



Woman as the Goddess, the Mother, and the Lover: A Literary Analysis of Selected Poems of J. P. Clark

ANTHONIA M. YAKUBU

National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi, Abuja FCT, Nigeria.

Abstract. Women have traditionally been viewed from the images of the supernatural, motherhood, and the sensual, and depending on the beholder and the context, these images come with layers of negativity and/or positivity ascribed to them. Many communities categorise women into these separate and distinct entities, and in few occasions, women embody these social types. Under each of these entities are sub-types and kinds that women are believed to portray; for example, under the sensual, women are also believed to be sorcerers, wicked, calculating, murderers, among other negativities. Under motherhood, women are generally perceived as caregivers, not ambitious, long suffering, sacrificial, homely, etc. As supernatural beings, women are generally feared, adored, entreated, powerful, and vengeful. Women have over the centuries contended with these prescribed roles and traits and have also come to believe many of these about themselves. John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, popularly known as J.P. Clark, a first-generation Nigerian poet and dramatist analysed a number of these perceptions and beliefs about women in his poetry, using the Niger Delta terrain as the backdrop. His robust education notwithstanding, a number of his poems dwell on the strengths, weaknesses, presence, and invisibility of women, particularly those who were people he related with. From the early 60s, when he published his first poetry collection, to the 21st century, nothing really has changed much in the general views about women. Instead, in spite of the gallant strides women have made personally and for the common good, they are still regarded as subservient and incomplete.

Keywords: Poetry, Women, JP Clark, Patriarchy, Archetypal, Images

1. Introduction: J. P. Clark and his Writing

John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, also known as J. P. Clark or John Pepper Clark, was a first-generation Nigerian poet and playwright who started to write before the country achieved her independence from Britain in 1960. A product of the University of Ibadan, his writing career included being an editor, scholar, and critic, the different hats he wore fully well before his in 2020. As a poet and a playwright, he creatively explored human issues using his Niger Delta environment as the setting of many of his writings in these genres. Having an Ijaw father and Urhobo mother and growing up within the Niger Delta environment during his primary and secondary school days provided the ready material he needed to bring the characters, settings, narrative techniques, and imagery in his creative writings to fruition. For his poetry, he has published six collections and these are *Poems* (1961); *A Reed in the Tide* (1965); *Casualties* (1970); *A Decade of Tongues* (1981); *State of the Union* (1985); and *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988). These poems explore diverse issues from the personal to the communal and then to the nation. They generally paint a picture of the abuses – human, social, economic, political, and environmental – that the average Nigerian man and woman are subjected to.

His plays discuss the themes of infidelity, social taboos, human relationships, gender issues, women empowerment, amongst others. His published plays include *Song of a Goat* (1961); *The Masquerade* (1964); *The Raft* (1964); *Ozidi* (1966); *The Boat* (1981); and *The Wives Revolt* (1991). As a social critic, his most popular work is the book, *America, Their America* (1964), a travelogue he wrote while he was a Parvin fellow at Princeton University. In the book, he whiplashes the American people, their lifestyles,

beliefs, views, politics, racism, amongst others. He described the book as:
 “The jaundiced and unsavoury account of the responses and reactions of one difficult, hypocritical character and palate, who, presented with unusually rich grapes in a dish of silver and gold, took deprecatory bites, and churlishly spat everything out and in the face of all”. (p. 22)

Interestingly, as he grew older and the world became harsher on women and their enviable exploits, he pit his tent with the cause of women and wrote a play, *The Wives Revolt* (1991), to justify his stance. We also see this in another first-generation Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, whose last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), presented independent and enlightened women, who contrast sharply with his portrayal of women in many of his novels that precede *Anthills*.

