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Dynamics of Power, Widowhood, and Female Sexual Agency in Ogbu's *The Moon Also Sets*

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Abstract

In many African literary texts, widows are portrayed as marginalised and oppressed, often treated as the property of men and excluded from spaces of power. Their sexuality is tightly controlled through hetero-patriarchal traditions that construct them as nonsexual, passive beings whose desires are either erased or repressed. These cultural and social norms not only silence their bodily autonomy but also render them vulnerable to exploitation, humiliation, and continued male dominance. Such portrayals reinforce gendered power hierarchies that limit women's roles to submissive, reproductive functions. However, contemporary literary narratives are increasingly challenging these representations by depicting widows as active agents who resist gendered oppression and reclaim their sexual agency. This paper examines how widows in Ogbu's (2005) *The Moon Also Sets* challenge the hetero-patriarchal social order that seeks to suppress their sexuality and limit their participation in public and private spheres. It argues that widowhood can become a powerful site of resistance and transformation, where women assert agency through voice, action, and bodily autonomy. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of power, sexuality, and the body, the study explores how widow characters disrupt dominant narratives, resist discipline, and reclaim control over their identities, thereby exposing and subverting the power structures that seek to oppress them.

Keywords:
Docile, Hetero-patriarchy, Power, Female sexual agency, Widowhood
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Introduction

Widowhood in many African societies is deeply entangled with cultural and patriarchal norms that regulate women's behaviour, particularly their sexuality. In Osi Ogbu's *The Moon Also Sets* (2002), widowhood is portrayed not only as a personal loss but as a structural condition in which widows are subjected to oppressive practices such as wife inheritance, ritual cleansing, and economic marginalisation—mechanisms of power that discipline the female body and reinforce male

dominance. This paper draws on feminist perspectives and Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to examine how these cultural norms suppress widows' sexual agency and how widows resist such controls to assert autonomy. Through their voices, economic independence, and maternal authority, the widows in the novel challenge patriarchal expectations and disrupt the traditional view of widows as passive and voiceless, reimagining widowhood as a space for transformation, empowerment, and social critique.

Studies on widowhood in African literature have often emphasised the vulnerability and marginalisation of widows within patriarchal systems. The portrayal of widows as powerless stems from the historical discrimination they have faced under hetero-patriarchal systems. These male-dominated societies have imposed various restrictions to control widows' sexuality, often reducing them to passive, submissive figures (Sollet 2016, p. 21). Much of the existing scholarship has focused on the vulnerability of widows, overlooking their potential to act with agency and resist oppression (see Kapuma 2018; Okonda 2018; Datta 2008; Giri 2002). This paper shifts the focus from victimhood to agency by challenging dominant narratives that portray widows as passive subjects. It explores the diverse and creative ways in which widows assert control over their sexuality, actively resisting the cultural and societal norms designed to silence and marginalise them. It examines how gender roles are constructed by society, rather than biology, to reinforce unequal power dynamics between men and women (McIlwaine, 2003). Building on this, the paper interrogates how widows, despite being pushed to the margins by hetero-patriarchal norms, reclaim sexual agency and challenge the systems that seek to suppress them.

In African literature, representations of sexuality often reflect the broader hetero-patriarchal structures that privilege male desire while systematically regulating and repressing female sexual agency. Hetero-patriarchy constructs women as extensions of male sexual authority, reducing them to objects within a male-centred sexual economy (Ramazanoglu 1995). Such configurations not only curtail women's autonomy over their bodies but also limit how female sexuality can be represented and understood within cultural narratives (Kambarami 2006, p. 1). As Walby (1991, p. 20) argues, patriarchy is institutionalised through social structures and cultural practices that grant men sexual agency and symbolic authority, while excluding women from equivalent forms of expression and power. In this

context, African literary texts become important sites for examining how gendered sexual norms are challenged and reproduced.

This paper adopts Michel Foucault's theory of power, which challenges traditional notions of power as merely repression or legal enforcement. Foucault conceptualises power as relational and productive, operating through knowledge, social practices, and discourses that shape identities and behaviours (Callaghan 2013). In The History of Sexuality, Foucault (1978) argues that power both restricts and produces knowledge about sexuality, thereby regulating bodies and subjectivities. Central to Michel Foucault's theory of power is the concept of the "docile body," a body that is trained and regulated to be both valuable and compliant through subtle disciplinary techniques such as surveillance, normalisation, and examination (Foucault 1995). These mechanisms embed power within the body, shaping behaviour to align with societal expectations (Allen 1999; Deleuze 1986). In hetero-patriarchal contexts, such as those depicted in *The Moon Also Sets*, these disciplinary forms regulate female sexuality by constructing women as passive and controllable through cultural norms and rituals. Foucault (1978) emphasises that power is not absolute; it always invites resistance. While disciplinary power attempts to produce compliant bodies, individuals can challenge and redefine imposed norms. Tamale (2011) supports the relevance of this framework in African contexts, arguing that when adapted critically, Foucault's ideas illuminate how African women contest patriarchal control over their sexuality.

Methodology and Justification for Text Selection

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis to examine female sexual agency in Osi Ogbu's *The Moon Also Sets*. It is grounded in feminist theoretical perspectives on agency (Burke 2012; McNay 2003; Mohanty 2016; Duits & van Zoonen 2007) and informed by Michel Foucault's theory of power, which views power as relational and productive, operating through social practices and discourses to shape identities, bodies, and behaviors (Foucault 1978, 1995). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens to analyse how hetero-patriarchal power disciplines widows' sexuality and how these women resist such control by asserting agency.

