



REVIEW ESSAY

# The Autobiographical and Feminist Background of Ukamaka Olisakwe's *Ogadinma*

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Literature produces ideas that entrench or challenge existing ones. It performs this ideological function through the writer's choice of narrative, linguistic, stylistic and thematic elements, all of which merge into a rhetorical force that works on our feelings and thoughts towards certain cultural and social phenomena. Accordingly, feminist ideas are thematized in literary works that account for the experiences of women and girls from a dignified perspective. This is a deviation from the patriarchal tradition that enabled the stereotypical representation of women as the human "other" in the writings of both male and female authors across cultures and continents. The feminist background of modern African literature was inaugurated by the writings of Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland, Mariama Bâ, Nawal El Sadaawi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emechata and other women authors, whose writings involve "the creation of female characters who are fascinating in their variety, contrariness and complexity" and who extend "beyond the confines of traditional realities, in order to probe, discover and document extraordinary female experiences" (Acholonu 1990, p.54). The works of these pioneers are consolidated by those of contemporary women authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe and Yewande Omotoso. These women "are unabashedly feminist" and their works "tell of bodies in pain and [ask] pertinent ethical question in that regard" (Eze 2014, p.89). The commitment of generations of African women writers to gender equality and social justice gives their writing the deep moral courage it needs to demand these rights in a vastly patriarchal environment like ours.

From her reading of Bessie Head's fiction, Françoise Lionnet discovers that African "women writers are often especially aware of their task as producers of images that both participate in the dominant representations of their culture and simultaneously undermine and subvert those images by offering a revision of familiar scripts" (1993, p.132). Although the critic Oladele Taiwo (1985) suggests that the unequivocal depiction of women in the works of male African writers is not an act of malignity, but a faithful portrayal of the traditional roles women play in society, another Nigerian critic Chinyere Nwahunanya contends that "the reoccurrence of the stereotypical categories may suggest a deliberate masculine attempt to subjugate women, and therefore makes the protest of women against those images understandable" (2003, p.11). African women writers and critics power the struggle for gender equality by demarginalizing women's "spiritual, maternal, domestic and productive locations in an otherwise patriarchal society" (Bestman 2012, p.155).

In their preoccupation with the past, pioneer African feminist writers and critics tend to align with Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's Womanism, an Africanist variation of global feminism concerned about the experiences of Black African women. Their works also deferred to the ideology of cultural feminism, which relies on the biological components of the male and female bodies to highlight the considerable differences between men and women. Privileging the reproductive ability of women as an indication of their proximity

to nature and their significance in society, cultural feminism provides an enabling ground for the sisterhood of women based on their similar biological identity and their peculiar experience of marriage and motherhood. However, contemporary African feminist writers and critics tilt more towards socialist feminism, by identifying the root of women's oppression in the economic inequality that exists between men and women in patriarchal societies.

The feminist literary protest against the dehumanization, domestication and sexualization of women and girls continues even today with the emergence of Ukamaka Olisakwe in the African literary scene. Olisakwe, founding editor of *Isele Magazine*, grew up in Kano, Nigeria, and now lives in Vermilion, South Dakota. She was named one of the continent's most promising writers under the age of 40 by the UNESCO World Book Capital for the Africa39 project in 2014, awarded an honorary fellowship in Writing from the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 2016 and won the Vermont College of Fine Arts' Emerging Writer Scholarship for the MFA in Writing and Publishing programme in 2018. In *Ogadinma*, published in 2020 by The Indigo Press, London, Olisakwe writes about the experiences of "navigating the burdens of expectation as a married woman in Nigeria" (Finding My Freedom 2019, p.1). The feminist trope in the novel is a continuity of Olisakwe's ongoing research project on the impact of marriage and motherhood on women's mental health, what she calls "postpartum interiorities." With postpartum interiorities, she intends to reclaim the motherhood experiences of women from the "fringes" of "domestic narratives" where "they are often banished" (Everything is Storytelling 2022, p.35).