2. The Grandmother as a Stopgap

Women’s most appreciative role is that of mothers and by extension, grandmothers. Unlike the robust eulogy accorded to mothers, much less is given to grandmothers, and hardly at all to grandfathers. In centuries before, grandmothers enjoyed an enviable position within the nuclear and polygamous homes. They were much respected by every member of the household because of their age, wealth of experience, skills, and wisdom. In the patriarchal setting of most African homes, the paternal grandmother wields much power over her son, his wives, and children. Even though the 21st century has minimized their presence and influence somewhat, many adults of today hold very fond memories of their grandmothers, paternal or maternal. In pre-independence and early independent Nigeria, grandmothers perform many roles which were vital to the continuity and vitality of the nuclear household. They are a major force in the upbringing of their grandchildren, transmitting moral values and societal expectations to the young ones and their mothers (Busari & Adebayo, 2022).

In those days of yore, when father and mother can comfortably leave their children in the care of their grandmothers, while they go out to tend the farms or sell their wares, the grandmother fulfills the emotional needs of the children, so much so that they do not miss much the absence of their mothers. The intergenerational relationship they share with their grandchildren can be so strong that the children feel unsafe and unprotected without their presence in the home. As caregivers, their experience of life has imbued them with the strength to face challenges and

to offer arms of comfort to their grandchildren, and words of wisdom and guidance to their sons and their wives, and vice versa. In all of these, the grandfather is hardly seen, as children generally turn towards their mothers and grandmothers more than their fathers and grandfathers (Lee & Bauer, 2013; Lie, 2010).

It is not surprising then that John Pepper Clark, while in admitted in a hospital, as a teenager or young adult, remembers his grandmother. In the poem, ‘For Granny (from Hospital), he reflected on the presence and strength of his grandmother while she was with them in his “father’s house of many wives” (13). In a somber mood, he recalls being with his grandmother, some fifteen years ago, in a boat on their trip home, perhaps, and wondered what could have made her clutch him tightly to her breast. His being incapacitated on a hospital bed brings to his mind the trip home that watery and windy night as they made their way home. In the poem, Clark is a casualty of fear – the fear of dying. This is a natural fear which springs out of the love he has for himself and for life. Moreover, out of the love he has for himself and for his grandmother, he is not only able to re-experience the fear he felt fifteen years before, when he was barely six years old (See Wren, 1984: 168), but he is also able to understand the magnitude of the mental pain his grandmother went through during one of their trade voyages. This sudden understanding on his part brings in a fresh slab of pain into his mind for what his granny experienced then, in a dugout on the sea, even though the event he is mentally recalling happened ages ago.

Tell me, before the ferryman’s return
 What was that stirred within your soul
 One night fifteen floods today
 When upon a dugout
 Mid pilgrim lettuce on the Niger,
 You with a start strained me to breast. (1 - 6)

He wonders whether his granny was a victim of “the raucous voice of yesterday’s rain” (Line 7), brought about by
the loud note of quarrels
 And endless dark nights of intrigue
 In Father’s house of many wives (11-13)

Polygamy, as an interesting part of the African culture, provides a forum where “African females share the husband’s love” (Okpaku, 1967: 4 – 5). Yet, the endless squabbles, envy, sense of fear and insecurity, and the unhealthy competition between the wives and the children create many victims of love. Clark’s granny’s sense of morbid fear for her life and that of her grandson, Clark, arises from her love for herself

and offspring – a love that is in competition with other loves. It is interesting to note that the poet only began to emphasise with some of the pains of his grandmother when he was in pain. He probably, like many children do, thought that his grandmother, comfortably fulfilling the various role of a psychologist, teacher, comforter, doctor, midwife, cook, to mention a few (Michel et al, 2019), was a perfect human being.

3. A Tribute to Motherhood

People generally hold their mothers in high regard. This is more so in a patriarchal environment where the man is king and the woman is expected to make many sacrifices in order to keep her home, her family, and in many cases, her sanity. The woman's position in relation to the man is aptly summed up in the Hausa proverb that says,
Babban abu shi ne, mace ta riga nijinta bawali.
(It is a serious thing for a wife to urinate before her husband does).