The methodology involves textual analysis, focusing on character development, narrative structure, and themes to explore the interplay between disciplinary power and female resistance. This approach highlights how widows like Mama Oby navigate oppressive cultural practices such as wife inheritance and arranged marriage, using voice, economic autonomy, and personal decision-making to contest patriarchal norms. An intersectional feminist lens is also applied to capture how gender, widowhood, religion, and cultural expectations intersect to influence experiences of power and agency. In line with Foucault's assertion that power always encounters resistance (Foucault 1978), the study examines the tension between subjugation and empowerment that widows embody in the novel.

The choice of *The Moon Also Sets* is deliberate, as the novel vividly portrays widows confronting and resisting hetero-patriarchal control. Unlike portrayals that render widows as passive victims, Ogbu's narrative presents Mama Oby as an agent of change who challenges restrictive traditions and asserts control over her own and her daughter's sexuality. The novel's intersection of Christianity, tradition, and gender politics further enriches the analysis, making it a compelling text for studying power, resistance, and sexual agency within an African context.

Reclaiming Power: The Agency of the Widow in *The Moon Also Sets*

This section is divided into three parts. The first part provides a brief synopsis of the novel, followed by a discussion of the concepts of agency and Foucault's theory of power. The final part explores how widows in the text resist traditional oppressive practices and reclaim their agency and autonomy, particularly in the context of their portrayal as docile bodies. The central focus here is the cultural practice of wife inheritance, which dehumanises widows and undermines their dignity. This theme is examined through four dimensions of violence: first, economic violence, where widows are dispossessed of property or have their property taken over by others. Second, there is emotional and psychological violence, which includes the trauma that widows endure during mourning rituals. Third, physical abuse is inflicted under the guise of cultural norms; and fourth, sexual violence, in which widows are coerced into sexual relationships against their will, stripping them of sexual autonomy.

These forms of violence, which are economic, emotional, physical, and sexual, demonstrate how African sexuality, especially female sexuality, is

controlled through patriarchal traditions that treat women's bodies as property. They show how widowhood becomes a site where sexuality is disciplined, silenced, or exploited. Despite these forms of violence being perpetuated under the legitimacy of tradition, the novel illustrates how widows exercise agency by resisting these practices, thereby reclaiming control over their bodies and lives.

Synopsis of the novel

Osi Ogbu is a Nigerian writer currently based in Nairobi, where he serves as the executive director of the African Technology Policy Studies Network. His novel, The Moon Also Sets, was first published in 2002 and is set in the fictional Nigerian village of Isiakpu, a typical African village, as well as at the University of Embakassi, a modern African university. The story centres on two main characters, Mama Oby and her daughter Oby, who struggle to survive in a chauvinistic society where tradition and modernity confront them with daunting challenges. Their trials and tribulations reflect the dilemma facing the modern African woman in a society still entrenched in complex paradoxes (Ogbu 2002). The novel illustrates that women, despite their disadvantaged positions, fight to achieve their goals. The narrative unfolds chronologically, beginning with Mama Oby's relocation to Isiakpu after her husband died in Kano City. Significantly, the novel opens not with her marriage but with her status as a widow, immediately foregrounding the challenges and vulnerabilities associated with widowhood. A devout Christian, modest in character, and a respected leader of women in her church (Ogbu 2002, p. 13), Mama Oby quickly encounters a hostile and oppressive environment. Her brothers-in-law, representing the patriarchal forces within the extended family, make concerted yet unsuccessful efforts to render her life unbearable. She is determined to raise her children and provide them with a good education; she is strong yet generous.

The novel constructs characters that reflect both traditional and modern settings, highlighting how patriarchal control operates across these spaces. In the traditional village of Isiakpu, male characters such as Pa Okolo, Uncle Ben, Uncle Eze, Chief Ugwueze, and Father Damian are portrayed as enforcers of cultural traditions, ensuring that patriarchal norms are upheld. In contrast, the modern academic setting of the University of Embakassi features male figures such as Chris, Okoro, Chike, and Professor Akpanu,

who, despite their modern context, similarly perpetuate male dominance. In both settings, male characters are positioned as oppressors who view women not as autonomous individuals capable of making independent decisions, but as beings whose primary function is to satisfy male desires and conform to male authority. Female characters like Mama Oby, Oby, Mama Ijeoma, and Mama Oby's grandmother are depicted as victims of this entrenched patriarchal order. However, this paper focuses specifically on the traditional setting of Isiakpu, where the novel examines how power is exercised through cultural norms and traditions, and how widows resist these oppressive structures. In this context, widows face economic, social, psychological, and physical abuse rooted in their marginal status. The novel exposes how deteriorating customs bind the community of Isiakpu to a rigid traditional framework that disproportionately harms widows and restricts their agency.

