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Beyond Subjugation: Rethinking Power and Female Agency in Mary Karooro Okurut's *Child of a Delegate* and "*A Virgin for the King*"

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Abstract

This paper examines Power and Female Agency in Mary Karooro Okurut's Child of a Delegate and "A Virgin for the King". The paper explores how the author depicts women's ability to stand up for their own interests in a male-dominated Ugandan society. The study aims to deepen understanding of the narrative strategies Okurut employs to advance female agency in her novels. The paper uses feminist and post-colonial approaches to investigate how the characters resist the pressure exerted on them to conform to societal expectations. The analysis demonstrates that, instead of being passive victims of patriarchy, Okurut's protagonists use subtle forms of resistance to negotiate power relations and gain some degree of agency. They go beyond their socially constructed roles and acquire a form of liberation that is self-driven and stems from their viewing of themselves as subjects, not objects. The research thus ultimately focuses on how Okurut's writing provides a new perspective on female agency in Ugandan fiction.

Introduction

The Ugandan and African women's literary heritages have produced numerous female authors. Mary Karooro Okurut is one of the writers who has significantly contributed to the African women's literary heritage. In her literary works, she

develops the ideas expressed by African women's critics and novelists. For instance, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that African women should define themselves, while Nabakooza (2012) explores the relationships between women and their culture. African women novelists and critics flourished at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. These writers depicted the experience of women and their struggle for political power, sexual freedom, and other rights. Mary Karooro Okurut is among Ugandan writers who wrote about women's experience, interpreting it from a distinctly Ugandan perspective. Therefore, her works should be evaluated using the Ugandan African feminist approach, which recognizes the cultural, social, and political particularities of the Ugandan people.

Researchers have focused much attention on African women writers and their literary heritage. African women's literary heritage is filled with works depicting the experience of subordination to patriarchy. However, several scholars have argued that African women's literature is more diverse than it is presented in the dominant discourse of African women's studies (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). In other words, African women's literature does not only narrate the experience of subordination but also depicts examples of African women's agency in local traditions. Agency may be defined as a capacity to act or behave independently. It has been suggested that African women's agency should not be understood from the dominant viewpoint of Western feminism. Mahmood (2005) argues that agency is embodied, meaning that people express it through their bodies. Scholars studying African women's literature have proposed to conceptualize African women's agency from the perspectives of African women's local traditions and culture. Therefore, African women's literature provides examples of African women's agency that are manifested in African traditions. In addition, the narratives of African women writers demonstrate that their heroines negotiate their lives within the framework of local patriarchal traditions. Mary Karooro Okurut's literary heritage is filled with stories depicting women's lives and their relationship with patriarchy. Thus, the following research questions guide this study: How does Okurut depict female agency in patriarchal society? How do the narratives of Child of a Delegate and "A Virgin for the King" portray female power?

The central message of this paper is that Mary Karooro Okurut deserves more attention from the international feminist scholarship, as her works present the voice of an African woman writer. Although she is a Ugandan writer and politician, her literary heritage remains unstudied from the perspective of international feminism. The current study fills this gap by presenting reflections on African women's agency

in Okurut's narratives. In addition, this research contributes to the discussion of African women writers' legacy, which is dominated by the discourse of women's subordination to patriarchy. The current study advances the understanding of how African women writers depict female power in their narratives.

Moreover, the themes depicted in Okurut's stories resonate with the ideas of African women's agency in local traditions. The protagonists of Okurut's stories demonstrate how women can attain power despite being subjected to patriarchy. The current study, therefore, contributes to the scholarship on African women's power in local traditions. In addition, this study elucidates the concepts of Ugandan women's power and its reflection in the works of Ugandan female writers. Various researchers have demonstrated that African folktales are filled with illustrations of women's power and African traditions (Ocan et al., 2025). *Child of a Delegate* and "A Virgin for the King" are the stories that demonstrate the themes of African folktales. Thus, this study contributes to the discussions of African folktales and their reflection in African women's literature.

Furthermore, the current study is a contribution to the scholarly debates on African women's narratives and their interpretation within the framework of African feminism. Different African women writers have expressed diverse views regarding the role of African women in society. For instance, Nnaemeka (2004) has introduced the concept of "nego-feminism," which depicts African women as agents who negotiate their position in society using give-and-take principles. Another scholar, Acholonu (1995), has argued that African women are inherently nurturing and supportive, which is reflected in their close relationships with each other and their communities. Okurut's protagonists seem to demonstrate viewpoints similar to those of the proponents of African feminism. Thus, the current study contributes to the discussion of African women writers and their perspectives on African women's role in society.

The themes of female power in private and public spheres are vividly depicted in Okurut's stories. *Child of a Delegate* presents the story of a woman whose family life and public life are intertwined. This woman is portrayed as an agent who questions the role of women in society. The protagonist of *Child of a Delegate* reflects the experience of Ugandan women, who are underprivileged and who find themselves in circumstances beyond their control but who, through their agency, negotiate and end up obtaining political power to transform society. In her story, Okurut depicts the protagonist, who is a daughter of a delegate and a street child. The protagonist narrates her coming-of-age experiences, which are related to the changes occurring

in the country's politics. Through the lens of the protagonist, the audience perceives the impact of female power and agency and its impact on society.