The woman is expected to defer to the men in her life in everything including issues that pertain to her personally. The other expectations placed on her include her ability to be able to conceive and to bear children, particularly male children. Her inability to bear children, or at least a male child, further reduces her worth and identity within her marriage and the society (Akujobi, 2011; Devi, 2017; Lumumba, 2019). Then when the children start to fill up a home, their overall care – emotional, physical, psychological, and mental - is usually left to the mother. This makes much demand on her, taking its toll on her ability to take care of herself. Children see and feel these sacrifices of their mother and they naturally gravitate toward her, for she is clearly the underdog here. Over the centuries, therefore, men and women have documented for posterity creative works to eulogise their mothers, their own way of showing appreciation to women who willingly put their care on hold in order to take care of their children.

While motherhood extends beyond the biological, the poems, 'Streamside Exchange' and 'Abiku' are written from the point of view of a child who feels a sense of security and warmth because of the presence of his mother, and another child who experiences pain and fear because of the continued absence of the mother. To the Yoruba, and to many other ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa,

orisa bi iya ko si, iya la ba maa bo
(Mother is the only deity worthy of worship).

At the same time, people also believe with the Igbo that,

Ajo nwa naaza aha nne ya
(a bad child answers his or her mother's name).

These feelings of love, empathy, and understanding that many have for their mothers are expressly conveyed in the selected poems of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo. In the first poem, 'Streamside Exchange', a child waits by the shore for his mother to return from her market trip. While waiting, and longing for words of hope about his mother's return, he asked the river bird about her whereabouts:

River bird, river bird
Sing to me a song
Of all that pass
And say,
Will mother come back today? (4-9).

The fatalistic bird shatters the hitherto secured future of the child:

You cannot know
And should not bother;
Tide and market come and go
And so shall your mother (9-12).

The poet contrasts two situations – one is already completed, while the other is still running its course: the use of "shall" in the last line shows the boy's mother may not return home, as she has run her own part of life's race, while the words "tide and market come and go" confirm that the demise of one does not stop life from running its course. This contrast deepens one's sorrow and increases the confusion and incomprehensibility of the innocent child.

In J. P. Clark's 'Abiku', the poet personae pleads with the spirit-child who keeps "coming and going these several seasons" (1) to have mercy on the mother who goes through the stress of pregnancy, giving birth, and taking care of the child, and then the child dies, then she takes in again, and the circle repeats itself. Unlike Wole Soyinka's 'Abiku' who boasts and ridicules the mother's efforts to make him stop his incessant cyclical visits, the spirit-child in Clark's 'Abiku' does not utter a word; instead, he listens to the pleas that beg him to pity the physical and mental state of his mother.

His mother is destroyed by the child's seeming blatant insensitivity in the face of her love and pleas. In a reaction to this, the poet-personae angrily asks the child to stay away from the home-stead:

Do stay out on the baobab tree
Follow where you please your kindred spirits
If indoors is not enough for you (2-4)

However, this poet-personae changes and begs the spirit-child to pity the plight of his mother whose "body is tired/....., her milk going sour" (24-25).

The mother not only suffers from the blatant insensitivity and cruelty of her spirit-child, she is also a victim of her own natural filial love and affection for a homestead filled with the noise and babbles of children. The poet states that the home is already filled with children but the mother desires to have many more, and in this, she becomes a victim:

Still, it's been healthy stock
To several fingers, to many more will be
Who reach to the sun (12-14).

The spirit-child, on his part, is a casualty of a system of the spiritual world he comes from and returns to, which dictates his short stay in the physical world. Very much aware of his mother's love for him and willing to so much reciprocate this love, he finds that the ties of his spiritual world are strong and binding. The poet, J. P. Clark paints a picture of a mother who is willing to keep conceiving in the hope that this particular child would stay. In spite of the number of questions that spring to one's mind about the 'unintelligent' stance of a mother who keeps conceiving when her homestead is already full of other children, the poet is more interested in directing the gaze of the reader to the sacrificial love of mothers for their children.