Foucault, Power, and the Widow's Agency

Female agency refers to the capacity of women to make autonomous decisions across economic, political, and cultural domains. Mohanty (2003) argues that such agency enables women to challenge and subvert hetero-patriarchal norms, and in some cases, to redefine culturally sanctioned expressions of female sexuality. Similarly, Burke (2012) conceptualises agency as the capacity to resist and contest dominant systems of knowledge and power that constrain personal freedom and impose fixed identities. McNay (2003) frames agency as the ability to initiate transformative actions that disrupt entrenched gender norms. In contrast, Duits and van Zoonen (2007) emphasise that agency involves intentional actions shaped by both individual will and broader structural contexts.

In the context of widowhood, women's agencies are profoundly shaped by the socio-cultural environments they navigate. Widows often enact resistance not only through overt defiance but also through negotiation, strategic silence, and adaptive resilience. These subtle acts represent efforts to redefine identity and desire beyond the limits imposed by patriarchal expectations. Burke (2012) highlights that even within oppressive systems, women can develop strategies to negotiate their interests. However, as Maseno and Kilonzo (2011) observe, hetero-patriarchal systems have historically constrained widows' agency, curbing their autonomy and suppressing their sexual and social expression.

Foucault's analyses in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and The History of Sexuality (1978, 1985) propose that power is not merely repressive but also productive, generating norms and shaping behaviour through institutions such as the family, religion, and cultural customs. For Foucault, power operates through disciplinary mechanisms that create "docile bodies," individuals conditioned to internalise control and conform to expected roles (Foucault 1995; Morriss 2002). Importantly, Foucault (1978) asserts that "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95), indicating that agency is always entangled within power relations and that even marginalised individuals possess the potential to resist.

In *The Moon Also Sets* (Ogbu 2002), these Foucauldian dynamics are vividly illustrated in the traditional village of Isiakpu, where widowhood becomes a site of surveillance, discipline, and ritual control. The village is socially stratified into "owners" and "messengers," with women deliberately excluded from both categories. Mama Oby questions this exclusion when she asks, "But what of those who are neither messengers nor owners of the society...? At least a messenger will one day benefit from the master's magnanimity" (Ogbu 2002, p. 5). Her question exposes the gendered nature of exclusion, where widows are denied even the lowest forms of social recognition, rendering them structurally invisible.

The oppressive conditions imposed on widows in Isiakpu are sustained through cultural traditions that function as mechanisms of patriarchal control. As the novel states, "Being a widow in Isiakpu needs to confront one of those Isiakpu traditions" (Ogbu 2002, p. 7), signalling that widowhood is inseparable from ritual expectations and social policing. Another passage reinforces this: "In Isiakpu, it was difficult to forget the loss of Papa Oby. The memory of death lingered much longer than the memory of the life that was taken away. This was Isiakpu. Here, widows had no rights. No say. You would never forget that your husband was no more" (Ogbu 2002, p. 14). These reflections depict widowhood as not only a state of mourning but also a condition of prolonged subjugation, in which women are stripped of agency and identity. Rituals, memory, and tradition operate as disciplinary tools that define acceptable behaviour, enforce silence, and anchor women to a patriarchal moral order.

However, *The Moon Also Sets* does not render widows entirely passive. It highlights acts of resistance, however quiet or strategic, that challenge the hetero-patriarchal regime. Mama Oby's rejection of wife inheritance, her critiques of male entitlement, and her silent but resolute endurance represent what Baral (2018) calls the "agency of indiscipline," a form of resistance that disrupts normative expectations and asserts autonomy. These acts unsettle the community's efforts to mould widows into compliant subjects and demonstrate that resistance can manifest in forms other than open rebellion.

Widows in Isiakpu are enclosed within hetero-patriarchal institutions, marriage, family, and religion that function as disciplinary apparatuses. These structures regulate their sexuality, deny them property rights and social voice, and reinforce male dominance. Foucault (1995) explains that disciplinary power operates through surveillance, normalisation, and constraint, producing docile subjects who internalise their subordination. In Ogbu's narrative, expectations such as wife inheritance and ritual cleansing symbolise institutionalised control over widows' bodies and choices. Through the portrayal of Mama Oby's defiance, the novel exposes the cracks in this system. It reveals how widowhood, despite its constraints, can also be a site for reclaiming agency and asserting moral critique.

Resisting Tradition: Widowhood, Agency, and the Reclamation of Power

This section examines how widows in *The Moon Also Sets* resist cultural practices that depict them as passive and powerless. A central focus is the practice of wife inheritance, which undermines their dignity through four forms of violence: economic (loss of property), emotional (mourning-related trauma), physical (abuse disguised as tradition), and sexual (coerced intimacy). The discussion here addresses these oppressions collectively rather than separately, highlighting the widows' overall assertion of agency against systems designed to silence them.

In "*The Moon Also Rises,*" *the widows' resistance to oppressive cultural norms is powerfully illustrated through their* rejection of wife inheritance. This practice reflects the deep entrenchment of hetero-patriarchal control over female bodies. Foucault's concept that power operates through the regulation and discipline of bodies is particularly relevant here, as this practice attempts to render widows passive, submissive, and dependent. According to Jommo

(1994), wife inheritance is an institution that commodifies women for the domination and exploitation by men. It violates widows' agency and freedom of choice by denying them the right to decide whether to remarry and limiting their sexual autonomy to members of their late husband's clan. This requirement, as Jommo asserts, constitutes an infringement on the widow's liberty (1994, p. 23).

