morally contentious. The pursuit of desire can therefore be seen as a quest for authenticity, but one that often comes with social or moral risks.

Nigerian literature, in its postcolonial and contemporary forms, has served as a mirror reflecting these tensions. Writers use their narratives to explore how characters navigate the burdens of piety while grappling with the human longing for self-expression, freedom, love, and fulfillment. These tensions are not abstract ideas but real dilemmas affecting people's lives especially in a society where success, social approval, and divine favour are often believed to be tightly linked to obedience to religious and cultural norms. The conflict between piety and personal desires arises when a person wants something deeply but is held back by moral, religious, cultural or family obligations. For instance, a young woman may desire a career abroad, but her religion or family might expect her to marry early and stay close to home. Similarly, a man may long for love outside of an unhappy marriage, but his religion or social values forbids divorce or infidelity. Various aspects of life such as personal relationships, cultural expectations, religious

beliefs, and economic struggles serve as the battleground for this conflict. In personal relationships, individuals are often forced to choose between romantic or emotional fulfillment and the obligations imposed by family or religion. For instance, in many traditional Nigerian settings, marriage choices are heavily influenced by parental and communal approval rather than personal love or compatibility, leading to suppressed desires and personal sacrifice (Eze 52).

Cultural expectations also play a critical role. Societies impose behavioral codes and gender roles that limit personal agency. For example, women are often expected to conform to ideals of chastity, obedience, and submission, while men are expected to be providers and upholders of tradition. These cultural expectations clash with the modern ideals of individual freedom and gender equality, leading to inner turmoil and societal friction (Okonkwo 45).

Religious beliefs further compound this tension. Nigeria is a deeply religious country, with Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religions playing major roles in shaping moral codes. Religious teachings often demand the denial of the self in favour of spiritual or divine laws. This can create conflicts for individuals whose desires

whether romantic, material, or ideological do not align with religious prescriptions (Iheanacho 112)

Economic struggles add another layer to this conflict. The pursuit of economic stability and prosperity sometimes necessitates moral compromise or deviation from traditional values. Individuals may feel pressured to migrate, engage in illegal activities, or make ethically questionable decisions to secure a better life. This economic dimension forces characters to navigate between survival and spiritual or moral obligations (Adewale 78).

Thus, Nigerian literature has become a powerful medium for exploring how individuals grapple with the complexities of balancing piety and personal desires. Writers depict characters whose lives are shaped and often tormented by the need to adhere to external expectations while nurturing their inner aspirations. This study will examine how these conflicts are portrayed in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, INC...*, by highlighting the struggles, consequences and resolutions presented in the text. The tension between these two forces creates an enduring conflict that has become a major theme in literature, philosophy, psychology, and religious studies. In African literature, particularly Nigerian literature, this tension is

especially profound due to the intersection of deeply rooted traditions with evolving modern values. As Nigeria continues to experience socio-political and cultural transformation, individuals are frequently placed in positions where they must choose between personal desires and collective expectations. This dynamic offers rich material for literary analysis and critical reflection, as it mirrors the realities faced by many in contemporary Nigerian society.

Conceptual Review

Conflict: This is a common theme in literature. It helps to show the struggles people go through in life, especially when they must choose between what they truly want (their desires) and what their society or religion expects from them.

Conflict is when two or more ideas, needs, or beliefs do not agree. In literature, it often shows the problems that characters face. It can be between people (external conflict), within a person (internal conflict), or between individuals and society. In this research, the interest is in the internal conflict that characters experience when they have to choose between piety (duty to religion or society) and personal desires (what they truly want).

Conflict is important in literature because it drives the plot and helps to develop characters. It also reflects real-life experiences where people are forced to make hard choices. In the Nigerian society, conflicts often arise from clashes between modern values and traditional beliefs, between individual rights and family expectations, or between survival and morality.

Piety: Piety means strong religious belief or commitment to cultural rules. It is about doing what is seen as morally right or expected by religion and tradition. In many Nigerian cultures, a pious person is someone who respects elders, follows religious teachings, and lives according to cultural norms. Piety can also include loyalty to one's family, honesty, humility, and discipline.

