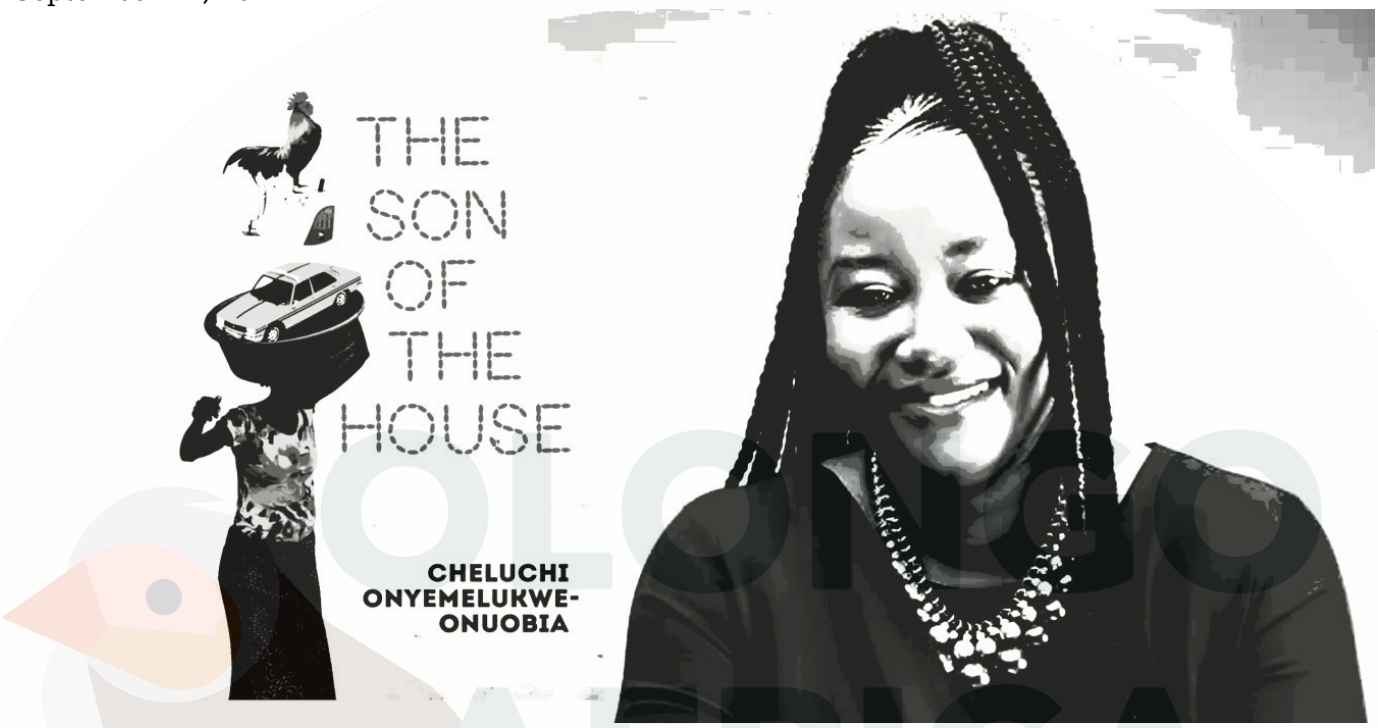
Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's Gender Quest

Salawu Olajide
September 27, 2021



The past decade has witnessed a resurgence of female novelists in Nigeria, particularly in fiction. It comes as no surprise that American and European publishers have published the novels of more Nigerian women than those of their male counterparts. This is a welcome development, no less fantastic. The resurgence is also evident in the current shortlist of the Nigeria LNG Prize for Literature featuring two novels published outside Nigeria: Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House and Abi Daré's The Girl With the Louding Voice*. Penguin Random House published both books in 2019 and 2020, respectively. However, the focus here is on Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's debut novel, a story of female resilience amid a culture of oppression. The story of a housemaid, Nwabulu. It is also the story of an entrepreneur, Julie. Despite their marginal positions in the family, these two women strive to assert their autonomy in their respective domains. This is, indeed, the story of female industry.

The housemaid remains a fixture in many Nigerian middle-class families, attesting to the social stratification in the dominant culture. Ironically enough, not many Nigerian novelists have significantly dramatized the plight of domestic servants, the world of servitude that entraps many of their kind. Onyemelukwe-Onuobia tackles this subject in plain and uncompromising prose. In the novel, she reveals the precariousness of female housemaids and the sexual assault they usually encounter. That is not the only topic she discusses; she also considers the pitfalls of gender ideology, showing how traditional patriarchal structures reinforce classism and androcentrism in society. More importantly, she depicts the tenacity of women in a culture that threatens their selfhood. Hers is a narrative that celebrates female autonomy but trenchantly criticizes male culture.