The tradition of wife inheritance functions as a powerful tool of patriarchal control by suppressing the widow's sexual agency and reducing her to an object incapable of independent desire or negotiation (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 11). It positions the widow as a docile body whose primary value lies in her sexual and reproductive functions, even after the death of her husband. This aligns with Andrea Dworkin's argument that within a patriarchal system, male desire commodifies women, treating them as instruments for fulfilling male needs. In *The Moon Also Sets*, Mama Oby is treated as property to be inherited, but she resists this role. Traditions such as *Nkuchi* (wife inheritance) deny women the right to assert control over their bodies and sexuality, reinforcing their subjugation through taboos and silencing any attempt to resist (Baloyi 2009, p. 10). The novel dramatises this silencing through scenes in which male authority figures, such as Pa Okolo, Mama Oby's brother-in-law, assume control over her future. Decisions concerning her body and sexual life are made without her consent, reinforcing the notion that widows are not entitled to autonomy.

This portrayal supports Fonchingong's (2006) assertion that in many African societies, women are considered the property of men, and men are positioned as the heads and ultimate decision-makers within the family and society (p. 26). The denial of Mama Oby's voice in matters affecting her most intimately underscores the broader patriarchal structures that silence and marginalise women, particularly widows, under the guise of cultural tradition. Pa Okolo's declaration, "This is what the custom demands, it is also what I demand … I am the custodian of the custom in this family. All your husband's brothers are here. If you do not choose one among us, we shall choose for you" (Ogbu 2005, p. 8). Pa Okolo's statement shows how hetero-patriarchal power combines tradition, male dominance, and social expectations to deny women like Mama Oby any sexual agency or independent identity. She is expected to transition from one man (her

deceased husband) to another (his brother), reinforcing the belief that a woman's body is inheritable, lacking in ownership or autonomy.

However, Mama Oby's resistance disrupts this script. Her decision to remain single and focus on raising her children, as captured in the line, "I want to remain single and concentrate on bringing up the children" (Ogbu 2005, p. 10), Her refusal represents a radical defiance of societal expectations, especially in a context where widowhood is viewed as a transitional state to another male-controlled relationship. The emphatic statement "She has refused to be inherited" (Ogbu 2005, p. 183) underscores her bold rejection of patriarchal control over her sexuality and life choices. Through this act, Mama Oby breaks the silence surrounding sexual repression in Isiakpu society. Her resistance not only challenges the cultural norm of levirate marriage but also represents a radical act of reclaiming her body and sexuality from the hetero-patriarchal structures that commodify female bodies. Mama Oby's case illustrates that even within highly regulated traditional systems, widows are not entirely powerless; they can assert agency and actively resist the imposed roles designed to maintain male dominance.

Scholars argue that in many African societies, single women, especially widows and never-married adults, are culturally constructed as incomplete, dangerous, or socially deficient (Maseno & Kilonzo 2011). In such settings, singlehood is not typically understood as a form of autonomy but as a deviation from communal norms that equate a woman's value with marriage and male supervision. However, Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) suggest that single women often resist these societal pressures by reimagining singlehood as a space of independence, self-sufficiency, and identity formation, thereby transforming what is culturally framed as a lack into a deliberate and empowered lifestyle that subverts hetero-patriarchal expectations. In *The Moon Also Sets*, Mama Oby exemplifies this resistant stance by openly rejecting wife inheritance and asserting her desire to remain single. Her choice directly challenges the patriarchal customs of Isiakpu that seek to control and regulate women's sexuality through ritual and tradition. This aligns with Foucault's (1978) assertion that "power is understood as a form of prohibition dictating what one should and should not do… through taboos" (p. 84), where social norms are enforced through invisible but powerful cultural mechanisms. By declaring, "I have learned to speak my mind and to be direct. I want to remain single" (Ogbu 2005, p. 10), Mama Oby not only claims her voice but also rejects the cultural scripts

that seek to dictate her sexual and social identity. Her resistance reframes singlehood not as a deficiency but as a radical act of self-determination and refusal to be absorbed back into the cycle of patriarchal control.

In line with this, Moses Okoda (2005) argues that voluntary celibacy can challenge dominant hetero-patriarchal norms by framing sexual restraint as a personal choice rather than a gendered obligation (p. 7). Mama Oby's celibate singlehood resists the tradition of *Nkuchi* (wife inheritance), unsettling traditional masculinity that assumes control over female bodies. The community's discomfort with her decision is evident in their efforts to impose Uncle Ben as her new husband, a move intended to suppress her autonomy and restore patriarchal order. As Okoda (2005) notes, single women in African societies are often stigmatised for deviating from the norm of marriage (p. 12), and Mama Oby's refusal is perceived as a threat that must be managed. However, since marriage remains a dominant expectation in most societies, individuals, especially women who remain single beyond a certain age, often face discrimination and stigma (Okoda 2005, p. 12). This is the reason the Isiakpu society describes Mama Oby as someone regarded as deficient and, therefore, in need of control.

