



# Gender Consciousness and Women’s Voices in Poetic Discourse: A Review of Selected Poems

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## Abstract

The issue of gender has remained a central point of negotiation in the African milieu, where traditional patriarchal structures frequently dictate and confine women's roles. Modern African poets have utilized their works to artistically document and challenge these societal representations. Drawing on key concepts from feminist literary criticism, this study investigates the articulation of gender consciousness and the assertion of women's voices in selected poems by three prominent female Modern African poets: Titilope Sonuga, Catherine Acholonu, and Finuala Dowling. Employing a Feminist Stylistic and Thematic Analysis, the paper analyses how these poets utilize linguistic, structural, and thematic strategies to contest marginalization, define self-agency, and envision new roles for women. The findings reveal that their poetry serves as a vital platform for dismantling entrenched stereotypes and transforming gender discourse, thus asserting the female voice as a primary catalyst for social change in contemporary Africa.

**Keywords:** African patriarchy, Cultural interpretations, Gender identity, Literary discourse, Thematic analysis.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of gender disparity and the negotiation of traditional roles remain central to contemporary human discourse, particularly within the African milieu (Sotunsa, 2008). Patriarchal structures have historically influenced social, economic, and political spheres, often resulting in the marginalization and subordination of women. This study recognizes that the domain of literature, specifically Modern African Poetry, serves as a crucial artistic and intellectual battleground where these established norms are challenged and alternative forms of gender identity are articulated. Therefore, this paper is motivated by the need to understand *how* contemporary African women poets engage with and contest these entrenched social systems. We aim to move beyond simply identifying themes of oppression to analysing the strategies and linguistic features employed by female poets to assert agency and construct a distinct gender consciousness, an awareness of gendered experience and its resulting struggle for self-definition.

The study will investigate the articulation of gender consciousness and the assertion of women's voices in selected poems by three prominent female Modern African poets: Titilope Sonuga (Nigeria/Canada), Catherine Acholonu (Nigeria), and Finuala Dowling (South Africa). Specifically therefore, through a feminist stylistic and thematic analysis, this paper argues that Modern African women poets utilize their craft as a vital platform for dismantling entrenched patriarchal stereotypes, transforming gender discourse, and asserting the female voice as a primary catalyst for social and cultural change in contemporary Africa.

## 2. Gender, Poetics, and Feminist Critique

This section establishes the theoretical underpinnings of the study by reviewing critical perspectives on gender as a literary variable, the role of poetry in social critique, and the major frameworks of feminist literary criticism pertinent to the African context. This section is further discussed under the following sub-headings.

### 2.1. Defining Gender and the African Context

Scholarly consensus from various researchers emphasizes that gender is not a fixed, biological state, but a flexible, culturally interpreted variable. In line with this observation, Aidoo (2007) argues that gender is a "fluid construct rather than a fixed identity." This is why Acholonu (1985) contends that societal norms, not innate characteristics, dictate gender roles, rendering gender a pivotal element of literary discourse. In the African context, this construct is heavily influenced by pervasive patriarchal systems. While international conventions like the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, CEDAW, 1985) and local policies exist, the persistence of cultural and structural obstacles means inequality remains acute. Steady (2002) suggests that grappling with this challenge requires understanding that gender identity is a human construct built on "shaky foundations." And it should be emphasized that discussions surrounding gender often

ignite controversy due to cultural norms that perpetuate stereotypes, reinforcing the subservient position of women.

## 2.2. Gender in Modern African Poetry

Modern African poetry provides a rich canvas for showcasing and challenging these gender representations. Onarinde (2013) avers that just like every other sphere of human society, gender issue is a major point of discussion in Modern African poetry. The poet's voice, which is distinct from prose, often employs compressed imagery and intense emotion thereby making it a powerful vehicle for expressing the personal and political dimensions of gender oppression. In their study, Amore, Bamgbose & Lawani (2011) acknowledge gender as a fundamental factor in literary creation, consumption, and dissemination, underscoring the political nature of literary expression by women.

Evidences abound that female African poets, including Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Fatima Alkali, and the poets (Sonuga, Acholonu and Dowling) selected for this study, have joined the ranks of their male counterparts, specifically using their work to speak against the perceived marginalization, subjugation, and oppression of women. They have used poetry to reclaim their narratives and redefine womanhood as sufficiently established by this study.

## 2.3. Theoretical Frameworks

To analyse the strategic use of voice and language, this study draws primarily on two critical frameworks:

- Gender Consciousness: This is the thematic foundation, representing the poet's intellectual and emotional awareness of gender as a determining factor in social and personal experience. It moves beyond mere recognition of gender roles to an active realization of systemic oppression (Li et al., 2024).