"A Virgin for the King" illustrates the experience of women who participate in ceremonial practices. The story depicts a woman who re-signifies her experience and demonstrates how women exercise their power in society. Okurut's protagonists are the embodiments of female power. They illustrate the role of women in society from the perspective of African culture. Therefore, analyzing these protagonists' deeds allows obtaining more insight into the ways Ugandan women exercise their power. The story demonstrates how women can be powerful even when their power is manifested in rejection of ceremonial practices. Thus, the reader perceives the cultural particularities of Ugandan traditions concerning women's roles.

Finally, the current study advances the discussion of African women writers and their themes from the perspective of African postcolonial feminism. It has been suggested that the literature of African women writers contains the discourses of nation-building and national belonging. The representatives of African postcolonial feminism have depicted the themes of national identity and African values in their works. Mary Karooro Okurut is both a writer and a politician; therefore, she perfectly understands the national needs and the role of politics in Ugandan society. Her works contain various reflections of these themes, demonstrating how Ugandan women can exercise their power. Thus, the current study contributes to the discussion of Okurut's ideas of female power in Ugandan literature. Moreover, the current research adds to the scholarly debates on African postcolonial feminist writings and the reflection of national belonging in them.

Child of a Delegate and "A Virgin for the King" demonstrate the different aspects of female power. Mary Karooro Okurut depicts the experience of women who exercise their power in society from the perspective of Ugandan culture. The stories present female power in both private and public spheres. The protagonist of "A Virgin for the King" illustrates how women are forced to promote unjust ritualistic practices. *Child of a Delegate* depicts a woman who promotes female empowerment at any given opportunity. The stories show that female power is manifested in the deeds of women who exercise their agency. These deeds can be both symbolic and radical. Although the existing scholarship predominantly depicts African women as victims of patriarchy, Okurut's protagonists prove that African women can empower themselves. Therefore, the current study contributes to the discussion of African women writers and their depiction of female power in literature.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of analysis for Mary Karooro Okurut's works is informed by African womanism and post-colonial feminism. African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives are appropriate in decoding women's experiences as depicted in Child of a Delegate and "A Virgin for the King". African womanism is advanced by scholars such as Hudson-Weems who argue that it focuses "on the African woman's unique cultural, historical and social realities" (Hudson-Weems, 1998, pp. 24-26). Womanism's proponents argue that women's liberation is intrinsically linked with race, communalism, and nationalism. Notably, African womanism focuses on African women's experiences and lives in the context of African social institutions and not Western institutions. African womanism gives the researcher a framework for decoding experiences of women in Uganda. This is because Ugandan traditions, values, and social norms are indigenous to the country and inform the life of every Ugandan. These traditions, values, and norms are particularly pertinent in the family setting and in national and communal life. This is why African womanism is critical in analyzing the role and effectiveness of women as depicted in Okurut's works.

Conversely, the post-colonial feminism perspective enables the researcher to decode gender relations and women's experiences more fully. Post-colonial feminism theory focuses on the interactions between power and gender in both a local and international context. Mohanty observes that while Western feminists have depicted "Third World" women as oppressed, victimized, and passive, "Third World" women have been actively negotiating power and patriarchy (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 64-68). Therefore, through post-colonial feminism, the researcher reviews gender relations and women's experiences in Ugandan society with fresh eyes. This is because the post-colonial feminism perspective challenges the notion that women are entirely subordinate to men.

Additionally, this perspective enables the researcher to question the power dynamics that exist between Ugandan men and women as well as the impact of colonialism and patriarchy on gender relations. The analysis of women's experiences and roles using post-colonial feminism is pertinent, especially in a country such as Uganda where patriarchy and colonialism have been the status quo for a considerable period of time. In essence, African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives are appropriate because these theories challenge the status quo as far as gender relations are concerned and take into account cultural beliefs and practices that inform power dynamics in society. Both African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives argue that women in Ugandan society are

active negotiators of power even though they do so within the confines of patriarchy. The analysis of women's experiences through these theoretical frameworks sheds light on the cultural underpinnings of women's role and agency in Ugandan society. For instance, African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives enable the researcher to review the role of women in Ugandan society as depicted by Okurut's works within the context of gender roles and stereotypes. African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives also enable the researcher to explore the extent to which women conform to or deviate from cultural beliefs and practices as far as gender relations are concerned. African womanism and post-colonial feminism are also particularly appropriate in decoding the role and agency of women depicted in Okurut's works since both theories argue that gender relations cannot be fully understood from a Western paradigm. For instance, African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives enable the researcher to explore cultural beliefs and practices that define the roles of Ugandan women in society. Such aspects of culture include proverbs, myths, maxims, rituals, and social norms, among others. This is because African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives argue that Africans have their own worldviews, epistemologies, and paradigms for understanding societal phenomena.