Marjo Buitelaar quotes a Moroccan proverb that says: "A woman without a man is like a public bath without water," meaning that she will get hotter while there is no sperm to cool her off. This proverb aptly illustrates the image of the widow found in different societies as a woman who, having tasted the sweetness of sexual pleasure, is not willing to resign herself to chastity, but develops powerful sexual propensities and needs (Buitelaar 2006, pp. 3–9). That is why culture demands that Mama Oby cannot remain single because it is culturally unacceptable for a woman to be by herself. Mama Oby defies this conventional expectation, asserting herself as a strong widow who defends her position as a single woman. Her sexual agency forces Pa Okolo to accept her choice and announces that: "The custom of Nkuchi-wife inheritance would not encumber her, but they had to extract other concessions from her 'singleness" (Ogbu 2005, p. 13). However, the need to "extract other concessions from her singleness" reveals that even when a woman resists one form of control, society may attempt to impose alternative forms of regulation. In this case, Mama Oby is not entirely free; her singleness is tolerated only under conditions that allow the community to retain some power over her. This underscores that

patriarchal systems often adapt to manage and contain female agency, rather than fully embracing women's independence or sexual freedom. Mama Oby's case illustrates what Ogunyankin (2020) describes as the reconfiguration of African women's sexuality through spatial and cultural resistance. She inhabits a space designed to repress her, but instead transforms it into a domain of agency, choice, and power. Her rejection of both marriage and sexual dependence marks a radical departure from societal expectations, making her singleness not only a personal stance but a form of structural resistance to hetero-patriarchal domination.

The novel reads that Mama Oby's assertion of sexual agency is closely tied to her economic independence, which empowers her to reject patriarchal customs like *Nkuchi* (wife inheritance). Firstly, she has a market at Eze which empowers her to be independent (Ogbu, 128). She has a land she had put up a spirited fight against her brothers in law to get this land (3). Thus, her refusal to be inherited signals a shift from the expected docility of widows to open defiance. Because she runs a thriving market stall that others depend on, she occupies a position of economic power that challenges traditional gender roles. This financial autonomy enhances her ability to resist social control, demonstrating that economic power can be a crucial foundation for women's sexual and personal agency. Her defiance is therefore not just personal but structural; it destabilises both economic and cultural expectations of women in Isiakpu society. Thus, by staying single and "concentrat[ing] on bringing up the children" (Ogbu, 10), Mama Oby redefines widowhood not as a condition of lack or incompleteness, but as a powerful space of resistance, in line with Ogunyankin's argument that African women's sexuality must be understood in terms of how they challenge, inhabit, and transform the very spaces meant to repress them.

Ogundipe argues that for a woman to voice her agency, she must actively "fight for their fundamental and economic rights, without waiting for the happy day when men will willingly share power and privilege, a day that will never come" (as cited in Morwani 2016, p. 13). Similarly, the novel contends that economic independence enhances widows' agency, noting that "the origin of women's subordination was linked to their exclusion from the marketplace" (Razavi & Miller 1995, p. 5). In this light, economic autonomy provides Mama Oby with protection against sexual exploitation. It empowers her to exercise agency by increasing her ability to make decisions both within the household and in society as a whole. Mama Oby's income grants her bargaining power with her in-laws, particularly

regarding the proposed arranged marriage for her daughter. Pa Okolo believes that because Oby is uncircumcised, she cannot marry a respectable man, and thus arranges for her to marry Ndubisi, who is also uncircumcised. Mama Oby criticises this arrangement and challenges Pa Okolo by empowering her daughter to make her own choices (Ogbu, pp. 160–162). This resistance exemplifies the broader principle that where there is power, there is also resistance. Mama Oby opposes both arranged marriage and the practice of genital mutilation for her daughter. Within the novel, Pa Okolo's exercise of power over Mama Oby is portrayed as creating personal insecurities, limiting his ability to assert authority over her. Mama Oby openly rejects the arranged marriage proposal, telling Pa Okolo:

> "You and I know that Chief Ugwueze could not have become the chief of this if men of principle were still around. How can we consign Oby and our grandchildren to such a stigma that neither money nor fame can erase? I am surprised that you are excited about this marriage proposal unless there is something I do not know" (p. 113).

This statement reveals that, in the absence of "men of principle," Isiakpu society inadvertently creates space for Mama Oby to take control by asserting her decision. In doing so, she defends her daughter and resists the hetero-patriarchal structures that seek to dominate her. Her actions challenge the expectation of female submission and reflect a deliberate refusal to conform to oppressive norms. Mama Oby demonstrates that widows can assert themselves by adopting intense, sometimes extreme, positions that undermine male dominance. Connell (1995) notes that "the authority of men is not spread in every department of social life. In some circumstances women have authority in others, and the power of men is diffused, confused, or contested" (p. 109). This observation aligns with Mama Oby's character, whose economic power enables her to make critical decisions regarding her children's futures. Throughout the novel, Mama Oby is portrayed as an assertive widow who confronts anyone, especially men, attempting to enforce submissiveness through oppressive traditions.