*Ogadinma* is the story of the eponymous character Ogadinma, whose journey through childhood, adolescence and adulthood reflects the tensions of growing up in a suffocating patriarchal society that plunders the bodies and wrecks the minds of women and girls. The novel transcends the particularity of its spatial and temporal settings of 1980s Nigeria to become the story of our time. *Ogadinma* herself can easily be read as an archetypal character embodying the familiar wounds of several African women and girls who wrestle under the weight of a misogynistic society that insists they matter only to the degree of "their relation to men—as daughters, wives and mothers" (Önal 2011, p.88).

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how *Ogadinma* overcomes her experience of patriarchal oppression through the feminist agency Olisakwe bequeaths to her and to highlight how Olisakwe's and *Ogadinma*'s narratives as liberated women subvert the patriarchal manifesto for marriage and motherhood. I proceed with the understanding that Olisakwe combines the elements of both socialist and cultural feminisms in her analysis of the female predicament in *Ogadinma*, for although the narrative identifies the economic disempowerment of women and girls as a tool of patriarchal oppression, Olisakwe relies considerably on the sisterhood ideology to create for *Ogadinma* the feminist agency she envisions for herself.

### Patriarchal Oppression and the Feminist Agency in *Ogadinma*

Reviewers of *Ogadinma* have acknowledged the novel's engagement with feminism. For instance, Ugandan poet and journalist Harriet Anena observes that *Ogadinma* "does a thorough job of painting the different shades of patriarchy" (2020, p.1). A Swiss-British writer, Zoë Wells, validates Anena's remark with her comment that the novel embodies "all the makings of a modern feminist classic" (2020, p.5). Likewise, citing Rob Spillman's view that *Ogadinma* is "a stirring, unflinching novel that further cements Olisakwe as an important feminist voice" and Chinelo Okparanta's opinion that the novel is an "engaging story of one woman's journey to independence," Nigerian writer and editor Chukwuebuka Ibeh declares *Ogadinma* "a feminist story" (2020, pp.1-3). But none of these reviews provides an elaborate account of how Olisakwe engages with *Ogadinma*'s experience of patriarchal oppression. What follows now is my attempt to offer that necessary clarification.

*Ogadinma* opens at Barrister Chima's office. *Ogadinma* the character goes to the lawyer, on her father's recommendation, to request his assistance to secure admission to the university. This visit marks the beginning of her experience of patriarchal oppression. From the outset, *Ogadinma*'s innocence, the same value her avaricious society is determined to exploit, is glaring. The lawyer's office first engages the mind: "The room was empty. The fan whirled, scattering the papers on the cluttered desk. They floated to the

floor, slid under the table, under the chair, by the door and her feet” (p.9). This disorder may well be a subtle reflection of the man’s irresponsibility. Being a teenager, Ogadinma is unable to decipher the suggestiveness of things and situations, instead “she wondered if it would be awkward to walk in” to the office “uninvited and pick [the items] up” (p.9). Ogadinma’s confusion is perhaps Olisakwe’s portrayal of the female condition in a patriarchal society as a life of inevitable mental struggle.

Ogadinma’s first conversation with Barrister Chima is revealing. In response to her greeting, the lawyer asked her how old she was. When she answered, the man retorted, “You don’t look seventeenth at all” (p.2). What follows this question are acts of mental and sexual exploitation. From asking Ogadinma to leave and return to his office at 3pm, to telling her to accompany him to have lunch, Barrister Chima plays out his real character, a pedophile and rapist shielded by patriarchy. The rendition of this episode is disturbing and the aching sadness it yields is intensified by Olisakwe’s consummate prose, a brilliant and moving writing that ensures readers return to the passage often, either to witness the putrefaction of human decency or to relish the odious joy of a melancholic singing prose:

There was a moment when a scream came to [Ogadinma’s] throat, but she clamped her lips shut. She would be going to the university. She would study Literature, and all of this would no longer matter. She spoke these words to herself even when her body stretched and a sharp pain travelled briefly to her waist. He arched above her, his thrust feverish, his face contorted into a dark ugly mask. Dollops of sweat from his face and neck splattered on her chest, her breasts. The room was so bright; outside the window the sun shone with passionate intensity. A lone bird flew past, and she thought how wonderful it would be to wing into the sky and fly away, away from here. (p.18)

While Ogadinma’s rape is anchored on the patriarchal deployment of the phallus as a tool to conquer and despoil the female body, her family’s condition of economic and social destitution enables Barrister Chima to wreak such violence on her.