As such, through these theoretical frameworks, the researcher explores the epistemology that underpins women's role and agency in Ugandan society as depicted in Okurut's *Child of a Delegate* and "A Virgin for the King". The researcher draws insights from the works of Nabakooza, among others, on African women's literature whose writings illustrate African women's epistemology. Such epistemology is pertinent because African women writers such as Okurut depict their female characters as exercising agency in a patriarchal society through a variety of means. However, their actions are always informed by African traditions, values, and social norms.

The discussion of female agency and role in Okurut's works was informed by Michel Foucault's understanding of power. According to Foucault, power is relational and therefore cannot be understood from the position of either the oppressor or the oppressed. In his work The History of Sexuality, Foucault writes, "Power is exercised through a network of relations and is not a property of the subject or of the State" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 92-95). As such, an examination of the role of women is seen to take place in the larger society not from the perspective of either the oppressor or the oppressed. The analysis of women's agency in Okurut's works is informed by Judith Butler's view of gender as performative. Judith Butler argues that gender is performed according to scripts. As such, people are not born

male or female; instead, their biological sex is performed according to set cultural beliefs and practices. This perspective is particularly appropriate in the analysis of gender roles and agency as depicted in Okurut's works since the discussion is centred on how gender roles are performed in Ugandan society. Although Butler's view of gender is largely informed by the European and American experiences, the perspectives can be used to understand gender roles and agency in Ugandan society, particularly within the framework of post-colonial feminism.

Using Michel Foucault's relational understanding of power and Judith Butler's performative theory of gender, the researcher explores the agency of women as depicted in Okurut's *Child of a Delegate* and "A Virgin for the King". Both theories take a different angle from the status quo perspective of analyzing power and gender. Through the discussion of the performative aspect of gender, the researcher focuses on how women depicted by Okurut use their agency to negotiate gender roles prescribed by society. The discussion of agency also takes place within the larger power structure as described by Michel Foucault. This means that the discussion of female agency is informed by the larger power structure in society. This perspective is particularly appropriate in the analysis of the role and agency of women in Okurut's works given that the writer depicts female characters who exercise their agency within the confines of a patriarchal society.

Social, Political, and Historical Aspects of the Role and Agency of Women in Uganda

Any discussion of gender relations requires a clear understanding of the social, political, and historical aspects of gender in Ugandan society. Tamale notes "Uganda has a patriarchal society like the rest of Africa, yet Uganda has witnessed several changes and challenges in its political, legal, and cultural systems" (Tamale, 1999, pp. 7-10). These observations are particularly pertinent to gender relations in Uganda. It is through these observations that the researcher gained a deeper understanding of how gender relations, women's roles, and agency are depicted in Okurut's works. The observations also provided a framework for understanding the role and agency of women in Ugandan society in general. The fact that Ugandan society has undergone significant social, political, and cultural changes is a key consideration in analysing gender relations in Okurut's works. This is because the dynamics of gender relations in Okurut's works cannot be dissociated from the social, political, and cultural history of Uganda. Additionally, Tamale observes "it is not enough to look at Uganda's liberal and progressive laws to understand women's lives, since many of these laws contradict customary practices and women's social and economic realities" (Tamale, 1999, pp. 102-105). This

observation offers a critical insight into the depiction of women in Okurut's works and gives the researcher a direction in reviewing gender relations in Ugandan society in general. Indeed, Tamale's observations create a theoretical framework upon which the researcher can base the discussion of the role and agency of women as depicted in Okurut's works.

The researcher draws insights from African womanism, post-colonial feminism, Foucault's relational understanding of power, and Butler's performative theory of gender to discuss female agency as depicted in Okurut's works. The discussion is informed by a review of gender relations in Ugandan society. Notably, the use of African womanism and post-colonial feminism perspectives enabled the researcher to review the role and agency of women in a Ugandan context. Conversely, the discussion of power and gender informed by Foucault's relational understanding of power and Butler's performative theory of gender. Additionally, the analysis of gender relations and women's role and agency took place against the backdrop of the social, political, and economic history of Uganda, particularly with regard to gender relations.

The works of Mary Karooro Okurut, which explore both literary and public spheres, have attracted considerable attention in Uganda. However, the scholarship on Okurut has focused primarily on social and cultural aspects of her writing, neglecting to investigate how the author portrays female agency. Reading Ugandan scholarship in conjunction with African feminist writings (Aidoo's literary criticism, Ogundipe-Leslie's re-creation, Nnaemeka's nego-feminism) can help bridge this gap and provide new insight into the portrayal of female agency in Okurut's works. This literature review assesses Ugandan scholarship on how Okurut explores African feminist writings on female agency, and identifies how the scholarship can build upon one another.