The suppression of women's sexual agency is closely tied to economic control, as patriarchy often operates by placing obstacles to women's access

to and control over economic resources. As Foucault (1978) argues, power disciplines bodies by regulating access to material means and shaping behavioural norms. In *The Moon Also Sets*, Mama Oby's economic independence threatens male authority, prompting Pa Okolo and his brothers-in-law to burn down her shop in retaliation (Ogbu 2002, p. 57). This act of destruction is a calculated attempt to undermine her resistance and reassert patriarchal dominance, illustrating how economic sabotage is deployed to enforce female subordination. By targeting her means of livelihood, the men aim to dismantle the foundation of her autonomy and force her back into dependency. This reflects a broader structural reality in which patriarchal systems intentionally create a lack of enabling environments for women's economic ventures, thereby restricting their ability to claim agency and challenge traditional gender hierarchies. The novel further reveals this strategy through Chief Ugwueze's advice to "find out what makes his brother's wife tick" and his suggestion that her economic power be undermined to "force obedience," even if she must later be "rehabilitated" (pp. 183–185). His words reflect a patriarchal logic that views women's economic autonomy as a direct threat to male authority. As Bell Hooks (2000) argues, such violence is often justified by the belief that those in power have the right to dominate others through force (p. 61). Mama Oby's experience illustrates that economic empowerment is not only tied to survival but also to sexual autonomy and resistance. Her defiance destabilises men like Pa Okolo, who feel their dominance is eroded by her refusal to conform. The destruction of her shop thus signifies more than an economic attack; it is a deliberate attempt to silence her resistance and reassert male control. Ultimately, the narrative reveals how economic violence is used to discipline and contain female agency in patriarchal societies.

Economic vulnerability increases women's susceptibility to gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and silencing. In The Moon Also Sets, the narrator critiques this cultural norm in Isiakpu society, where widows are discouraged from voicing their suffering, especially economic abuse, for fear of being labelled disrespectful or greedy, as those "concerned about material things and lacking respect for the dead" (p. 11). In this way, hetero-patriarchal discourse weaponises emotional and moral blackmail to suppress widows' voices and restrict their agency. However, the narrative also reveals how widows like Mama Oby begin to resist this silencing by adopting covert survival strategies. She is advised by a fellow widow to "wipe her tears and sort out her husband's property... she had to do what

she had to do… to protect herself and her children" (p. 16). The advice that "if a widow kept quiet, she and her young children would have nothing" (p. 17) illustrates the urgency of strategic resistance. By hiding or securing property before publicly mourning her husband, Mama Oby reclaims control over her life and asserts authority over her decisions. This economic resistance is directly linked to sexual agency. In a society where financial dependency often forces widows into exploitative relationships, such as wife inheritance, claiming property allows them to resist re-subordination into patriarchal structures. As Mama Oby narrates, "A man's brothers and uncles had first claim to a man's assets, whether or not he had a wife and children… the dead man's brother attempted to secure their kin's property... while their brother lay in the mortuary" (p. 16). This practice is not merely about inheritance; it enforces control over the widow's body and choices by making her economically and sexually available to male relatives. By taking preemptive action, Mama Oby and other widows subvert this control. Their resistance is not only about material survival but about reclaiming sexual autonomy and asserting subjectivity in a space that seeks to erase it. The novel resists stereotypical portrayals of widows as weak or passive, instead framing them as strong, strategic, and resourceful. In reclaiming power over their property, they also reclaim power over their bodies, their sexuality, and their futures, challenging the very structures designed to contain them.

The novel exposes the structural injustice faced by widows in Isiakpu, especially regarding land ownership. As the narrator states, "the only way a married woman can inherit landed property in the late husband's place is through her male children; the custom does not consider her direct and indirect contribution towards the acquisition of property by her late husband." This exclusion reflects the patriarchal logic that denies women independent rights to resources, tying their value instead to their reproductive roles. For Mama Oby, this means that her sexuality is framed as functional only through the production of male heirs, reinforcing a system in which women's rights are mediated through men. When Papa Oby dies, her right to the land is contested, despite her significant contributions to the family. She is left with only "a small farm, an acre of red soil" (p. 3), where "tough weeds thrive." Even this infertile land is not freely given; Mama Oby has to fight for it: "She had put up a spirited fight

against her brothers-in-law to get this land. Although she and her children were entitled to the land after her husband's death, her in-laws considered it an act of generosity on their part to allow her to keep it" (p. 3). Her struggle underscores the deep-seated belief in patriarchal societies that men are the natural holders of property, while women remain dependent and peripheral. This system of exclusion impacts women's sexuality by positioning them as passive recipients of rights only through their sexual or reproductive relationships with men. It denies widows like Mama Oby the autonomy to live as self-sufficient individuals and perpetuates a model in which their agency, economic and sexual, is conditional and fragile. Mama Oby's fight for land becomes a broader symbol of resisting this marginalisation, asserting her right not just to survive, but to exist beyond the roles patriarchy assigns to her as a widow and a woman.

In *The Moon Also Sets*, sexual violence is portrayed as a tool of patriarchal domination used to discipline, control, and punish women, especially widows like Mama Oby who resist social expectations. From an African feminist perspective, such violence is not simply a personal or isolated act but is deeply embedded in the gendered power structures of society. Amina Mama (1997) explains:

> "Sexual violence is both an expression and a reinforcement of unequal gender power relations. It is used to discipline women's bodies, to punish them for perceived transgressions, and to remind them of the limits of their freedom in patriarchal societies" (p. 69).

This reading is reflected in how multiple male characters in the novel, including Uncle Ben, Father Damian, and Pa Okolo, attempt to exert sexual control over Mama Oby. Her refusal to be inherited, her resistance to unwanted sexual advances, and her assertion of sexual and reproductive autonomy challenge the patriarchal order. In turn, these acts of defiance provoke backlash in the form of economic sabotage, community stigma, and direct sexual harassment. The novel reads that sexual violence is a pervasive reality for women in patriarchal societies, transcending marital, social, and educational status. Whether widowed, single, or educated, women are systematically objectified and targeted for abuse within cultures that prioritise male dominance. Mama Oby explains to her daughter that "both adult females, widows and singles, are fair game for the men" (p. 6), which reflects the pervasive sexual objectification of women in Isiakpu.