In *Foreign Gods, INC.*, it is seen in Ike's cultural and moral knowledge that stealing a god is wrong. Piety in the text is not just about religion, but about social responsibilities, spiritual beliefs, and cultural identity.

Personal Desires: These are the things that individuals want for themselves such as happiness, success, love, money, freedom, or fulfillment. Personal desires often come from emotions, experiences, or ambition. They

may go against what society wants, especially if following them means breaking cultural or religious rules.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this research is the psychoanalytic theory. This theory was developed by Sigmund Freud. It explains that human behavior is controlled by three parts of the mind:

Id (basic desires): This part of the mind controls our wants and needs—like wanting money, love, or success. It does not care about rules or consequences.

Superego (morals and rules): This part of the mind knows society's expectations and tells us what is right or wrong based on cultural and moral teachings.

Ego (the balance): This part tries to balance the id and superego. It helps people make decisions that satisfy both personal desires and society's rules.

Psychoanalytic theory helps us understand why characters act the way they do when they are torn between what they want and what society expects. It also helps in analyzing guilt, repression, trauma, and defense mechanisms such as denial, rationalization, or fantasy.

Empirical Review

Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describe African literature as filled with conflicts between tradition and change. These scholars agree that African writers use their stories to highlight the personal and social struggles caused by colonialism, modernity, and economic hardship (Achebe 22, Ngugi 48). More recent authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Helon Habila also explore family breakdown, religious clashes, and personal crises.

Piety and Cultural Expectations

Stratton and Nnaemeka explain that African women are often expected to be pious by obeying cultural and religious norms (Stratton 74, Nnaemeka 113). Yejide in *Stay With Me* fits this pattern, and her story reflects the emotional burden of such expectations. Scholars have shown that piety can be a source of strength but also of oppression, especially when tied to patriarchal systems and reproductive expectations.

Personal Desires and Individual Freedom

Ogunyemi writes that African women often want love and peace more than traditional roles (Ogunyemi 36). Jeyifo shows how urban life brings new desires that clash with

traditional beliefs (Jeyifo 54). Other scholars like Emenyonu note that young Africans increasingly value personal happiness over communal expectations (Emenyonu 28). In the diaspora, personal desires become even stronger due to exposure to global lifestyles.

Religion vs. Modern Life

Okpewho and Appiah explain how modern Africans struggle with loyalty to religion versus modern lifestyles (Okpewho 91, Appiah 142). Ike's actions clearly show this tension. The growth of Pentecostalism and religious capitalism in Nigeria has also prompted questions about the boundary between faith and self-interest.

Mental and Emotional Effects of Conflict

Afolabi found that cultural expectations often lead to emotional pain for women (Afolabi 61). Akande noted that postcolonial pressures lead many young Africans to make morally risky decisions (Akande 83). Studies in psychology and literature (Ogunyinka, 2021) also show that unresolved internal conflict can lead to anxiety, depression, or self-destruction in fictional and real-life cases.

Gendered Experience of Conflict

Some studies, such as those by Eze and Nwapa, emphasize that men and women experience internal conflict differently due to gender roles (Eze 104, Nwapa 65) While men may face pressure to succeed or provide, women are burdened with expectations of fertility, submission, and silence. This gendered experience of piety and desire is central to both novels.

Summary of Empirical Review

These studies show that:

- i. African/Nigerian literature often shows conflict between duty and desire.
- ii. Women especially face pressure to be pious.
- iii. Migration and Western culture create new desires and problems.
- iv. Emotional and mental struggles are common themes in modern African writing.
- v. Gender plays a key role in how characters experience and respond to conflict.