4. The Lover in the Goddess

Of all the roles given to women in a patriarchal society, motherhood is the most dignified and lover is the least dignified. As a lover, a woman is seen as irresponsible, materialistic, lustful, a sexualised object, among many undignifying labels. At the same time, women are also seen as deep and highly spiritual, and that is why their reproductive abilities are revered, and that is also why female goddesses have many male adherents. For J. P. Clark, he fuses the spiritual and sensual qualities of a woman into one in his poem, 'Olokun', a reflection of his admiration and fear of a woman.

Before we go into throwing more light on women as goddesses, let us make a brief analysis into J. P. Clark's poems about unrequited love. Let us also remember that the proverbs that address women's sensuality are usually negative. A few examples from the Yoruba would suffice:

Gbogbo obinrin lo ngbese

Eyi to ba se tire lase ju laraye n pe lasewo. (Yoruba)
(All women are sexually uncontrollable, but the woman that does hers in excess is a prostitute).

Obinrin abi ale mefa won ko mo ara won (Yoruba)
(A woman will have six concubines,
yet the six concubines wouldn't know one another)

(Yusuf, 1999).

The Igbo generally believe in a supreme deity called *Chineke* (the creator God) or *Chukwu* (the Great God). They also believe and pay homage to some 'smaller' gods who act as intermediaries between them and *Chukwu*. Some of these gods are *Amadi-Oha* (the god of thunder and lightning), *Anyanwu* (the god of the sun), *Igwe* (the sky god and husband to *Ala*), and *Ala* (the earth goddess). Of all these gods, cutting across the different communities of the Igbo, the earth goddess, *Ala*, is the most revered (Ilogu, 1985:35). However, it is ironical that in spite of the awe and fear in which she is held, her mortal female sex is seen as subservient and inferior to the male sex. Among the Yoruba, there is *Aje*, the goddess of wealth. The *Aje* festival is celebrated with much pomp because the goddess is revered as the possessor of wealth and fertility. The Yoruba offer prayers and sacrifices to her to grant their requests of having money/more money, to be wealthy, and to prosper in their businesses. The women, however, owe more allegiance to her as she is believed to be the controller of the market economy. Ironically, in spite of women being in charge of the market economy, the bulk of the wealth remains with their men, who also control the political terrain.

In four of his poems, J. P. Clark bemoans his unrequited love for a lady of great physical beauty. In 'Why Should I Rage?' the protagonist's failure to ignite a flame of love from the lady's heart is compared to the action of pouring fuel "on wet wood". The battered psyche of the protagonist as a result of this deepens into a desperate despair and makes the protagonist exclaim with disbelief:

The fire I strove with fame
To light in your heart
Has not come to flame?

In 'Passion is a Fuel', the poet likens the lady's attitude to the "indifferent cruel seas". The unreciprocated love is wasted as it bears no fruit for the poet, for love is not love when it is not returned.

Shall I sit on this privileged stool
And not wear beads of coral?

His agony reaches a full pitch in the poem titled 'New Year'. With the flood as a symbol, the poet observes that "another flood is finished to a fall" – "flood" here is used to mark time in the riverine areas. The work "another" suggests the futility of the relationship and this deepens into sorrow and despair for the protagonist. His relationship with the lady is compared to "two reeds on the bank". In spite of their willingness to love and be loved, they cannot reach a compromise.

Insidious creaks of drying joints

Warn of recessions hard to reach (13-14)

And this further increases their pain and disillusionment. The protagonist's situation becomes more pathetic in the face of

Even the water lettuce

From upland go hand in hand to the sea (7-8)

He wonders for how long the "hedging" will go on before the lady is finally united to him. However, the last two lines of the poem give the answer:

... this flood in laps of the old

Will long bear us aberrant on the beach (15-16)

The use of water imageries like "laps", "banks" "sea", "water lettuce", "reeds", "blades", go to confirm that the flood of time will not change the uncompromising stance of the lady.