Nigerian writer and publisher Nnorom Azuonye makes a surprising argument to foreground his thought that Ogadinma is complicit in her rape. He suggests that “Ogadinma, though young, knew exactly what she was doing. She may have been a victim of predatory sex, agreed, but she also had a choice... In fact, reading the story some will say she went to Chima willingly” (2020, p.7). Azuonye’s opinion exemplifies the misogynistic tendency to absolve men of the transgressions they commit against the bodies and minds of women and girls in patriarchal societies. Considering her teenage status, it is inappropriate to misread Ogadinma’s realization of the lawyer’s intention as an indication of her culpability. The narrator’s testimony that Ogadinma chose not to defy the lawyer’s sexual advance for her fear of losing the opportunity to go university establishes her vulnerability. Moreover, Ali Mazuri’s (1993) idea of “malignant sexism,” which accounts for “the economic manipulation, sexual exploitation, and political marginalization” of women and girls in African societies should offer us an enlightening and sympathetic insight into Ogadinma’s predicament (p.92).

Much of Ogadinma’s experience of patriarchal oppression happens against the background of a larger social tragedy. For instance, before raping Ogadinma, Barrister Chima engages her in a conversation about the United Nations’ involvement in wars. By this, Olisakwe shows the similarity between rape and war, that is their tendency to ruin the lives of their victims. Also, Olisakwe chooses the moment Ogadinma realizes that she is pregnant, and as such terrified, to take the reader into an account of a social unrest in Kano, in which Ogadinma’s father’s Peugeot pickup was burnt, and he himself narrowly escaped death. It appears Ogadinma’s pregnancy is as destructive as the riot and its impact as unforgettable as the burnt car. Incidentally, Ogadinma had become a burnt car by the fact of the pregnancy, for her father brutalized her on realizing that she had had an abortion. The sobering description of this scene compels us to feel for Ogadinma, to share in her pain and shame. Ogadinma’s father, Olisakwe writes,

lifted his hand, his cane reaching for the ceiling, before he brought it down with so much might that it zipped through the air, before landing on her buttocks, the force lifting her skirt. She was numbed by the shock, her knees suddenly soft. And then she screamed. A hoarse cry that tore through the night, ringing through the compound. (p.32)

Unsatisfied with the violence he wreaks on his daughter’s body, the man distances himself both physically and emotionally from Ogadinma by exiling her to faraway Lagos,

with this pathetic warning: “I would have sent you to your grandmother in the village, but the shame you have brought will kill that woman... You will go and stay with my brother Ugonna until I decide what to do with you” (p.32). By this act of parental rejection, he inflicts on Ogadinma such “punishment of a less immediately physical kind,” involving “a certain discretion in the art of inflicting pain, a combination of more subtle, more subdued sufferings, deprived of their visible display” and which provokes “deeper changes” in the sufferer (Foucault 1975, p.8). At this point, we may find ourselves lamenting the lack of opportunity to translate our empathy for Ogadinma into actions that could have saved her from misery.

At Lagos, Ogadinma meets and marries Tobe, a younger brother to her uncle’s wife, Auntie Ngozi. The language with which Auntie Ngozi introduces Ogadinma to Tobe entrenches the patriarchal representation of women as subordinate to men and shows that women also perpetuate the oppressive culture of patriarchy: “Tobe, meet my niece, Ogadinma. She has home training and she is a great cook” (p.46). Auntie Ngozi is Olisakwe’s illustration of the patriarchy princess, a woman who “has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy” and consequently is unable to “see the ways in which women are oppressed by traditional gender roles” (Tyson 2006, pp.85-86). Nneka Otika associates the phenomenon of internalized patriarchy in women with the impact of “benevolent sexism” in her definition of a patriarchy princess as “a female human who upholds... patriarchy for the sole reason of being in the male gaze and enjoying adulation from male folk” (2018, p.7).

