

**Negotiating Patriarchy and Contemporary Female Identity: A Postmodernist Interrogation of
Paulina Chiziane's *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy***

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Abstract

This paper examines Paulina Chiziane's *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy* as a profound assertion of postmodern womanhood or female identity within the literary traditions of African feminism. Chiziane's works have been read mostly in the light of sociological and realist frameworks. Using the postmodern feminist framework, this paper interrogates and deconstructs grand narratives that define femininity in patriarchal African societies by emphasizing the multiplicity of womanhood, and the contradictions and fluidity that characterize women's identities in contemporary times. The paper draws from the works of postmodern theorists such as Jean-Francois, Judith Butler and Zygmunt Bauman, alongside African Feminist thinkers like Molara Ogundipe and Obioma Nnaemeka. It argues that Chiziane's novel portrays a uniquely African form of postmodern feminism as she rejects both the universal labels of western feminist thoughts and the idealization of the African woman with the culture specific traits with which she has been defined over the years. The study concludes that the postmodern reading of the novel enacts the possibility of new womanhood, a hybridized identity, a postmodern identity.

Keywords: Paulina Chiziane, Postmodernism, African feminism, Patriarchy, Polygamy, Solidarity, Nego-feminism

Introduction

In most traditional African societies, women's identities were defined by cultural roles, ceremonial functions and communal expectations rather than individual subjectivity. These realities also spilled into literature as evident in the portrayal of women in male authored narratives. African literature which has its root in communal norms and oral tradition portrayed women in the light of traditional gender categories such as wives, mothers, nurturers or as symbols of fertility and continuity of lineage. This could be attributed to the patriarchal nature of African society.

Patriarchy can be described as a systemic structure where men hold primary power, dictating social norms, economic access, and political authority. Over the years, scholars of African literature have reviewed how patriarchy shapes and constrains female identity, often resulting in

their subordination and limitation to subservient roles. This has given rise to narratives that depict how women, in response, continually negotiate, subvert or resist these structural constraints to construct their distinct identity and reclaim agency. Nayab Qasim avows that patriarchy as a social system accords men the primary in roles of "political leadership, moral authority, and control over property and family structures." (9) He states that patriarchal operation is not limited to the social background "but also as a narrative and symbolic system that shapes character roles, plot structures, and thematic concerns." (9) He affirms that in literary texts, women usually at the receiving end of this narrative dominance as they are portrayed as "passive, dependent or morally constrained figures" which reflect the expectations of patriarchal society for them. (9)

Deborah Ndidiamaka Umeh's confirms this view in her comparative reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* which opens with a definition of patriarchy as "a form of mental, social, spiritual, economic, and political organisation of societal structuring" that institutionalizes the "lesser value of women" across interlocking social institutions (1). She argues that Achebe's Okonkwo embodies a masculinity built on strength and dominance that the novel ultimately critiques through its tragic arc, while Emecheta's protagonist Adah experiences patriarchy compounded by colonialism and racism, since her husband Francis views her as, in Umeh's paraphrase of the novel's language, existing to serve him regardless of her own education or income (5).

Sripriyatharshini S. and Amutha Dhanaraj examine patriarchy in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, a

Zimbabwean novel set under colonial rule, arguing that the protagonist Tambu's hunger for education becomes the central site where patriarchal suppression and resistance play out simultaneously, with the authors noting that "suppression and resistance started in her family" before extending into colonial schooling structures (Sripriyatharshini and Dhanaraj). Their analysis treats patriarchy and colonialism as entangled rather than separate systems, consistent with how Dangarembga's novel is often read as showing women's identity being shaped by a double bind of gender and colonial subjugation.