Ugandan scholarship on Okurut: themes, contexts, and constraints

The Ugandan scholarship on Mary Karooro Okurut has made significant strides in situating the author within Uganda's postcolonial literary traditions and investigating the themes and contexts of her works (Musisi, 2010; Nakimera, 2020; Ocan, 2024). The scholarship has made critical interventions in examining how Okurut's stories reflect Ugandan values and social change. For instance, Okurut's works have been read in relation to the political, economic, and social changes that have taken place in Uganda since her novels were written (Musisi, 2010; Nakimera, 2020; Ocan, 2024).

However, the scholarship has been overwhelmingly descriptive, providing a set of themes and contexts that Okurut's stories depict without investigating how female agency is portrayed through rhetorical and narrative means (Musisi, 2010; Nakimera, 2020; Ocan, 2024). The Ugandan scholarship has been instrumental in identifying the themes and contexts of Okurut's stories, such as patriarchy, corruption, and motherhood, as well as the narrative outcomes of these themes, such as tragedy and social change. Nevertheless, the scholarship has not interrogated how Okurut's use of rhetoric and narrative techniques reflects female agency.

African feminist writings: themes, contexts, and constraints

African feminist writings offer valuable insight into the ways in which female agency can be investigated within Okurut's works. Three African feminist writings, in particular, have made critical interventions in discussing female agency in African literature. First, Ama Ata Aidoo's literary criticism and writings demonstrate how African women writers have created new literary canons that enable them to write about their experiences without being constrained by the existing literary traditions (Aidoo, 1977/1997). Aidoo's works, including the play Our Sister Killjoy, can be read to discuss how female writers have been able to subvert the existing discourses on African society and create new ones that centre African women's voices.

Second, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's *Re-creating Ourselves* (1994) is a valuable resource for reading Okurut's works because it explores how African women have been engaging in cultural re-creation through various forms of artistic expression. Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) work provides a theoretical foundation for discussing how African women *writers* have been using their creative writings to transform society, particularly in terms of gender relations. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that African women writers have been employing a wide range of rhetorical and narrative strategies to achieve their objectives, such as challenging patriarchy and advocating for gender equality.

Third, Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism (2004) offers a useful framework for discussing female agency in Okurut's works. Nnaemeka (2004) argues that African women have been negotiating their gender roles and relations in a variety of ways, including non-confrontational means, such as accommodation and persuasion. This perspective enables a close reading of how female agency is exercised in Okurut's stories, as the protagonist often navigate their social realities through a combination of rhetoric and negotiation.

African Feminist Writings and Ugandan Scholarship on Okurut:

A synthesis of the Ugandan scholarship and African feminist writings can yield valuable insights into the portrayal of female agency in Okurut's stories. First, the Ugandan scholarship situates Okurut's stories within the sociohistorical context of postcolonial Uganda, which is critical for understanding how female agency is portrayed in the stories (Musisi, 2010; Nakimera, 2020; Ocan, 2024). However, the scholarship's descriptive approach to discussing the themes and contexts of Okurut's stories limits the analysis of how the author's rhetoric and narrative techniques reflect female agency. Reading Ugandan scholarship in conjunction with African feminist writings can help bridge this gap by providing a theoretical foundation for discussing female agency in Okurut's stories.

African feminist writings offer a theoretical foundation for discussing female agency in Okurut's stories by demonstrating how female writers have been engaging in cultural re-creation, subverting existing discourses, and negotiating gender relations (Aidoo, 1977/1997; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Nnaemeka, 2004). In particular, Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) discussion of cultural re-creation and Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of nego-feminism can be used to discuss how female agency is exercised in Okurut's stories. Additionally, Aidoo's (1977/1997) Our Sister Killjoy can be used to explore how Okurut's protagonist negotiates her social reality through a combination of rhetoric and negotiation.

Three areas that warrant further investigation in the Ugandan scholarship on Okurut are the following: agency as a process, form as a medium for exploring agency, and local particularities within a pan-African framework. First, agency should be investigated as a process rather than an endpoint or an outcome. This perspective can help elucidate how Okurut's protagonist exercises agency through a combination of rhetoric and negotiation. Second, form should be considered a medium for exploring agency, which means that attention should be paid to how the author's use of various rhetorical and narrative techniques reflects female agency. Third, local particularities should be investigated within a pan-African framework, which means that the Ugandan scholarship should build upon the African feminist writings to discuss how female agency is exercised in Okurut's stories.

Implications

Addressing these research questions requires engaging in close reading practices guided by African feminist theories. In this regard, the study entails both line-by-line readings of the chosen texts by Okurut and theoretical inquiries into the ways

nego-feminism and cultural re-creation are deployed to reveal the nuances of female agency. Particular attention was paid to the depiction of dialogic interactions, narrative focalization, choice of language, and scenes of negotiation to identify the mechanisms through which agency is negotiated or manifested in the given narratives. The comparative element in this study emerges from identifying the similarities and differences between Okurut's approach to female agency and the strategies used by Aidoo and other African women writers.