Auntie Ngozi fits Otika’s description in her justification of Tobe’s moral failings. On one occasion, she tells Ogadinma: “My brother is spoiling you silly..., he has a good heart, but he has only one problem: he has a temper. Be a virtuous wife, and you will enjoy him well-well” (p.82). When Tobe is imprisoned by the military government for allegations of money laundering, Ogadinma fears that his beastly nature might become worse when he is back from prison, but she is unable to express her thoughts because “she knew that Auntie Ngozi would not like to hear this, that she would expect her to accept their new reality without questions, like a virtuous woman” (p.128). When Ogadinma’s fear becomes real, as Tobe begins again to physically assault her, Auntie Ngozi also comes to Tobe’s rescue. She tells Ogadinma: “[Tobe] has lost everything again. So don’t be upset that he takes out his frustrations on you; that is the burden we women have to bear” (p.177). When Tobe’s misfortunes continue, Auntie Ngozi insists that Ogadinma must visit and remain with Onye Ekpere, an old fake prophet who abused and raped Ogadinma in the guise of delivering her from the captivity of a spirit husband wreaking havoc on Tobe through their marriage. Ogadinma’s experience at the church evokes both pity and sadness, pity for her and women like her who contend with the despoliation of their bodies and mind by agents of patriarchy, and sadness for the role religion plays in enabling patriarchal oppression.

Olisakwe offers Ogadinma the support Auntie Ngozi fails to provide her in Ogadinma’s friendship with Ejiro, an assertive young woman who lived in the same street with Ogadinma and Tobe when they were newly wedded. Ejiro and Ogadinma’s relationship seems to validate Cheri Register’s observation that the notion that women hate one another and engage in unnecessary rivalries for the sake of male attention can be viewed as a patriarchal construct intended to consolidate the “belief in female inferiority” (1989, p.21). Clenora Hudson-Weems’ elaboration of the sisterhood ideology offers some clarity on the subject:

This sisterly bond is a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally, as they embody emphatic understanding of each other’s shared experiences. Everything is given out of love. Criticism includes, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards. There is no substitute for sisterhood, and while the traditional family is of key importance to the Africanist womanist, she recognized her need for this genuine connection between women, one that supports her in her search for solace in her time of need, and offers insight in her time of confusion. (1993, p.63)

The following instances illustrate how Ejiro fits Hudson-Weems’ portrayal of a “sister” in her relationship with Ogadinma. Ejiro condemns Tobe’s abuse of Ogadinma with unreserved honesty. Even when Ogadinma, acting the patriarchal script of a virtuous wife, makes excuses for Tobe, Ejiro warns her about the potentials of abusive husbands to murder their wives: “See, once a man beats you like this, he never stops. He may stop for a

while and apologize and promise never to do it again, but he will do it again and again, until he kills you” (p.155). Throughout Tobe’s time in prison, Ejiro becomes Ogadinma’s emotional anchor. Ogadinma needed that support so much that before moving out of Tobe’s house, which was “put... up for sale” by Uncle Ugonna to raise Tobe’s bailout fund, “she gave Ejiro her new contact address and phone number” (p.126). When Ogadinma’s suffering becomes intolerable following Tobe’s release from prison, she turns to Ejiro for help. The narrator testifies that “it warmed Ogadinma’s heart that Ejiro was her succor” (p.179). The help Ejiro offers her friend, “one of those portions... which turned violent men into submissive husbands” grants Ogadinma, “for the first since things fell apart” in her marriage, “a stirring wicked pleasure” that comes from the experience of emasculating Tobe (p.181). Shortly after eating the food Ogadinma prepared with the content, Tobe loses his sexual stamina and becomes a “ten-second” man in bed. By targeting Tobe’s penis, Ogadinma and Ejiro seem to demonstrate their awareness of the feminist belief that the phallus is a weapon of patriarchy and the symbol of misogyny. In the narrator’s account:

Ogadinma told [Ejiro] about the ten-second incident, how flustered he had been, that he lowered his head when he told her to return to her room. The ten-second incident happened again this morning and he couldn’t even look her in the face. Later, he had sat in the parlour, shrunken like a defeathered cock, staring dolefully at the TV. ‘Him don humble by force,’ Ogadinma said. (p.181)