The female image has been subject to various feminist debates for decades. Gboyega Kolawole describes the role of women in a traditional African setting when he avers that "a woman's primary duty as from puberty was to wait for a suitor in marriage and produce a male heir for her husband" (13). The place of women in

traditional setting no doubts rested in marriage, however, even in this all-important feat, the woman was merely a property to be owned by the man and her value was determined by her ability to bear sons. Gboyega further opines that one of the reasons why the anomaly of gender discrimination was not for a long time attended to was because the multiplicity of obstacles against women had come to be believed as her destiny and had become part of most cultures. (13)

This has given rise to counter studies that expose the negative and limiting roles and identity of African women. They decry the image of women and modes of representing them in African literature. Their writings are geared towards exposing the negative and stereotypical representations of women in life and literature and righting the wrongs. In spite of the growing scholarly attention that African women's fiction has attracted, there remains insufficient

theoretical interrogation of how postmodern aesthetics reshape female subjectivity. The available criticism tends to focus on resistance frameworks in the representation of their female characters and interpret female agency only as a liberating force without paying heed to its contradictions, irony and ambiguity. Monique O. Ekpong joins the conversation on African womanhood when she avers that modern African female writers do not only embark on the idealization of female characters in their narratives but to “validate woman's personality, authenticate her experience, reveal her psyche and provide a more realistic and complete image of woman as a separate human entity from man.” (166) This paper examines Paulina Chiziane's *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy* as a profound assertion of postmodern womanhood or female identity within the literary traditions of African feminism.

Paulina Chiziane is acclaimed as Mozambique's first female novelist and one of the most compelling feminist voices in Lusophone Africa. This novel, *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy* was first published as *Niketché: Uma História de Poligamia* in 2000, and later translated into English in 2016. The novel criticizes patriarchal polygamy and provides a sensitive exploration on questions of identity, tradition, power and women's resilience in ways that resonate beyond its immediate cultural context. Chiziane's position is significant because it does not merely narrate women's oppression as seen in many African feminist writings; it profoundly redefines the understanding of womanhood itself within a patriarchal and postmodern framework.

Even though most of Chiziane's works are situated within the frameworks of African feminism or postcolonial literature, this study argues that there are postmodern dimensions to her work which elaborate on

alternative female imaging in African fiction. While these initial frameworks are indispensable, the postmodern perspective clarifies her interrogation of "truths", as it has to do with the practice and acceptance of polygamy in patriarchal Africa, and her insistence on the fluidity of womanhood. By adopting a combined lens of postmodernism and African feminism to examine *The First Wife*, this study asserts that Chiziane articulates profound and unconventional views of African postmodern womanhood.

Postmodern womanhood, in this study, suggests a redefinition of female identity as one which does not conform to universal or essentialist ideals or standard but rather an identity that is fragmented and relational. It resonates with Jean-Francois Lyotard famous definition of the postmodern condition as an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv) This skepticism towards grand, universal narratives have been adopted by feminist theorists over the

years to challenge and resist essentialist definitions of womanhood. Their examination of womanhood through a postmodern lens, defies any singular “truth” or narrative, be it from a patriarchal standpoint characterized by the obedient wife, the submissive mother (the ‘ideal African woman’), or the Western feminist view (the liberated individual divorced from community and tradition). This aptitude of postmodern feminism for questioning and opposing grand narratives makes it suitable for reading Chiziane’s *The First Wife*. This is because, womanhood is not presented in the light of the many ideals that characterize traditional and modern African literary texts, views propagated and upheld by society as the norm, rather, it is presented as a contradictory and fluctuating phenomenon, negotiating diverse identities. Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is also useful in the reading of this text as it challenges the idea of fixed identities. It suggests that

gender is not based on biological principles but on repeated actions. The study also shows the multiplicity and instability are exemplified in *The First Wife* by the author’s presentation of her protagonist, Rami, as a fluid character, who navigates several contradictory demands. She negotiates between her Christian beliefs and African traditional practices, monogamy and polygamy, rivalry and solidarity, individual identity and collective belonging. Her eventual decision is not in conformity to traditional status quo but based on her judgment of what is perceived right per time. These postmodern perceptions challenge any stable or universal category of womanhood as discussed in this study.