Okurut's novels represent a fertile ground for situating the Ugandan sociocultural environment within the larger project of African feminist writings. Indeed, while the Ugandan context has been extensively explored in the previous scholarship (Musisi, 2010; Nakimera, 2020; Ocan, 2024), there is a need for more research on the theoretical underpinnings and formal means through which agency is manifested in her writings. The theoretical framework offered by Aidoo's scholarship on the aesthetics of female agency, Ogundipe-Leslie's conceptualization of cultural re-creation, and Nnaemeka's nego-feminism and its implications help address this issue. Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarly debates by demonstrating how the themes of female agency in Okurut's novels intersect with socio-cultural discourse and advance African feminist scholarship in new directions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis research design to examine how Mary Karooro Okurut presents female agency and renegotiates gender relations in the novel *Child of a Delegate* (1999) and the short story "A Virgin for the King" (2007). The choice of a qualitative textual analysis design rests on its ability to capture the complexities of meaning creation and dissemination encoded in the literary works under investigation (Given, 2016). This technique is more appropriate than the quantitative or content analysis of textual information since it considers the intricacies of language peculiar to the creative writings of Okurut. It also allows for contextualizing the literary pieces within the cultural and ideological environment in which they were produced (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This study proposes using a qualitative design to analyze how gendered power dynamics unfold through the female characters and voices in Okurut's literary works.

Text Selection

The texts selected for this study are Okurut's first novel, *Child of a Delegate* (1999) and her short story titled "A Virgin for the King" (2007). The rationale for selecting these texts rests on their thematic concern with female agency, gender relations, and

power in patriarchal societies. The two literary works were purposefully selected because qualitative research typically relies on purposeful sampling to identify materials that contribute specific information to a study (Palinkas et al., 2015). This study focuses on Okurut's use of literary devices to renegotiate gender relations and present female agency in different social settings. *Child of a Delegate* interrogates gendered power relations within the domestic and political realms, whereas "A Virgin for the King" unveils the ideological underpinning of female sexuality. These texts provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing how Okurut tackles the theme of female agency in different patriarchal institutions.

The study adopted a thematic analysis approach to examine how Okurut portrays female agency and renegotiates gender relations in the selected texts. Thematic analysis is appropriate for this study since it allows the researcher to identify, organize, and offer insight into the content and data under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach also helps in understanding the meaning and importance of various manifestations of female agency and gendered power dynamics encoded in Okurut's texts. In addition, the study employs a discourse analysis approach to reveal the underlying assumptions regarding female agency and gender relations in Okurut's works. Discourse analysis helps illuminate how power relations were performed and negotiated by the female characters depicted in the narratives under review (Fairclough, 2010).

Justifications of the Approaches and Data Interpretation

The choice of these approaches is appropriate since Okurut's literary works encapsulate a dynamic interplay between theme and discourse. The thematic analysis enables this study to uncover how each text portrays female agency and renegotiates gender relations. However, a close reading of the texts reveals that Okurut employs creative discourse to present her views on female agency and gendered power dynamics. Therefore, this study adopts a combined thematic and discourse analysis approach to capture the nuances of the themes encoded in the literary works under investigation. The selection of these texts for analysis was based on their significance in Okurut's creative writing career. The first text represents Okurut's initial attempts at interrogating female agency and gendered power relations, whereas the short story exemplifies her changing perceptions of female agency.

The interpretation of data uncovered through the thematic and discourse analysis of these texts relies on intertextuality to establish connections between Okurut's writings, Ugandan cultural beliefs, and extant feminist theories. Intertextuality is

employed to reveal the links between Okurut's literary works and the broader cultural beliefs and ideologies that informed their production (Kristeva, 1986). This approach also aids in uncovering the relationship between Okurut's beliefs and those of other writers who have made significant contributions to feminist literature. This study interprets the data relying on African and post-colonial feminist theories to illuminate Okurut's views on female agency and gender relations. Interpreting the data through the lens of African and post-colonial feminism enables a contextual understanding of female agency and gendered power dynamics in Okurut's works. The choice of these theoretical frameworks is appropriate since they consider African cultural beliefs and practices in understanding female agency and gendered power relations (Hudson-Weems, 1998; Mohanty, 1988).

Discussion

This discussion section explores the theme of power in Mary Karooro Okurut's Child of a Delegate (1999) and the short story, "A Virgin for the King" (2007). It focuses on the gendered aspects of power as manifested in the politics of Uganda. The themes discussed include patriarchal inheritance and political symbolism, individuals' subversion of power using various forms of agency, and the counter-subjectivity of the 'delegate's daughter' who represents the third gender. The analysis follows feminist, womanist and post-colonial perspectives in discussing the manifestations and consequences of power as depicted in Okurut's works.