But even spirituality has its limits, as Ogadinma’s subsequent experience suggests. The trauma of prison life and poverty deepens Tobe’s sense of violence and, for someone already inclined to physically abusing his wife, he tortures the pregnant Ogadinma till she experiences forced labour. When Ogadinma finally had her child, “a baby with a penis,” as the nurse described him, “she waited for the warmth that was supposed to flood her chest and stomach, the beginning of the bond between mother and child. But she felt nothing” (p.203). By this experience of maternal alienation, Ollisakwe depicts Ogadinma’s struggle with postpartum depression and subverts the patriarchal myth of “sweet” motherhood that every woman is expected to uphold. Also, Ogadinma’s experience of traumatic motherhood derives substantially from her aversion to the “penis,” to men. This suggests that there is a limit to what a virtuous wife can endure in the hands of an abusive husband, a patriarchal father who insists that she must remain married to be regarded as a responsible daughter, and a patriarchy princess aunt who justifies marital violence and female oppression. It is then not surprising that Ogadinma garners courage and abandons her husband and child. She, like her mother before her, walks out of her marriage and into the world to live on her own terms. Both Ogadinma’s and her mother’s choices seem to justify Lionnet’s opinion that:

black women writers in Africa and the Diasporas have, since the 1970s, been equating marriage itself (or other forms of heterosexual alliances) with confinement and captivity, denouncing their culture’s failure to offer models of sexual partnership that are not demeaning or degrading to women *and* that allow for the mutual renegotiation of differences” (1993, p.133).

Ogadinma was abandoned by her mother at infancy. But for Ogadinma what is more traumatic than her mother’s absence is the constant need to negotiate the fact of that absence, to accept it, to make peace with a past she did not know. Although she is physically unavailable, Ogadinma’s mother is a constant emotional presence that tortures her mind. Her attempt to reconstruct her mother’s life absolves the woman of the malicious stereotypes that featured in the stories Ogadinma’s grandmother and other relatives had told her. Also, her father’s refusal to speak about the situation surrounding her mother’s departure makes Ogadinma’s burden enormous. But Ogadinma’s attempt to reconcile the facts of her life led her to reject a life of endless hibernation: “Ogadinma had gathered bits and pieces of the retelling of [her mother’s] story, fitting and stitching them together until she constructed a logical narrative” (p.24). To erase her image as a child unworthy of a mother’s love and that of her mother as a cruel woman undeserving of dignity, Ogadinma takes up the arduous responsibility of validating her new identity with an imagined but compelling narrative of her mother’s past. In her account,

the war had tired her mother, the burden of caring for a constantly hungry baby tired her, and one morning, the day her town fell to the Nigerian soldiers, she thrust Ogadinma into her mother-in-law’s arms and walked out of the compound. She did not hold Ogadinma, and she did not look back.” (pp.24-25)

Ogadinma considers the impact of the war on her young mother, something her father is incapable of doing. This is perhaps Olisakwe's effort to emphasize the maturity of Ogadinma's mind and, even more crucially, to foreground her earlier implied notion that African women in abusive marriages, enabled by patriarchy, experience war. Now, we are called to witness Ogadinma's transformation from a conforming teenager to a self-assured young woman determined to reclaim her body and mind. By leaving her husband and child, Ogadinma rejects the cultural expectations around marriage and motherhood, moves away from the patriarchal ideal of a "virtuous wife" and a "sweet mother," which demand absolute self-denial from women. In place of the deposed baggage, Ogadinma reinvents herself, embraces and cares for the reinvented self.