Conflict of Piety and Personal Desires in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods Inc...*

Overview of the Text

Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, INC.* (2014) is widely regarded as one of the most engaging works of contemporary Nigerian literature because it boldly examines the life of the African immigrant while also questioning the value that a society places on its heritage. The novel follows the story of Ikechukwu Uzundu popularly called Ike a Nigerian man who travels to the United States with high hopes, only to be confronted with the harsh reality of racial prejudice, cultural alienation, and economic frustration. Instead of finding the success he imagined, Ike becomes stuck in low paying taxi work despite having a university education. He soon develops a daring plan to return to his home village, Utonki, in Nigeria to steal a revered ancestral deity, Ngene, and sell it to an art gallery in New York. Through this unusual and morally complex plot, Ndibe sheds light on issues such as migration, the loss of identity, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the way African artifacts are treated in a globalized world.

At its core, the novel is both a personal and a social story. On the personal level, *Foreign Gods, INC.* follows the emotional struggles of Ike, a man torn between loyalty to his roots and his desperate need for financial survival in America. On the social level, the novel reflects on larger questions that affect many

African societies: What happens when traditional values collide with modern economic systems? How does a community preserve its culture when its most sacred symbols are reduced to marketable objects in Western galleries? These questions make the novel a fertile ground for literary analysis and cultural discussion.

Ndibe sets the story against two contrasting backdrops. First is New York, a city that represents opportunity and global modernity, but which also exposes Ike to discrimination, debt, and disappointment. In one striking moment, Ike reflects on his situation:

“He had crossed an ocean to chase the American dream, only to find himself broke, broken, and driving drunks around the city.” (42)

This sentence captures not just Ike’s personal despair but also the broken promise that migration often holds for many educated Africans.

The second setting is Utonki, Ike’s village in southeastern Nigeria, which is steeped in tradition, communal expectations, and ancestral pride. The village is a place where spiritual values are intertwined with everyday life, and where the deity Ngene is seen not only as a religious symbol but as a guardian of the people’s identity. Returning to Utonki

exposes Ike to pressures of another kind: elders who expect him to be generous with money, relatives who see him as a savior, and leaders like Chief Izuchukwu, who manipulate traditions for personal gain. By placing Ike between these two worlds, Ndibe skillfully portrays the emotional and cultural dislocation that many migrants experience.

Another key reason *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is important to Nigerian literature is that it adds to the growing body of diaspora writing stories that are set both in Nigeria and in foreign lands. Earlier Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa focused on traditional life and the impact of colonialism within Nigeria itself. Later writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in works like *Americanah*, turned their gaze to the experiences of Nigerians living abroad. Ndibe’s novel stands in this lineage but offers a darker, more ironic vision of the migrant journey. It explores not only love and longing for home but also the ethical compromises and cultural losses that sometimes accompany migration.

The novel also explores the theme of cultural commoditization in a very striking way. The statue of Ngene, which is sacred in Utonki, becomes in Ike’s eyes a financial opportunity. The art gallery in New York

views it not as a spiritual object but as a rare artifact that can fetch high profit. This transformation of a sacred symbol into a market commodity is central to the novel's critique of how African cultural heritage is often exploited in global markets. Ike's moral conflict whether to honor his heritage or betray it for survival becomes the central tension of the story.

Ndibe's style, which combines humor, irony, and sharp social observation, allows him to handle these heavy issues in a way that remains readable and engaging. The novel is full of satirical moments that highlight the absurdities of both Nigerian and American societies. For example, Ndibe humorously describes the art dealers' excitement over African artifacts while completely ignoring the people who created them. This irony helps the reader see how culture can be misinterpreted and misused in a global context.

In addition, *Foreign Gods, INC.* is deeply relevant because it speaks to the current realities faced by many Nigerians and other Africans in the diaspora. The pressure to succeed abroad, the demands from family members at home, and the constant feeling of being "in between" cultures are issues that many readers can relate to. Ike's decision to

steal a deity is extreme, but it is a powerful metaphor for the desperate measures people sometimes take when caught between cultural loyalty and economic survival.

Through Ike's journey, *Foreign Gods, INC.* portrays how material ambition collides with piety, how cultural devotion is commodified under global capitalism, and how religious institutions both resist and exploit this tension. The chapter therefore provides a detailed textual analysis that incorporates characters, themes, and symbolic elements to reveal Ndibe's critique of contemporary Nigerian and diasporic existence.