Deconstruction of Marriage and Patriarchal Truths

One of the core tenets of postmodernism as introduced above is Skepticism toward “grand narratives”. This is exemplified in the study through Chiziane’s

representation of marriage. Marriage has been depicted in the African context and as represented in African fiction over the years as a woman's utmost achievement. Traditional African narratives tied women's social, cultural and religious significance to motherhood and matrimony. Thus, a woman is said to have "settled down" (a term which signifies rest, peace of mind, respect and a general feeling of accomplishment) when she gets married. Marriage, in *The First Wife*, is not represented as a stable institution that brings the much-anticipated fulfilment propagated by patriarchal societies but as postmodern site of contestation, disintegration, and contradiction, where patriarchal power is simultaneously asserted and undermined. Rami and her co-wives experience marriage differently. For one, to gain the society approved identity, and for others, emotional stability, survival, financial liberation, and others consider it as betrayal and anguish. Thus, we see the constant

negotiation, betrayal, and reinvention in the bid for everyone including the polygamous husband, to achieve their aim.

In the case of the protagonist, Rami, marriage is initially seen as a realization of catholic principles (characterized by exclusivity, long lasting, almost permanent relationship, and loyalty) and cultural pride. She states that "A husband at home means security, protection." (Chiziane, 12). Yet, 20 years into their marriage, she has almost all the 'privileges' of marriage ripped off her hands by betrayals. Her husband, Tony's polygamous practices expose marriage as an institution riddled with inconsistencies, hypocrisy, and exploitation. The belief of male presence as a determiner for a strong family relationship is debunked as Rami seeks her husband who has become absent, to solve the many problems that riddle the family. "My Tony, where are you? Why do you leave me all by myself to fill the role of both woman and man in solving everyday

problems.... If Tony were here...” (Chiziane, 11). In spite of this lamentation, Tony is nowhere to be found leaving his wife to tackle his responsibilities. This is not merely a reversal of roles but a representation of women’s role in postmodern era. It is believed that men are the problem solvers in the family and women usually look up to men in that regard. But a typical contemporary family is presented where the father is absent, yet the family does not fall apart because the woman rises to the task of building a formidable family structure in the light of shifting roles. Rami notes that she is not alone in the predicament as nearly all the women around her run their homes on their own terms, with absent husbands. Thus, she states, “I see them all. Tired, used women...defeated in the battle of love” (Chiziane, 14) This strikes out the myth of fulfilment by virtue of matrimony. Chiziane depicts the irony of marriage as she deconstructs the patriarchal “truths” of male

presence as determiner for successful familyhood and marriage as utmost fulfilment for women. Rami’s role as “the first wife” initially implies superiority and respect, yet it becomes clear that this position guarantees neither fidelity, security nor dignity for her. The exalted position she occupies as the “first wife” is bereft of any privileges above the other wives. The patriarchal assumption that hierarchy within polygamy ensures order and legitimacy is debunked. The eventual order and peace witnessed by Rami and other women in the novel result from unity of purpose.

This unity is an ironic deconstruction, as the very system devised to dominate and manage women (patriarchy) becomes the springboard for their empowerment. Rather than being divided as seen in most polygamous homes where the women fight and compete for the man’s attention much to his delight, women in *The First wife* see each other as victims and unite in other that their

scarce resource (Tony) be made available and used judiciously by all of them. Thus, Chiziane's portrayal of marriage as unstable in *The First Wife* can be read as a postmodern strategy to deconstruct the idealization of socially instituted marital identity as essential and ideal. Chiziane presents marriage as a subject with multiple interpretations and endless contradiction and rewriting and not as an institution with fixed meaning. She implies that marriage is comprised of competing discourses which necessitates the endless deconstruction and reinterpretation of the institution. Thus, marriage in this novel is interpreted from various perspectives (Catholic, traditional, patriarchal, feminist), with none being held as the ultimate standard for being. As a Catholic, the ideal marital institution prescribes a one-man, one-woman, relationship, driven by fidelity and 'a seal of permanence' until death. Rami and Tony's marriage start off in this light but drifts into another phase eventually. Even his

(Tony's) involvement with other women is seen as his birthright. It is therefore not surprising that Rami switches from her Catholic perspectives to a traditional/patriarchal standpoint and acts accordingly. This 'switch' is in itself a postmodern strategy that rejects the fixed identity of women in society.