Mama Oby's use of "fair game" shows that society views women's bodies as available for male use, regardless of their status. This normalises sexual violence as a social right of men and demonstrates how patriarchal power defines women through their sexual availability. However, by vocalising this reality to her daughter, Mama Oby begins to resist by exposing the system and refusing to remain silent, a step toward asserting sexual agency through critical awareness. She adds, "Whatever we do, we should realise that those who set rules have different expectations for women" (p. 195). Here, Mama Oby identifies how men ("those who set rules") shape the law and morality in her society. These rules reinforce double standards, placing restrictions on women's sexual behaviour while excusing men. Recognising this imbalance allows Mama Oby to question and challenge it, signalling her conscious resistance to unjust norms, a subtle form of sexual agency.

The motivations behind sexual violence are deeply rooted in power, control, and a sense of male entitlement. As Ricardo and Barker (2008, p. 6) argue, sexual violence is not driven by sexual desire but functions as a means to assert dominance over individuals in vulnerable positions. This understanding aligns with MacKinnon's (1989) feminist theory, which posits that sexual violence is normalised within patriarchal societies as a tool of male control. This dynamic is reflected in *The Moon Also Sets*, where Uncle Ben's perceived entitlement to Mama Oby's body underscores how male authority is exercised through sexual domination and coercion. He states, "I have come to do the necessary… I have come to play with my wife as expected of me. I come because I thought that kids would be asleep by now" (Ogbu 2002, p. 35), showing how wife inheritance institutionalises male sexual access. Uncle Ben's casual phrase "play with my wife" trivialises consent, reinforcing patriarchal norms that naturalise male control over female bodies. He further declares, "It is the family's injunction that I have come to fulfil… I am still a man in this house... nobody can fight… a widow in case" (Ogbu 2002, p. 35), emphasising masculinity tied to domination and entitlement. Mama Oby, however, resists. Though "she could not find the voice with which to respond" initially (Ogbu 2002, p. 35), she quickly reclaims agency by threatening, "If you do not go out, I will scream and by daybreak, you will be very dead" (p. 35). After driving him away, she asserts power with humour and threat: "Foolish man, if you come back here again I will circumcise you a second time" (p. 35). This

confrontation disrupts patriarchal sexual violence, showing Mama Oby's refusal to submit and her active resistance to reclaim control over her body and space.

Pathologising women's resistance by labelling them as irrational, immoral, or deviant constitutes emotional and psychological abuse. This abuse undermines women's self-worth, inducing shame and guilt for asserting autonomy. As Bartky (1990) explains, such responses are part of a broader disciplinary system that punishes women for defying traditional gender roles. Emotional abuse silences and isolates resisting women, while psychological abuse operates through internalised norms that make them doubt their choices and feel obligated to uphold patriarchal expectations. In *The Moon Also Sets*, the Isiakpu community enforces this discipline through cultural expectations that demand female submissiveness. When Mama Oby resists these norms, Pa Okolo discredits her actions by claiming, "A clash of hormones dictates your actions; it is the worst thing that can happen to a woman" (Ogbu 2002, p. 116). This statement implies that Mama Oby is not resisting male authority because she is strong or has agency, but because she is emotionally unstable or hormonally imbalanced. In other words, Pa Okolo refuses to acknowledge her resistance as valid. Instead, he treats it like a symptom of a problem, something wrong with her. This pathologisation reduces her defiance to emotional instability, a tactic patriarchy uses to neutralise female agency (Bartky 1990; Gavey 2005). From an African feminist lens, such discursive strategies are not accidental but deliberate mechanisms of control. Amina Mama (1995) argues that African women are often portrayed as irrational to justify their exclusion from power. Mama Oby's refusal to comply with Pa Okolo's demands, especially his attempt to marry off her daughter to gain access to political influence, exemplifies sexual and maternal agency. Pa Okolo's ambition "to be an in-law to the chief" is rooted in his desire to use uncircumcised female bodies as currency for male advancement. Mama Oby's rejection of this plan not only defends her daughter's autonomy but also disrupts the patriarchal order that seeks to commodify female sexuality for male gain. Her actions embody the form of strategic, context-sensitive resistance that African feminists, such as Nnaemeka (2004), describe as nego-feminism — a refusal to surrender female bodies to oppressive structures while working within the cultural context to assert agency.

Father Damian's actions toward Mama Oby constitute a clear case of sexual coercion and exploitation. As a Catholic priest, he holds spiritual and social

authority, which he abuses by initiating unwanted sexual contact. The narrative recounts that "he planted a kiss on her lips. His hands grabbed her left breast and squeezed it" (Ogbu 2002, p. 20), an act that occurs without Mama Oby's consent, in a context where Father Damian's elevated status complicates resistance. According to Breitenbecher (2006) and others, sexual coercion includes a range of non-consensual sexual activities, such as kissing and sexual touching, particularly when the aggressor uses manipulation, pressure, or authority to override a victim's autonomy (Faulkner et al. 2008). The coercive nature of this act is further intensified by the trust invested in Father Damian's religious role, transforming what should be spiritual guidance into a violation of sexual and personal boundaries. His behaviour reflects a misuse of power that strips Mama Oby's sexual agency and reinforces patriarchal control through religious authority.