At the heart of *Foreign Gods, INC.* is Ike's internal battle between his respect for the sacred deity Ngene and his desperate longing for wealth. Despite being a graduate in economics, Ike struggles to find work in the United States due to systemic racism and his foreign accent: "Employers heard me speak and their eyes glazed over" (39). His economic frustrations fuel his desire to sell the idol of Ngene to a Western gallery, even though he knows the deity represents centuries of cultural piety.

He tells himself: "Ngene was nothing more than a piece of wood to them. But for me, it could be a life-changer" (104). Here, the

sacred is stripped of spiritual reverence and converted into economic opportunity. This act encapsulates the novel's central conflict: the collision of cultural devotion with personal desire for survival and success.

Similarly, Reverend Walter, the local pastor in Ike's village, preaches vehemently against the worship of traditional deities. Yet his rejection of Ngene is not grounded in pure spirituality but in his ambition to consolidate his influence and curry favor with foreign missionaries. Thus, even piety itself becomes entangled with personal desire, exposing the hypocrisy within religious institutions.

Ndibe situates Ike's conflict in broader socio-cultural and economic realities. In New York, Ike embodies the struggles of many African immigrants trapped in low-wage jobs despite their education: "My degree was useless here, a paper that bought me nothing but disappointment" (41). His inability to achieve the "American Dream" makes him turn toward a morally questionable solution.

Back in Nigeria, poverty and corruption fuel similar compromises. The villagers' readiness to let go of Ngene for the promise of wealth reflects the erosion of traditional values under economic hardship. As Ike observes: "Hunger had taught my people to place a price on even the gods" (163).

Ndibe thus critiques both Nigerian and Western societies. In Nigeria, poverty cheapens spirituality, while in the West, cultural artifacts are desecrated and commodified for profit. The novel exposes how global capitalism intensifies the conflict between piety and desire, reducing sacred symbols to marketable commodities.

Ike's conflict is not merely external but deeply psychological. Each time he contemplates stealing Ngene, guilt gnaws at him: "Each time I thought of touching it, I felt an invisible hand restraining me" (152). The clash between his conscience and his ambition produces emotional turmoil that isolates him further from both his American environment and his Nigerian roots.

His family also intensifies this burden. They expect financial support from him, and their demands push him deeper into desperation. Ike reflects bitterly: "In their eyes, I was a fountain that had run dry" (78). This psychological pressure demonstrates how personal desires are complicated by cultural expectations, turning survival into a moral battlefield.

Reverend Walter also suffers psychological contradictions. Outwardly, he denounces Ngene as a demonic idol, but inwardly, he covets the power and influence that come

with aligning himself with wealthy foreign patrons. His hidden desires undermine his outward piety, showing how the conflict corrodes not only individuals but entire institutions.

Ndibe uses *Foreign Gods, INC.* as a lens to critique how globalization, poverty, and corruption reshape cultural and religious values. The novel reflects the struggles of Nigerian immigrants in Western societies, where structural inequality frustrates ambition. At the same time, it critiques how traditional spirituality is commodified, reduced to exotic art for Western consumption.

Through Ike's downfall, Ndibe warns against sacrificing cultural integrity for material gain. Through Reverend Walter's hypocrisy, he critiques religious leaders who exploit faith for personal advancement. Through the villagers' complicity, he shows how poverty destabilizes morality and erodes sacred traditions.

Thus, the novel goes beyond individual characters to present a broader commentary: the conflict between piety and desire is not a private battle alone but a societal crisis that mirrors Nigeria's encounter with modernity and the diaspora's encounter with global capitalism.

Nigerian Authors and the Tension between Religious or Cultural Devotion and Individual Aspirations. Ndibe portrays the central conflict through Ike's ambition to succeed in America and his cultural devotion to the ancestral god, Ngene. On one hand, Ike is desperate for economic breakthrough; on the other, he is haunted by his mother's warning about Ngene's wrath. This tension is dramatized when Ike contemplates stealing the statue: "Ngene was nothing but a rock sitting in the shrine while his life wasted away in America" (85). Here, Ndibe shows how desire for success pushes Ike to reduce a sacred symbol of communal piety into a mere object of trade.