Negotiating Polygamy and Patriarchal Myths/Traditions

Chiziane does not only shed light on the uncertainties of marriage, but also on the myths that maintain and uphold patriarchal control. The myth of women's fated dependence on men, of male authority, and the myth that certain cultural practices cannot be avoided or escaped from are all exposed as conditional and unstable 'truths'. This stance is exemplified in Tony's inability to manage his wives. The feat which should have projected him as the ideal patriarch reveals patriarchal power as unstable and more of a performance than natural. On the other hand,

the roles feared to be unattainable by women by virtue of their gender is achieved by the female characters while society's expectations of women in a polygamous home are undermined. This goes to show that gender roles carried out by both Tony and his wives are determined by their patriarchal society and not necessarily inborn, a confirmation of Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. The role of Rami not only demonstrates womanhood as a socially determined performance, but also postmodern womanhood. It rejects the essentialism associated with female response and acceptability of polygamy, thus, Rami is plunged into polygamy not because it is her fate to share her husband with other women but as a result of a patriarchal structure that presumes that men are at liberty to grow a harem. Her response and reactions further buttress the performative role of gender in that, she and her cowives adapt into different

personalities instigated by their experiences and they carve a new image for themselves.

Polygamy has been an age-long practice which has contributed to the oppression of women over the years and resulted in the loss of their identity. Endorsed by African tradition and some religions, this practice often leaves women physically and psychologically distressed as they battle depression, abuse, low self-esteem and loneliness. Many studies insinuate that polygamy results from a woman's shortcomings in marriage, and that men tend to seek in other women what is lacking in their wives. Chiziane debunks this idea in the portrayal of her major character, Rami, thus,

No one can understand men.

How can Tony despise me like this.... When it came to obeying, I always obeyed him. I always did what he wanted. I always looked after him. I even put up with his

craziness. Twenty years is a record in modern-day-marriages. Modesty apart, I am the most perfect woman in the world. I made him into the man he is now. I gave him love...children....sacrificed my dreams for his.... In spite of this, I'm the unhappiest woman in the world. (Chiziane, 16)

The author reveals the emotional distress that bedevils her female characters as a result of polygamy. Rami losses herself all because of marriage but she is never enough. She settles for less by marrying Tony, gives her best to the marriage and in the end, she still “dance[s] upon sadness and loneliness” (Chiziane, 19) This completely debunks the notion of women’s fulfilment which is tied to marriage in patriarchal society.

Tony and other male figures in the novel perceive polygamy as an affirmation of

their masculinity. They insists that polygamy is sanctioned by African culture/tradition and is beneficial for the female folk as it provides security for them. This claim however is questionable as Tony’s practice of culture is self-serving, selective and inconsistent. He identifies with Christianity and enjoys the honor and respect that comes with being catholic but selects which of the practices to imbibe or neglect, thus, neglecting biblical injunction to flee adultery and polygamy. He goes ahead to marry multiple wives. This contradiction exposes the lapses of patriarchal ideals where a huge gap persists between what is preached and what is practiced. This narrative does not only expose the hypocrisy of the male character, Tony, but also brings to limelight the reliance of patriarchal authority on unstable truths. “Truths” that present patriarchal culture/tradition as fixed, timeless and beneficial to all are debunked and exposed as tools upheld only to preserve and perpetuate

male dominance. Chiziane challenges patriarchal structures not only thematically but also formally, by dismantling narrative authority and allowing for the text to be read in more than one way.

Postmodern Womanhood: Multiplicity of Identities

Chiziane's *The First Wife* not only interrogates and unnerves patriarchal authority but also interrogates womanhood as a category that defies any singular meaning and identity. This is exemplified in her major character, Rami. The author presents multiple and contradictory identities of this one character. She does not start as the first wife, a term that signifies there are other wives; the narrative introduces a woman who believes in and upholds her Christian beliefs in purity, piety, and morality, and in a marriage where one man and one woman are faithful and committed to each other. Her belief in the stability and permanence of Christian marriage falls apart when she discovers her