Onal reveals that "within a discourse which defines women only in their relation to men—as daughters, wives and mothers—the female evil connotes 'other' women, who escape this bind and thus, evade societal control mechanisms" (2011, p.88). Her insight is true to the experiences of both Ogadinma and her mother. The reaction of Auntie Okwy—Ogadinma's other aunt who, like Ogadinma, is a victim of teenage pregnancy—to the news of Ogadinma's abandonment of her marriage, clarifies this point. In a conversation with Ogadinma, Auntie Okwy says: "You left your son... You aren't different from your mother" (p.214). Later, she adds commandingly, "you must return to your husband, kneel before him and beg him to take you back" (p.217). Like Auntie Okwy, Ifeoma, Ogadinma's cousin, also shames Ogadinma for her action:

Why did you dump your son like your mother did? ... Your mates are working to keep their marriages, but you have been so blinded by privilege you think it is an easy world out there, that's why you were heartless enough to leave your son and move into another man's house. (p.243)

Although Ogadinma's transactional sexual relationship with Kelechi, Tobe's old friend, after she left the marriage, may suggest that she is not yet free from patriarchal oppression, her insistence on relating with men only on her terms and her discovery of sexual pleasure all together give her the aura of a liberated woman.

### The Autobiographical Background of *Ogadinma*

In writing Ogadinma out of bondage and into freedom, Olisakwe writes about herself. Acknowledging this, Paula Willie-Okafor, a contributing writer for Open Country Magazine, notes that Ogadinma "reads so real that people have asked if it was [Olisakwe's] story" (2021, p.14). The remaining part of this article shall clarify how Olisakwe's private and public experiences feature in *Ogadinma* and shape the protagonist's life. The conceptual framework for the observations I shall make is provided by Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu's notion that "literature... is necessarily about experiences, human experiences, and these experiences are most of the time, those the author is familiar with, those that have happened around him [or her], and those that have happened to him [or her]" (2010, p.340).

In "Everything is Storytelling," Olisakwe acknowledges the autobiographical background of *Ogadinma* in the following comment:

I did draw a lot from my life and the lives of the women in my immediate community. We famously married quite early—my mother at 16, me at 19, my aunts at different points in their teenage years. So, yes, there is much truth to that novel. I consider *Ogadinma* a love letter to my community; it is a hard conversation we must have and a reminder of where we used to be. (2022, p.27)

In an earlier conversation with the writer Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike, Olisakwe explains that the absence of a "variety of topics at the heart of the feminist discourse" in African literature inspired her to tell "the stories of women in [her] community in southeastern Nigeria, who were married off when they were barely teenagers, who were punished for getting pregnant at home" (Q&A 2020, p.7). Fundamentally, *Ogadinma* represents the kind of agency Olisakwe demands for herself and for middle-class women in her community. Olisakwe explains this in detail to Umezurike:

I had read a lot of stories about women from middle-class families whose circumstances were different, but the women in my community were from low-income earning families and didn't have

the privilege that comes with wealth. So, I thought of creating a composite of these characters and to include their story in the conversation. (Q&A 2020, p.7)

By creating a young female character who lacks the economic empowerment to thrive in a patriarchal society, Olisakwe seems to adhere to Anthonia Kalu's (2012) call for the inclusion of low-class women in the African feminist discourse.

The relationship between Olisakwe and Ogadinma cannot be undermined in studying *Ogadinma* as a feminist novel. In her interview at *Yalobusa Review*, Olisakwe speaks to Linda Masi, the fiction editor of the journal, about her struggle with authorial interference. She confesses: "My biggest challenge has been to learn how to put a distance between myself and the deeply personal narratives I often write about: How do I tell this story without having it demeaned as overly confessional?" (2020, p.14). Of course, Olisakwe's engagement with the self in her fiction predates *Ogadinma*. Speaking to Ebunoluwa Mordi of *Nolly Silver Screen* in 2015 about her debut screenplay *The Calabash*, Olisakwe reveals: "There is a bit of me in every piece of work I put out" (p.3). A year later, she tells Mikael Mulugeta, editor at *Iowa Now*: "I was able to be the main subject of my writing" by exploring the "realities [of] women living in a deeply patriarchal society" (2016, p.21). If Olisakwe's "personal experiences are always [the] starting point" of her fiction (I Love Writing, 2015 p.3), with the publication of *Ogadinma*, they become its centre, for just as Ogadinma left her marriage to "finally breathe" (260), Olisakwe "found [herself] taking breaks from" writing the novel "to breathe" (Everything is Storytelling 2020, p.13).