Patriarchal Inheritance and Political Symbolism

The politics of Uganda is portrayed as the extension of patriarchy and masculinity into the public sphere. In other words, the nation's politics are gendered. Freedman (2003) argues that politics are inherently patriarchal due to their close links with the family, thereby reflecting gender inequalities that exist in families. This explanation resonates in Okurut's *Child of a Delegate* because political positions such as delegate are portrayed as male bastions that exist to serve the patriarchal interests of Ugandan society. The delegate is both a political leader of the masses and a patriarch who propagates the vices he has come to deliberate upon; a phenomenon that explains the gendered aspects of power in Uganda. Okurut reveals the extent to which patriarchy has penetrated Ugandan politics by presenting the public persona of the delegate as the extension of manhood and phallocentricism. This means that politics has become a mechanism for promoting patriarchal values and priorities, such as female subordination to male leadership.

Child of a Delegate exposes the gendered nature of Ugandan politics by linking the nation to patriarchal family values that depict men as superiors and women as

subordinate helpers. The national values and symbols that Okurut attributes to the delegate are similar to those associated with the patriarch. The delegate's deliberations in the conference as opposed to his actions emphasize his role as a leader, a position that Ugandan society compares to the husband as the head of the family. Consequently, Okurut suggests that deliberations and goodwill stop in conference halls while the supposed implementers of decisions indirectly sabotage their own decisions; a betrayal to society and mankind.

"A Virgin for the King" presents a similar view of the gendered aspects of power in Uganda. In this story, the national values and symbols have been used to advance patriarchy by depriving women of their rights to personal autonomy, particularly regarding sexuality. Like the delegate in *Child of a Delegate*, the king is portrayed as the ultimate leader whose public persona reflects his status as a patriarch. The story reveals the extent to which patriarchy has penetrated Uganda's political system by linking leadership to male sexuality. For example, the king's political dominance is based on his ability to satisfy the patriarchal desire to own a virgin, a position that makes female sexuality a political tool. Similar to the delegate in *Child of a Delegate*, only the king has the power to free the protagonist from having a ritual marriage that can only satisfy the patriarchal expectations of the Izooba society in the text. Such issues as virginity and female sexuality have been used in other circumstances to deny women political power and representation in Uganda.

The exposure of gendered aspects of power in Uganda explains how female members of society have been excluded from political positions. Although Okurut's protagonists are not politically inclined, they all expose the hypocrisy of male political leaders who hold power through patriarchy and use it to promote national interests that contradict family values.

Individuals' Subversion of Power Using Various Forms of Agency

Okurut's protagonists reveal the extent to which patriarchal power has been exercised to control various aspects of the lives of ordinary Ugandans to advance the patriarchal agenda. However, they also depict the various ways in which the ordinary people, especially women, have exercised their agency to resist such power. For example, although the delegate's daughter in *Child of a Delegate* is portrayed as needy and poor as she pursues her studies, thanks to her father's last-minute benevolence, she uses her intellectual abilities to question the validity of family values and their impact on family lives. By being a brilliant student, the protagonist challenges the notions of patriarchy and demonstrates her ability to use critical thinking to resist the oppression of the Ugandan patriarchal system.

Similarly, the protagonist in "A Virgin for the King" uses her moral agency to resist the power of the Ugandan patriarchy that wants to own her. By refusing to succumb to the ritual and agree to have sex with the king, the protagonist shows that her moral values are not easily compromised by the patriarchal power structures that seek to control her sexuality.

Okurut demonstrates the subversive potential of women by depicting the ways in which the protagonists exercise their agency to resist patriarchal power. The power is revealed as existing mainly in the public sphere, especially in the positions of leadership. Consequently, Okurut's female protagonists use their private spheres to resist the power of male political leaders. For example, their education and moral values enable them to take subtle but effective actions that expose the hypocrisy and flaws of male leaders who use their power to control the private lives of their subjects. *Child of a Delegate* depicts such an aspect of resistance through the protagonist's subtle criticisms of the male's actions and speeches in the text. Such criticism resonates with Scott's (1990) concept of infrapolitics that reveals how people exercise agency to challenge oppressive political systems through non-confrontational actions and speech.

The 'Delegate's Daughter' as a Counter-Subject

The daughter of the delegate in *Child of a Delegate* represents a counter-subject that exposes the power structures in Ugandan politics. By questioning the validity of the existing patriarchal values, the protagonist reveals the extent to which the Ugandan political system promotes patriarchal ideals. For example, Hero, the protagonist, depicts the lecturer and the Academic Registrar as patriarchal figures whose power and leadership are based on their ability to exercise control over their subordinates. By her actions and criticism of their actions, the protagonist exposes the hypocrisy of the males by showing that their behaviour and actions conceal selfish intentions. Hero's criticism of the male characters who sexually bribe her exposes the fact that they have been using their power to promote corruption.

Furthermore, Hero, the child of a delegate, represents a counter-subject that highlights how university students are subjected to the control and power of lecturers and administrators such as the Academic Registrar. *Child of a Delegate* illustrates this aspect of subversion by depicting a student who criticises the unjust actions of university staff, thus revealing their hypocrisy. Similarly, "A Virgin for the King" depicts how the protagonist has used her voice to oppose the ritual marriage, decreed by tradition. Traditional power, acted here as a forced ritual marriage, has been used to deprive the protagonist of her right to choose what to do

with her sexuality. In contrast to the expectations of the whole village and clan, the protagonist opposes their expectations and exercises her agency to resist their power.