- Feminist Stylistics: Proposed by scholars like Sara Mills (2005), this approach allows for the rigorous analysis of linguistic choices focusing on lexis, syntax, agency, and metaphorical use of expressions to demonstrate specifically *how* the female voice is constructed in the text, *how* power relations are encoded, and *how* the writers strategically subvert patriarchal language.

Furthermore, the work of Catherine Acholonu introduces the framework of Motherism (*Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, 1995). Motherism critiques Western feminism for being culturally incongruous with African realities and proposes an Afrocentric model where the African woman's power is derived from her traditional roles (e.g., motherhood, nurturer) and cultural structures, rather than direct antagonism with men. This theoretical difference informs the analysis of Acholonu's specific articulation of gender consciousness.

## 3. Methodology and Corpus

In line with the theoretical frameworks adopted, this study adopts a combination of Feminist Stylistic and Thematic Analytical approach. In other words, the analysis focuses on two core components relatedly explored as follows:

Through the "Thematic Analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of gender consciousness, this study identifies the specific nature of awareness articulated (e.g., consciousness of trauma, consciousness of collective power, cultural consciousness). Secondly, the Feminist Stylistic Analysis (Mills, 2005; Simanjuntak, et al, 2024) helps to examine the poetic language, specifically focusing on: Agency/Syntax to answer questions such as: Who is the subject of the action? Does the female speaker act, or is she acted upon? The feminist stylistic approach offers us the privilege to explore the metaphor or imagery involving the symbolic representations used to define female selfhood (e.g., images of confinement, liberation, or strength).

Meanwhile, the corpus analysed comprises selected poems by:

- Titilope Sonuga's poems including "Slice" and "Take Back the Night," focusing on themes of personal vulnerability and social justice.
- Catherine Acholonu's poem from *The Spring's Last Drop*, analysed through the unique lens of Motherism.
- Finuala Dowling's poem "Doo-wop Girls of the Universe," focusing on collective achievement and assertive agency.

This selection provides a comparative view of gender consciousness across distinct regional experiences and theoretical approaches within Modern African poetry.

## 4. Analysis: Gender Consciousness and Poetic Voice

### 4.1. Gender Consciousness in Titilope Sonuga's Poetry: The Voice of Vulnerability and Resistance

Titilope Sonuga, known for her powerful spoken word poetry, explores themes of identity, womanhood, and social justice. In her poem "Slice," Sonuga projects a grim reality of structural inequality from the female perspective, emphasizing the binary opposition between the oppressed (female) and the oppressor (male):

I've been cutting through pain my entire life  
The world I live in has no place for female  
pleasures (lines 1-3)

The declaration that the world "has no place for female pleasure" explicitly articulates a consciousness of deprivation, a profound awareness that the feminine self is disallowed fulfilment in the current social order. The consequence, "I cut myself / With every slice" (lines 4-5), projects the severe psychological damage (or suicidal ideation) resulting from this marginalization.

Also, in "Take Back the Night," Sonuga shifts the voice from lament to warning and self-protection, urging women to reclaim autonomy and challenge scrutiny:

Do not enter their car  
Your body is a temple (lines 22 & 25).

They will ask you how short your skirt was  
Did you smile a little too wide? (lines 31 & 32)

By questioning the judgement placed on women's attire and expressions, Sonuga uses the female voice as a catalyst for collective consciousness, challenging the patriarchal tendency to shift blame for abuse onto the victim.

#### *4.2. Gender Consciousness in Catherine Acholonu's Poetry: The Motherist Voice*

Catherine Acholonu is renowned for introducing Motherism as an Afrocentric alternative to feminism, emphasizing indigenous African women's roles, contributions, and traditional power structures. Acholonu's poetry filters gender consciousness through this cultural lens.

In the poem "The Spring's Last Drop," Acholonu portrays the arduous labour and suffering endured by the African mother in pursuit of truth:

I have laboured up the hill  
through toil and sweat  
and I cannot spill it  
this water so pure  
so clear so sweet  
the dying spring's last drop (16)

Here, the female struggle is not framed as a search for power *over* men, but as the preservation of vital, pure cultural and existential truth. The mother figure is a creator and bearer of knowledge, an image central to Motherism, asserting a voice of profound cultural significance and resilience despite obstacles like societal expectations and poverty.

Similarly, the reflection of pain in "A Long Sky" is articulated through the mother/child dynamic:

If women could weave their pain  
It would be longer than the sky,  
She began  
My mother said  
I must hold the sun in my mouth  
For days too dark to live through  
For days that sound like mourning (pg. 32)

Chuma's voice informs us that the pain is vast, but the mother's injunction ("I must hold the sun") is an assertion of internalized strength and endurance. The gender consciousness here is defined by a cultural imperative to withstand suffering and preserve hope, lending the female voice a deep, ancestral authority.