*Ogadinma* inherits Olisakwe's ideal of self-love and her abhorrence of sexism. *Ogadinma*'s reaction when Tobe's consignment of milk was seized by soldiers who demanded a huge amount of money to release it, seems like a lesson drawn from Olisakwe's life. When the narrator tells us that Ogadinma "felt no need to carry any emotional burden on [Tobe's] behalf" since he did not tell her about the business plan before investing his money (p.199), Olisakwe's words lurk within the mind: "I stopped twisting myself into shapes to please people... I stopped enduring bullshit, stopped smiling in the face of daily sexism. I have stopped being grateful and now demand appreciation, because love should not be one-sided" (Being a Woman 2020, p.17). Rather than worry herself when Tobe did not return home that night, Ogadinma "drank a sweating bottle of Maltina and picked her teeth with toothpick. Then she leaned back on her chair and thought of all those times she had served him large portions and ate very little" (p.199). Later, "she read *The Joys of Motherhood* again, without interruption, and the words did not smudge this time" (p.199). Olisakwe's love for Emechata and her novel is well documented. In her interview at *Literary Everything*, Olisakwe says: "Buchi Emechata's *The Joys* is one of the key novels that shaped my writing" (2022, p.2). In another occasion, she underscores the relationship between Ogadinma and Nnu Ego, the protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood* (Breaking Free 2020, p.3). Also, in "Everything is Storytelling," Olisakwe notes: "I put *Ogadinma* in conversation with Buchi Emechata's *The Joys of Motherhood*; the novel and the legendary writer herself significantly influenced my writing and current thematic interests" (2022, p.24). But even before the publication of *Ogadinma*, Olisakwe proclaims: "*The Joys of Motherhood* remains my all-time favorite book" (I Love Writing 2015, p.4). So, when Ogadinma reads the novel in her moment of self-love, what emerges is the image of Olisakwe bequeathing her most cherished book to her character, with the hope that Ogadinma experiences the freedom of self-expression and the courage of self-assertion that Emechata offered her.

A discernable relationship exists in the economic circumstances of *Ogadinma*'s and Olisakwe's spouses. In *Ogadinma*, Tobe begins to experience financial setback in the months following his marriage to Ogadinma. Olisakwe's husband has a similar story. In the essay, "Finding My Freedom," Olisakwe writes about the economic misfortune that attended the early years of her marriage: "Things had changed over the years. His business was struggling. His store had been broken into, his shipment of mobile phones stolen. It was a difficult time" (2019, p.24). When Tobe blames Ogadinma for his predicament by asking her: "Why have things been going wrong since we married?", it appears Olisakwe sheds light on her own life, an experience she wrote about in "Being a Woman":

I not only take on my husband's identity, I become responsible for his success or failure. And it is a hard burden to bear, a burden I had learned to carry when I was only twenty years old when an in-

law berated me for the state of my husband's car. He said, "Our son was driving this car when he married you, now look at the car he is driving!" (2017, p.33)

Olisakwe's struggle for financial independence is also reflected in Ogadinma's life. When Ogadinma's earnings as a hairstylist at Madam Vonne's saloon offer her financial satisfaction, the picture of young Olisakwe working as a banker to support her family comes to mind. When she earned her first salary and contributed to her family's needs, Olisakwe's life was transformed. She confesses: "I saw then that it was my financial independence that had lifted the sacks off my shoulders, unlocked the yoke around my neck and broke the shackles bounding my limbs" (Finding My Freedom 2019, p.33). In Ogadinma's case, financial freedom gives her the confidence to confront a man in an eatery for hushing a group of women. When the man, Karim, asks her: "How is this any of your business, please?", Ogadinma's replies: "It is my business when you feel you can intimidate women because you are what—a man" (p.254). Ogadinma's response evokes Olisakwe's proclamation in the article "Being a Woman": "I am deeply committed to changing my society... I am a feminist" (2017, p.21).