This is verified in the poem, 'Ride Wash', where in spite of the fun and good times they had once had, they now stand on sand "depleted/exposed more than ever". The pulse of their union which had once "held one steam" beats no more. Both lovers thus become casualties of a union that is not meant to be.

However, in the poem, 'Olokun', J. P. Clark pays homage and obeisance to his community's river goddess, Olokun, who is deified as the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The poem has a mixture of words of sensuality and reverence addressed to the goddess who he regards as a mother, too. But this is not what we see in Christopher Okigbo's poem, 'The Passage', where the poet honours Idoto, the water goddess of the people of Idemili, in eastern Nigeria. He used words that show his deep reverence for a mother goddess whom he has come to pay homage to and to ask for help:

Before you, Mother Idoto, naked I stand
Before your watery presence,
A prodigal.

But in J. P. Clark's 'Olokun', he deifies and sensualises the goddess he has come to meet for favours:

I love to pass my fingers
(As tide thro' weeds of the sea
And wind the tall fern-fronds)
Thro' the strands of your hair
Dark as night that screens the naked moon

He also talks about being "jealous and passionate" for the goddess and declares to her that

No greater love had woman
From man than the one I have for you!

Then in the last stanza, he confesses his poverty and weakness, and entreats her to offer him emotional and physical succour:

So drunken, like ancient walls
We crumble in heaps at your feet;
And as the good maid of the sea,
Full of rich bounties for men,
You lift us all beggars to your breast.

5. Conclusion

The selected poems examined in this paper not only re-cement the archetypal images of women by men, but also an unconscious 'fear' of the power women wield as goddesses, priestesses, mothers and lovers. These images are still being celebrated, denied, eulogised, and critiqued till today.

References

- Akujobi, Remi. "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.1 (2011): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1706>>
- Busari, D. A., & Adebayo, K. O. (2022). Diaspora grand-mothering in Nigeria. *Journal of Family Studies*, 29(3), 1180–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2022.2034659>.
- Clark, J.P. (1961). *Poems*. Ibadan: Mbari, 1961.
- Clark, J. P. (1965). *Casualties*. London: Longman, 1970.
- Clark, J. P. (1985). *State of the Union*. London: Longman.
- Clark, J. P. (1988). *Mandela and Other Poems*. Ikeja: Longman.
- Clark, J. P. (1964). *America, Their America*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Devi, T. (2017). The Treatment of Motherhood in African Culture and Literature. *DJ Journal of English Language and Literature*. 2(2), 30-36 DOI: [10.18831/djeng.org/2017021006](https://doi.org/10.18831/djeng.org/2017021006).
- Ilogu, E. (1985). *Christianity and Igbo Culture*. Enugu: University Publishing Company.
- Lee, J., & Bauer, J. W. (2013). Motivations for Providing and Utilizing Child Care by Grandmothers in South Korea. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(2), 381–402. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23440788>.
- Lie, M. L. S. (2010). Across the Oceans: Childcare and Grandparenting in UK Chinese and Bangladeshi Households. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(9), 1425–1443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2010.491746>.
- Lumumba, E. O. "Of Mules and Mamas: Four Women, Africana Mothering, and Resistance" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1629. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1629>.

- Michel, J., Stuckelberger, A., Tediosi, F., Evans, D., & van Eeuwijk, P. (2019). The roles of a Grandmother in African societies - please do not send them to old people's homes. *Journal of Global Health*, 9(1), 010306. <https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.09.010306>.
- Okpaku, J. (1967). Culture and Criticism: African Critical Standard for African Literature and the Arts. *Journal of the New African Literature and the Arts*.
- Wren, R. (1984). *J. P. Clark*. Lagos: Lagos Univ. Press.
- Yusuf, Y. (1999). 'English and Yoruba Proverbs and the Decline of Marriage', *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1(1), 45-52.