husband's infidelities. In an attempt to win her husband back and confront her rivals, she glides into indigenous traditions and cultural norms, which lead her to both contest and tolerate polygamy. These fluctuations in Rami's identity demonstrate her as a site of cultural and religious contradictions. She neither stops being catholic nor fully embraces traditional practice but navigates both, further complicating her identity. This complexity echoes Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, in which foreign and indigenous knowledge and ideals are blended to form identities that are neither one nor the other, but something in between. In the case of Rami, her identity as an African woman is constantly renegotiated, proving her to be a postmodern subject whose identity defies any fixed category but changes in response to her experience in society. Hence, she navigates the identities of the Christian wife, betrayed wife, and upholder of polygamy (indigenous tradition), which earns her the title and

position of the first wife, further leading her to become a sexual rival, and eventually, a leader and negotiator among her co-wives. Each of these roles reveals womanhood as unstable and multifaceted.

Chiziane further reveals the multiplicity of the female identity through her depiction of Rami's cowives. Each wife symbolizes a distinct approach to dealing with patriarchy: one adheres to traditional values, another utilizes polygamy for financial stability, and others fight against its unfairness. In this way, the author gives each of the wives a unique voice and perspective thereby leading to the rejection of essentialism and the narrative of docility and victimhood that characterize the representation of the African women in life and literature. Molaria Ogundipe avers that African women go through various dimensions of societal pressure and oppression. These come from tradition and culture, (where barbaric practices still hold

sway), patriarchy, self-doubt (the internalized limitations of the African woman herself) caused by a lack of education, which has left her in perpetual backwardness and darkness, to her relationship with the men in her immediate environment (husbands and fathers), colonial and postcolonial imbalances, and race. All these she refers to as "the mountain on a woman's back". These various impediments necessitate the multidimensional nature of African women's identities. Thus, in *The First Wife*, every one of Tony's wives bears these 'mountains' in a different way, bringing to light the complexity of womanhood in Mozambican society.

Postmodern Womanhood: Resisting Essentialism

Beyond representing the plurality and different identities of women, postmodern womanhood in *The First Wife* also resist essentialism. Chiziane foregrounds the notion that women can never be captured in a

final definition by presenting Rami and her co-wives as unstable models of womanhood. Their identity constantly changes in the narrative and their very essence is dependent on context and negotiation, and are often contradictory. Derrida's concept on *différance* sheds light on this as he insists that meaning is always deferred and never fully present, thus, the female characters defy any single category, their personalities never fully understood as they shift constantly to suit their different circumstances. This shows the multifaceted and fluid nature of womanhood and the defiance to being abridged by biological or social labels.

The rejection of essentialism is crucial in postmodern feminist thought, particularly in relation to Chiziane's *The First Wife*. The narrative critiques the definitions of womanhood imposed by religious, cultural, and traditional standards. Despite conforming to these expectations, Rami experiences betrayal, illustrating that purity

and fidelity are inadequate measures of womanhood. This makes the protagonist to lament, thus, "life is an endless metamorphosis.... My Christian home became polygamous. I was a faithful spouse who became an adulteress." (Chiziane, 136) The study posits that African womanhood transcends colonial, religious, and traditional frameworks, embracing a hybrid identity shaped by various discourses. Chiziane's insights highlight the multidimensional nature of women's identities, which are influenced by their experiences rather than limited to any essentialist notion. Rami confirms this new identity by stating that her eventual adultery is merely resorting to "an informal brand of conjugal assistance just as this household's polygamy is informal". (136)

Subverting Patriarchy Through Female Solidarity and Negotiation

At the beginning of the novel, Rami enacts the patriarchal script of rivalry when

she physically fights her husband's mistresses believing that in a bid to reclaim her position as the only woman in Tony's life. She makes several attempts at reclaiming her home. First of all, she fights with nearly all the women having affairs with her husband. This is because of the agelong belief that a co-wife is a rival. She doesn't confront the man who goes after these women; rather, she sees them as her arch enemies. Secondly, she begins to attend love classes. This also stems from the patriarchal belief that women are responsible for the collapse of their marriages. This leads her to question her identity and effectiveness as a wife. She asks her mirror if she has become ugly or failed in her responsibilities. Furthermore, she alone attempts to solve her marital problems. This is still part of the patriarchal script that endorses the misbehavior of the male folk and push women towards making endless efforts to keep a home. When confronted about his betrayal, Tony responds thus,

"Betrayal!? Don't make me laugh! Purity is masculine, sin is female. Only women betray; men are free, Rami." (Chiziane, 38). In further attempts at reclaiming her husband, Rami seeks the services of a magician, a seer, and miracle workers. All these attempts fail. Only then does she realize that her attempts are agelong practices propounded by patriarchy and enacted by African women; thus, she laments, "I have learned life's lesson.... Only women, forever stupid." (Chiziane, 99).