Mama Oby challenges sexual exploitation through a silent battle, using non-verbal resistance as a form of agency. She responds not with confrontation, but with composed silence: "She got up… showed no emotions and did not say a word" (p. 20). The narrator notes that "the relationship between them was never the same again," and Mama Oby decided to fight silently to keep her faith (Ogbu 2002, p. 21). Her silent defiance, combined with spiritual resilience, reflects the emphasis on negotiation within cultural boundaries characteristic of nego-feminism (Nnaemeka 2004). By refusing to challenge Father Damian publicly but internally rejecting his authority, Mama Oby preserves her identity and subverts the church's moral monopoly. Thus, her journey from objectification to silent protest reveals how women exercise agency even within oppressive religious systems, utilising silence and faith as complex tools of resistance (Foucault 1995; Marx 1970).

Mama Oby's pregnancy becomes a lens through which the novel explores gendered sexual repression and female empowerment in a hetero-patriarchal context. In Isiakpu, widowhood is not simply a social identity but a disciplinary condition where women's bodies are policed through cultural taboos. Sexuality is treated as a communal concern, with strict prohibitions surrounding widow reproduction. The treatment of Mama Oby's pregnancy highlights the oppressive scrutiny that widows face under patriarchal customs. The narrative notes, "The pregnancy is an additional

burden landed on her by her in-laws and the society" (Ogbu 2002, p. 23), revealing how the community does not approach her situation with compassion but instead treats her pregnancy as a source of dishonour. Rather than recognising her grief or supporting her as a widow, society frames her reproductive state as a moral failing. Even though the narrator clarifies that Mama Oby was "one month pregnant when Papa Oby died in Crisis, in Kano City," her in-laws and the larger community assume that she conceived after his death, an act labelled "an abomination, an alu" (Ogbu 2002, p. 33). These responses show how patriarchal power constructs and polices women's sexuality by creating rigid mourning customs and punishing any perceived deviation. The fact that no one considers her explanation reflects a deeper gender bias: the community is quick to judge and shame the woman, while the absent or dead man is beyond reproach. This reinforces the idea that in such societies, a widow's body continues to be controlled and morally regulated, even in the absence of a husband. The quotes thus demonstrate how reproductive autonomy is not only denied but actively weaponised against women, reinforcing their subordination and upholding patriarchal norms that prioritise male lineage and control.

Despite this, Mama Oby's declaration that "the child was her comfort" (Ogbu 2002, p. 24) transforms her motherhood into an act of sexual agency. Instead of accepting the shame imposed by her community, she claims empowerment through her maternal role, resisting the hetero-patriarchal expectation that widows be sexually and emotionally passive. As Obbo (1980) highlights, African women are often denied the space to express their sexuality and reproductive choices. Mama Oby breaks this silence, asserting control over her body and challenging norms that erase a widow's sexual identity. This aligns with Ortner's (2001) concept of agency as acting within constraints and Makombe's (2015) idea of women reclaiming their sexuality on their terms. In a culture that stigmatises widow reproduction, Mama Oby's refusal to be shamed and her embrace of motherhood become powerful forms of resistance and self-definition, demonstrating how sexual agency can be reclaimed even in oppressive contexts. In Isiakpu, psychological sexual abuse functions as a means of maintaining patriarchal control over widows, particularly those of reproductive age, like Mama Oby. This abuse is rooted in cultural beliefs that position widows as morally suspect and potentially dangerous, often accusing them of causing their husbands' deaths or engaging in promiscuity. As Pa Okolo reminds Mama Oby of "the pain she had brought to the family" (p. 9), such accusations

serve to delegitimise her autonomy and justify efforts to subdue her. The family's intent, as the novel explains, is to "kill her inner spirit and make her docile and inferior to them" (p. 12), reflecting a broader strategy of psychological domination aimed at reinforcing male authority and preserving traditional power hierarchies. This form of psychological abuse aims to silence widows' sexual agency by labelling them as deviant and undeserving of respect or autonomy. However, despite these attacks, Mama Oby "still has the energy to defend herself" (p. 10), rejecting imposed inferiority and reclaiming her dignity and voice. Her resistance directly challenges Pa Okolo's authority, unsettling the patriarchal control he tries to enforce. Pease and Pringle (2001) offer insight into this dynamic, arguing that men's constructions of social and individual power often mask underlying fears, isolation, and insecurity. Pa Okolo's attempts to dominate Mama Oby reflect his anxieties, as the novel reveals he "knew Mama Oby would not be an easy nut to crack" (p. 111) when it comes to controlling her sexuality.

Conclusion

The Moon Also Sets explores how patriarchal societies employ cultural norms, religious authority, and psychological manipulation to control women's sexuality, particularly targeting widows. Mama Oby faces economic, emotional, physical, and sexual violence masked as tradition. However, rather than succumbing to a submissive role, she asserts her agency by resisting wife inheritance, confronting sexual violations, and reclaiming motherhood as a source of empowerment. Her defiance illustrates that widows can challenge hetero-patriarchal power and redefine their sexuality on their own terms. The novel ultimately demonstrates that even within oppressive systems, African women engage in meaningful resistance and reclaim their autonomy.

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