While Ogadinma and her mother are absent parents, which is not exactly the case for Olisakwe, Olisakwe's aunt provides a model for the characters. Writing about the social stigma that divorced women face in patriarchal societies, Olisakwe uses the case of an unnamed relative to buttress her point:

When I was ten years old, my aunt packed her things and left her marriage. She did not take her children with her. She was tired of pretending to be happy in a comfortable union. Knowing how dangerously unkind society is to a divorced woman, she travelled far away [from] home. And for two decades, she remained isolated from society that spurns her brave kind. (Being a Woman 2020, p.36)

Like Olisakwe's aunt, Ogadinma and her mother are vilified by society for leaving their marriages and children. That they are considered selfish for placing their lives and happiness above marriage and motherhood suggests that only women who remain married despite the unhappiness the union brings to them are considered virtuous in patriarchal societies. This is the reason Ogadinma and her mother, like Olisakwe's aunt, severed their relationships with their families when they left their marriages. The experience of "[living] among women who pushed back against society's expectations of how a woman should perform womanhood," Olisakwe announces in "Breaking Free," helped her to create *Ogadinma*, the novel, and recreate Ogadinma, the character. (2020, p.3).

Ogadinma's struggle with postpartum depression is a direct reflection of Olisakwe's life. In an interview with Ope Adetayo, Olisakwe speaks about the trauma of birthing her first child, and how writing has helped her to disinherit the silence associated with the experience. Ogadinma's maternal alienation from her son also finds an example in Olisakwe's life. Olisakwe faced enormous pressure as a mother of two daughters expected to produce a son for her husband. When she finally had a male child, she "searched [her] heart for joy and relief but found nothing" (Finding My Freedom 2019, p.25). Moreover, like Olisakwe, much of the trauma Ogadinma faced in her marriage was caused by her relatives. In "Finding my Freedom," Olisakwe writes about an unnamed cousin whose words almost ruined her joy as a new bride:

Later, after [my wedding] ceremony, she came into my room while I was undressing. She asked if I was sleeping with the man I had just married, and when I gasped and said no, she insisted, quietly, that I must begin to do so, because if I didn't get pregnant by the next Christmas the neighbors would mock me and call me barren. She said I must never, ever fail as a woman. (2019, p.3)

There is also a connection between Ogadinma's memory of her son and Olisakwe's physical distance from her children. Although Olisakwe explains, in her essay "Is It Still Beautiful?", that she "speaks with [her] children via WhatsApp video or voice calls every other day" (2020, p.4), she still suffers the emotional anxiety of her absence, as her other and more recent essay, "Art as an Escape," reveals: "I am living in Montpelier, while my family is in Aba, Nigeria. On most days, I am a bag of mess. I just cry and cry because I want to hold my children to my chest and smell their hair" (2020, p.27). For Ogadinma, the narrator tells us that "she could not keep the swirling thoughts from coming in, the images of her son swaddled up in his cot, him sucking her breasts, his eyes puffy and shut, his fingers bunched into dainty fists" (p.220).



Olisakwe almost did not hold back any part of herself from *Ogadinma*. She and *Ogadinma* share the same hometown, Abagana, and they both grew up in Kano (*Ogadinma*, 34 and 87). *Ogadinma*'s father's experience of religious riot in Kano is also evocative of Olisakwe's account of her own father's near-death encounter in the same city:

My father arrived Kano one cold morning in the 1970s... In December 1980, hope took a terrible blow when Yan Tatsine, a group led by the Islamic preacher Maitatsine, took to the streets in a blaze of violence... My father remembers shuddering in fear alongside other Christians in their neighborhood, Sabon Gari, as the bloodshed snuffed out 4,000 lives. (2014, p.3)

These similarities seem to make *Ogadinma* a compelling portrait of Olisakwe, a feminist writer courageously creating a future of independence and empowerment for African women and girls by subverting the patriarchal manifesto for marriage and motherhood.

## Conclusion

In *Ogadinma*, Olisakwe confronts the marital institution as an agent of women's subjugation in patriarchal societies. In essence, *Ogadinma* rejects the oppressive uses to which marriage and motherhood are put by leaving her husband and child. Her experiences with men, despite their traumatic tensions, become for her a means of self-discovery. *Ogadinma*'s ability to reclaim her body and mind from patriarchal oppression demonstrates the profundity of her shared feminist vision with Olisakwe. Even the title of the novel, which translates to, everything will be all right, makes it sufficiently clear that *Ogadinma*'s life is a journey of self-reinvention.

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