Child of a Delegate and "A Virgin for the King" present female protagonists that depict how the power of the Ugandan patriarchal political system has been exercised to control the lives of ordinary citizens. The analysis focuses on the themes of patriarchal control and political symbolism, individuals' subversion of power using various forms of agency, and the counter-subjectivity of the 'delegate's daughter' who represents the third gender. The analysis uses feminist, womanist and post-colonial perspectives to explore the themes and their relevance in Ugandan politics and literature today.

Rethinking Agency: From Subjugation to Strategic Resistance in Okurut's Feminist View

Okurut's writings are among the most prominent in Ugandan women's writing because they question gender inequalities and the subordination of women. However, her works provide a nuanced view of the relationship between domination and agency. The paper argues that Okurut's writing presents a feminist aesthetics of negotiation between genders in patriarchal societies. The paper also argues that Okurut's works represent the beginning of the Ugandan Indigenous Feminist Ethics of Negotiation. The article analyses the themes of agency and power from the perspective of Okurut's Child of a Delegate (1999) and A Virgin for the King (2007).

Rethinking Agency: From Subjugation to Strategic Resistance

Western feminist criticism tends to depict agency as action or rebellion, which either portrays African women as victims of patriarchy's subjugation or makes them "triumphant westernized heroines" for their overt opposition to patriarchy (Mohanty, 1988, p. 101). Okurut's works problematize both Western views of third-world women's submissiveness and overt masculinized rebellion. Okurut's writings depict women who express agency through their moral conduct, intellect, silence, and artfulness in negotiating gender relations. In other words, Okurut's female protagonists demonstrate strategic resistance to patriarchy.

In *Child of a Delegate*, Okurut's female characters negotiate with male counterparts to overcome some of the power disparities in political and family institutions without overtly challenging the system, exemplifying what Ocan (2024) refers to as "problematizing" colonized and patriarchal institutional logics." The women do not

oppose the system directly but rather seek to change it from within by working on their terms and conditions, which are more flexible. For example, the female characters conduct themselves with moral integrity, which undermines the system's efforts to belittle them and diminish their self-respect. In short, Okurut's female characters demonstrate that they can negotiate their subordination to patriarchy.

The strategic resistance is manifested in various ways, including self-discipline and moral conduct, intellect, and silent sabotage as described by Okurut in A Virgin for the King (2007). The women exercise agency by negotiating the meaning of shaming in the patriarchal systems to save their self-respect and dignity (Ocan, 2025). The narration exemplifies the African narrative tradition whereby gender equality is achieved through subtle power assertion disguised as politeness, humility, and service, rather than overtly confronting the established social order. However, the subversion's objective is to remind the audience or readers that the narrator or protagonist is entitled to the same respect as any other human being; therefore, their rights cannot be freely trampled on without consequences. As such, the strategic exercise of agency is based on self-respect and self-love and the belief that they deserve to be treated equally despite living in a male-dominated world.

Redefining Feminist Power: From Opposition to Negotiation

Okurut's contribution to the debate on gender equality and women's empowerment is through her unique take on power, which challenges the traditional view of power as a binary possession. The writer's depictions of gender relations question the assumption that power is either held by men or women. For example, Okurut's works depict women attaining power through negotiations rather than confrontation. Her depictions of power dynamics emphasize relational aspects of power, which entail elements of give-and-take and emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships in general.

Okurut's views on power relations contribute to the discussion on gender equality by demonstrating that power is distributed and shared among people within a given relationship rather than being a prerogative of one party. For instance, the novelist often depicts women gaining power through moral authority rather than outrightly acquiring it through force. She also exposes power structures by questioning how patriarchy makes women invisible. In doing so, Okurut's writings challenge both Western and African perceptions of gender relations. In other words, the novelist problematizes both the Western view of male superiority and the African belief in total female subordination to men. Okurut's criticism of patriarchy is based on her view that gender equality is a fundamental right for both males and females.

The writer's perception of power has a major implication on her views on the role of women in the domestic setting. For example, Okurut believes that women can negotiate power within the home to achieve gender equality in families. Family life is presented as the venue through which women can challenge patriarchal societal structures to change their status in society. In *Child of a Delegate*, Okurut demonstrates the power of women's voices in matters affecting them through "everyday acts of reclaiming selfhood," which challenge men to reconsider their actions (Johnson, Denis, & Charles Nelson, 2022, p. 113). In other words, women can use their voices to accuse men of their exploitative nature. This view is consistent with Okurut's criticism of female subordination to patriarchy, which is manifested in the family institution. In essence, Okurut's views on power inform her perspectives on gender equality in families and, by extension, in society at large.