This leads her to take a stance. This study believes that her new stance is a postmodern attempt at reclaiming her dignity. She doesn't contend further with accepting polygamy; she agrees that "all men are polygamous" (Chiziane, 99), thus, she embarks on new ways to deal with her situation. Her strategies are solidarity and negotiation. Chiziane's female characters recognize their collective victimhood as she states that her rival "is more of a victim than

a rival” (Chiziane, 30) and that all women are “together in this tragedy.” (Chiziane, 30) and the fact that patriarchy strives on rivalry as “...a polygamist [is] happy when his women are at war with each other and unhappy when they get along together...” (Chiziane, 168). She decides to unite with her husband’s mistresses. This shift from rivalry to unity and cooperation echo’s Obioma Nnaemeka’s Nego-feminism, a strand of feminism that preaches negotiation and compromise as well as collective survival over individual assertion and confrontation. The reading of the text from a postmodern lens demonstrates that the harmony of African women can be best understood and achieved from the point of negotiation and collective practice. As Rami investigates the lives of her rivals, it becomes clear that they share the same experiences of deception, betrayal and resistance. In the place of jealousy and fights, they recognize the power of their mutual dependence and build solidarity. Rami stops

the confrontations with all the rivals whom she now calls “sisters” and they negotiate their relationship with one another. They avoid a direct confrontation of Tony yet subvert his authority bit by bit through their collective effort. Rami discovers her strength when she accepts her betrayal as a shared ordeal and is able to resist patriarchal control through collective womanhood. The unity of the women redefines womanhood as both collective and contradictory identity. Their solidarity does not expunge their individuality neither does it portray a conflict-free and seamless sisterhood. On the contrary, while they work together to transform their lives, they each retain their individual personalities and temperaments and constantly negotiate their alliance. Their solidarity is considered postmodern in that, rather than deny their individual differences, they acknowledge them but refuse to be divided by these differences. Thus, womanhood in *The First Wife* is defined as

fluid, constantly shifting and adapting to new contexts. The wives' solidarity is constantly renegotiated through dialogue, compromise and mutual recognition of their collective ordeal.

Eventually, their unity results in a form of resistance to patriarchal control. Tony's role as patriarch is decentered as he becomes gradually irrelevant to his wives who collectively empower themselves emotionally and economically. This exemplifies postmodern womanhood as Chiziane does not present the emancipation of a single heroine but a plural subject breaking free through solidarity. She displays a postmodern skepticism towards singular narratives of liberation.

Conclusion

This study argues that Paulina Chiziane's *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy* is not merely a fictional or sociological exposition

of marriage and polygamy in Africa, but a profound expression of postmodern womanhood. The study reveals that Chiziane's narrative vividly displays the reimagining of culture/tradition, identity as well as female solidarity. Womanhood in the postmodern light is identified by women's multiple identities, the fluidity or changeability of women, their ability to negotiate their relationships to their advantage and build solidarity. By creating female characters who transcend the image of the 'ideal African woman', women who navigate betrayal and victimhood and emerge as leaders and a community of empowered individuals, a distinctly African form of postmodernism is upheld. Their rejection of essentialist definitions of what it means to be a woman, and the questioning of grand truths and narratives weakens and subverts patriarchal control.

The study shows that the identity of Chiziane's female characters is multifaceted;

depicting Christian principles, indigenous traditions, betrayed wifehood, female solidarity, and self-reinvention. These fractures do not indicate weakness but show the possibility of a new womanhood that is defined by negotiation, fluidity, and relationality. The study affirms that the postmodernist interrogation of *The First Wife* emphasizes subversion and negotiation of polygamy and patriarchy and the birth of a new female identity.

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