#### *4.3. Gender Consciousness in Finuala Dowling's Poetry*

##### *4.3.1. The Voice of Celebration and Command*

Finuala Dowling's work, particularly "Doo-wop Girls of the Universe," shifts the discourse from lament or endurance to celebration and active demand for recognition. Her poem celebrates women's excellence across various professions:

I know something you don't know  
about the women you know –  
those makers of decisions,  
physicians, rhetoricians,  
amiable stage technicians,  
indignant politicians,  
formidable statisticians,  
quiet dieticians  
and the non-icians too,  
the lovely -ists...(16)

This enumeration is an act of linguistic affirmation, a conscious effort to make visible the unseen or underappreciated contributions of women. This leads to a powerful, radical assertion of agency:

Give her the mike, Mike  
or I'll call my sisters,

This command to "Give her the mike" is the ultimate expression of gender consciousness leading to collective action and demand for discursive space. The female voice is no longer pleading; it is demanding its place in the public sphere, challenging male dominance ("Mike") with the threat of female solidarity ("my sisters").

## **5. Conclusion**

This study successfully investigated the articulation of gender consciousness and the assertion of women's voices in selected poems by three prominent female Modern African poets: Titilope Sonuga, Catherine Acholonu, and Finuala Dowling. By employing a Feminist Stylistic and Thematic Analysis, the research confirmed that Modern African women poets do not merely document marginalization but actively engage in strategic linguistic and thematic resistance against entrenched patriarchal norms across societies.

The study has revealed a powerful plurality of strategies through which gender consciousness manifests. Particularly, the analyses showed Titilope Sonuga's poetry articulating a consciousness rooted in vulnerability and trauma, translating this awareness into a protective voice of warning and self-protection. Her style relies on direct address and the use of private, confessional imagery to expose the psychological cost of systemic inequality.

In contrast to Titilope Sonuga's style and perspective on consciousness, Catherine Acholonu frames her gender consciousness through the Afrocentric paradigm of "Motherism." Her voice is one of ancestral authority and resilience, strategically reclaiming the mother figure and traditional African cosmology to assert womanhood as an inherently powerful cultural force. This approach emphasizes endurance and the preservation of cultural truth, offering a distinct counter-narrative to Western-centric feminism.

Finally, with a different perspective too, Finuala Dowling's work asserts a consciousness of collective achievement and unapologetic agency. Her poetic voice is characterized by celebration and command, notably utilizing enumeration of women's professional roles and direct, imperative statements such as: "Give her the mike, Mike" to demand visibility and challenge the male gatekeeper.

From the foregoing, these poets collectively demonstrate that the female voice is a veritable means for insightful gender discourse. Their works successfully destabilize the notion of the African woman as a monolithic, passive figure, instead showcasing her as an intellectual and political agent whose experiences are most clearly and profoundly understood when relayed through her own perspective. While this literary engagement is crucial for promoting critical consciousness, the conclusion reaffirms that significant systemic barriers remain, necessitating the sustained efforts outlined in the following recommendation section.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings regarding the power and necessity of the female poetic voice in challenging gender norms, the following recommendations are put forth for the various stakeholders including literary critics, educators, and social advocates.

### 6.1. For Literary Critics and Scholars

- Future research should expand the application of Feminist Stylistics across a wider range of African women poets to map regional and linguistic variations in the assertion of agency. Specific focus should be placed on analysing syntax (agency) and metaphorical subversion in detail, perhaps using quantitative stylistic methods.
- Scholars must continue to engage with and validate indigenous feminist frameworks like Motherism, rather than relying solely on Western theoretical models. Comparative studies between Motherist poets and contemporary intersectional poets would provide richer insights into culturally specific resistance strategies.

### 6.2. For Educational Curricula Developers

- Educational curricula at secondary and tertiary levels across Africa must prioritize the inclusion of female African poets like Sonuga, Acholonu, and Dowling. This ensures that students engage directly with literary works that challenge gender stereotypes and promote critical gender consciousness.
- Poetry courses should explicitly teach the analysis of poetry as a form of social and political critique, demonstrating how linguistic choices (like Dowling's use of the imperative voice) function as acts of resistance.

### 6.3. For Advocacy and Social Change

- Social justice organizations should actively collaborate with women poets, utilizing their powerful and concise language in advocacy materials and public awareness campaigns to champion gender equality.
- Funding and logistical support should be provided for women-only literary workshops, publishing initiatives, and reading circles. These spaces foster the development of new female voices and ensure the continued expansion of this vital literary discourse.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to emphasize that the struggle for gender justice requires sustained effort, advocacy, and solidarity across all levels of society. And by continuing to engage with and amplify the poetry of Modern African women poets, we can inspire a critical examination of gender norms and actively work towards creating more inclusive and equitable societies.

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