The novel also contrasts Christianity with indigenous faith. Pastor Uka embodies a new form of piety that clashes with tradition. He declares: "The gods of our ancestors are powerless before the name of Jesus" (102). Such statements expose the cultural shift in Nigerian society, where devotion to tradition is increasingly undermined by modern religious ideology. Ike becomes a battleground for these competing claims to devotion, as his aspirations clash with obligations to both family and faith.

Through these tensions, Ndibe captures a reality in Nigerian literature where personal

ambition is often tested against inherited loyalties to faith, culture, and tradition. Ike's dilemma is therefore not simply personal but symbolic of a larger struggle faced by many Nigerians in a globalized world.

Socio-Cultural and Economic Factors Contributing to the Conflict

Ike's crisis is deeply tied to his social and economic condition as an immigrant. In America, his Cambridge degree is devalued because of his accent and race. Ndibe writes: "His musical Nigerian accent was a shackle, dragging him down, disqualifying him for jobs" (12). Here, racism and cultural prejudice hinder his ability to rise professionally. This economic frustration intensifies his longing for a quick solution, leading him to consider betraying his cultural piety.

Back in Nigeria, the influence of Pentecostalism adds another layer of tension. Pastor Uka preaches prosperity and openly denounces traditional religion, persuading Ike's community that only Christianity brings success. This reflects the reality of many African societies where Pentecostal churches often redefine success in material terms, thereby feeding Ike's belief that sacrificing Ngene might bring financial freedom.

Economic inequality also plays a role. Ike is portrayed as trapped in low-paying jobs, humiliated by white clients who cannot see beyond his skin color. His desperate longing for social mobility leads him to rationalize the desecration of a god revered by his people. Thus, Ndibe shows how economic hardship, cultural displacement, and religious transformation create fertile ground for the conflict between piety and desire.

Psychological and Emotional Implications of the Conflict

The psychological cost of Ike's decisions is perhaps the most tragic dimension of the novel. Throughout the narrative, he is haunted by fear, guilt, and spiritual anxiety. His mother's voice echoes in his conscience: "Ngene does not forgive betrayal; he punishes unto the fourth generation" (76). This curse-like reminder burdens Ike emotionally, revealing the depth of his internal conflict.

Ndibe portrays Ike's mind as a battlefield where ambition collides with dread. He suffers nightmares and paranoia, symptoms of the guilt that consumes him. When he tries to convince himself that Ngene is "only a statue," his heart betrays him with fear. This tension underscores how deeply ingrained

cultural piety is, even in those who outwardly reject it.

Furthermore, his alienation in America intensifies his emotional struggle. Far from home, without supportive family ties, Ike becomes more vulnerable to despair. His failed relationships, poverty, and humiliation combine with guilt over betraying tradition, leading to his mental breakdown. This suggests that the conflict between piety and desire is not just external but profoundly psychological, destabilizing the very identity of the character.

Conclusion

Literature as Reflection and Critique of Societal Norms and Individual Struggles

Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, INC...* functions as both a reflection of society and a critique of its contradictions. Ndibe critiques Western commoditization of African spirituality by depicting how sacred gods are sold as mere "exotic" artifacts in American galleries. The dealer tells Ike: "The older the god, the higher the price. What matters is not the god's power, but the market's appetite" (143). This exposes the irony of cultural objects losing their sacred meaning once uprooted from their community.

Ndibe also critiques Nigerian society, particularly the commercialization of Christianity. Pastor Uka, with his prosperity gospel, mirrors a society where religion is entangled with materialism. This critique highlights how both Western and African systems exploit faith for profit, leaving individuals like Ike trapped between piety and survival. By weaving Ike's story, Ndibe reveals how literature reflects the pressures and contradictions of Nigerian life. His novel critiques not only personal weakness but also systemic structures colonial legacies, racism, globalization, and religious commoditization that deepen the conflict between devotion and ambition.

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