In *The Son of the House*, Onyemelukwe-Onuobia switches her narrative between the past and the present, the war and postwar periods. It is a complex structure, which she uses to reflect the persistence of memory, and the role writers can play in remembering the perils of war. The Nigeria-

Biafra war happened in the late 1960s, yet it remains a touchy subject many writers would rather avoid. In his poetic essay, "The Beige Notes," the prolific Nigerian American poet Uche Nduka remarks that Biafra is almost a whisper in Nigeria. Furthermore, in *War in African Literature Today 26,* the eminent African literary critic Ernest Emenyonu stresses the need for creative writers to probe the ramifications of war. However, he cautions them not to allow their art to degenerate to propaganda lest it undermines artistic objectivity. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets,* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* elucidate the brutalities of war: this is not the pivot on which Onyemelukwe-Onuobia remembers the war. Instead, she references it as a spectre to underscore how its memory still haunts some of her characters, thus illustrating its afterlives in the body politics.

The Son of the House is composed of three parts. Part one portrays the story of Nwabulu. In contrast, part two looks at Julie's story. The actions take place between 1972 and 1973. The final part includes stories of both women, spanning over thirty decades later, in 2011. In some way, the novel charts the childhood experiences of both protagonists. In *The Nation Writ Small,* Susan Andrade describes how the bildungsroman exemplifies the narrative of the individual in their complexity, tracing their formation and development in society. Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's portrayal of Nwabulu and Julie captures their respective subject formation. She uses the first-person point of view but oscillates the narration between Nwabulu and Julie, contouring and layering their experiences with adversities. This device presents a kind of "narrative mirroring" in which each narrator appears to mirror or counter-mirror the other's story. The novel begins with a prologue set in 2011, featuring Nwabulu and Julie, around whom the story will ultimately revolve. The prologue shows that a gang has kidnapped the women and will not release them until it gets its ransom. Regardless of their abjection, the two women decide to pass time and regale each other with stories of their lives.

Onyemelukwe-Onuobia also addresses issues of domestic and sexual violence. While men are the culprits in the novel, she also indicts women such as Mama Emma, described as "a lion," full of "thundering bellow." She delights in hitting her husband, Papa Emma, at the slightest provocation. Papa Emma is "a hulking man," even though he comes across as pitiable, "a goat." Yet, he violates the ten-year-old Nwabulu when she lives with them as their housemaid in Lagos. Although Onyemelukwe-Onuobia criticizes gender injustice, she also calls out female cruelty exemplified by the characters of Mama Nkemdilim, Mama Emma, and Mama Nathan. Still, the brilliance of her vision lies in how she emphasizes female solidarity. There are several instances of this feminist practice between Nwabulu and Chidinma, Julie and Obiageli.

The Son of the House uncovers crucial dimensions of women's lived experiences in postcolonial Africa. Consequently, Nigerian literature has grown more robust with this remarkable novel. In her essay, "Transcending the Margins: New Directions in Women's Writing," the feminist scholar Iniobong I. Uko argues that African women writers have re-imagined what it means to be a woman in modern societies. By contesting negative portrayals of women, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Osonye Tess Onwueme, Promise Okekwe, and Julie Okoh have rehabilitated the image of African womanhood. Although Uko provides a narrow list of female authors, such contemporary novelists as Chika Unigwe, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Sefi Atta, Yejide Kilanko, Yaa Gaasi, Ukamaka Olisakwe, Petina Gappah, Jennifer Nansubuga Maumbi, Imbolo Mbue, and many more writers have likewise reconstructed femininities. Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onubia is among this generation of women writers redefining womanhood. Her work further challenges female invisibility in Africa.

Perhaps, *The Son of the House is not about how culture privileges male heirs. It is primarily the story of daughters, women, and mothers—the affirmation of the female in all its contradictions and richness. It is a narrative of what is human in us, whatever our gender—*and *a testimony to our capacity to suffer much but triumph altogether.*

Uche Peter Umezurike holds a PhD in English and Film Studies from the University of Alberta. An alumnus of the International Writing Program, Iowa, USA, he is a co-editor of *Wreaths for Wayfarers*, an anthology of poems. His children's book *Wish Maker* is forthcoming from Masobe Books, Nigeria in fall 2021.

OLONGO AFRICA