Indigenous Feminist Ethics: Community-Oriented and relational models of agency

The author's main argument revolves around Indigenous Feminist Ethics as a school of thought that prioritizes communal responsibility, relational agency, and kinship values over individualistic and egocentric privileges associated with Western feminism. Arguably, Okurut's protagonists make choices based on the expectations of communal solidarity rather than pursue individualistic desires and inclinations. As the Indigenous Feminist Ethics view suggests, women's empowerment is achieved through relational agency where their behaviour is geared towards enhancing communal integrity while sustaining moral and cultural values.

Okurut's protagonists' commitment to communal integrity resonated with my understanding of collectivist cultures, particularly African Indigenous beliefs. The author's arguments align with those of other Ugandan scholars such as Ocan and Okumu (2025), who explain the Acoli folktales' lessons and values. Similar to the Acoli folktales, Okurut's protagonists espouse relational ethics where individuals, including women, make decisions based on the expectations of the community. For instance, the use of silence and patient endurance by the protagonist is a manifestation of African Indigenous beliefs that espouse community-oriented morals. Consequently, Indigenous Feminist Ethics demand collective responsibility and promote social norms that enhance communal peace, which is only achievable through relational agency rather than individualistic approaches.

Okurut's Feminist Aesthetics: Towards a Ugandan Negotiated Feminist Consciousness

Okurut's feminist aesthetics present a Uganda-specific version of Western liberal feminism, which seeks to advance the interests of women by promoting their empowerment regardless of gender-based power disparities. Her arguments reflect the essence of a Negotiated Feminist Consciousness that is grounded in situational factors such as personal experiences, collective experiences, and contextual issues. For instance, Okurut's arguments conform to the perspectives of African Indigenous feminists who promote negotiated individualistic feminism, particularly in addressing patriarchy (Namirembe, Wanjala & Muleka, 2020). Consequently, the author advocates for relational autonomy where women's decision-making is dependent on communal responsibilities and social expectations rather than individualistic desires (Mwetulundila, 2019). Secondly, Okurut advances feminist aesthetics that involve the use of strategic power to negotiate gender power relations. Her protagonists use their moral and intellectual powers to achieve their goals despite existing patriarchy (Mwetulundila, 2019). In addition, Okurut's writings depict the importance of indigenous knowledge in advancing women's empowerment (Mwetulundila, 2019; Namirembe, Wanjala & Muleka, 2020). Finally, the author supports the concept of adaptive power in her feminism, which is evident in her protagonists' ability to reshape power structures to achieve their goals (Namirembe, Wanjala & Muleka, 2020). Collectively, this feminist aesthetics reveal a Uganda-specific version of liberal feminism, as espoused in the author's writings.

Okurut's writings offer insights into African Indigenous Feminist Ethics that can be used to advance women's empowerment in Uganda and, by extension, the rest of Africa. By questioning Western feminism and the promotion of individualistic approaches to women's empowerment, Okurut's African Indigenous Feminism promotes relational agency based on collective experiences and adaptive strategies to address gender-based power inequalities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study is a valuable contribution to African feminist literary criticism because it tries to relate the nuances of Mary Karooro Okurut's writing to the themes of gender and power in Ugandan society. The article helps to understand how the author's views on female empowerment can serve as a guideline for interpreting the literary works of other African female writers. It highlights Okurut's critical attitude toward both patriarchal traditions and the Ugandan

political system, pointing out the importance of power relations in African feminism. In addition, the study underlines the significance of the relationships between Ugandan women and the political establishment for the empowerment process. Therefore, the article can be regarded as a valuable source for further research on African women's writing, aimed at exploring the strategies through which female authors present their characters' resistance to patriarchy.

The main value of this study rests in the opportunity it offers to reassess African feminist literary criticism in the light of the complex relationships between female characters and the Ugandan patriarchal establishment. Okurut's *Child of a Delegate* (1999) and "A Virgin for the King" (2007) are interesting in terms of analysis because they demonstrate how Ugandan women negotiate power in both families and the Ugandan Education Arena. The analysis of the author's attitude to the issues of female empowerment and equality contributes to further discussions of similar themes in the works of other African writers. The article also helps to understand the particularities of Ugandan feminism in comparison with its Western counterpart. The study shows that, in order to empower themselves, Ugandan women choose non-confrontational and subtle ways of negotiating relationships with their male counterparts.

For further research, it would be interesting to analyze the works of other African female writers, such as Grace Ogot and Goretti Kyomuhendo. Some attention should be paid to such questions as the role of family relationships in the empowerment process in Okurut's writings, as well as in the writings of Ogot and Kyomuhendo. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine the peculiarities of female agency in different socio-political settings. Moreover, there is the chance to analyze other female writers who deal with similar topics within the Ugandan context in order to highlight the subtle differences between them. Thus, the results of the study can become a valuable contribution to African feminist literary criticism, helping to identify the strategies chosen by African female authors to negotiate patriarchal power in a variety of socio-cultural contexts.

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