

# Behind the Door: An Exploration of Nigerian Women in Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

Ikhlas Muhamed Nati\*

International Campus, Shiraz University, Iran

Farideh Pourgiv

Shiraz University, Iran

**Abstract**—Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* offers a groundbreaking exploration of gender politics and female agency in postcolonial Nigeria. Through feminist textual analysis and sociocultural contextualization, this study examines how the play subverts patriarchal norms via the radical leadership of Wazobia, a woman who disrupts traditional chieftaincy structures. Onwueme critiques systemic oppression by interweaving resistance, identity reconstruction, and collective empowerment, reframing Nigerian women as catalysts for sociopolitical change rather than passive subjects. The narrative interrogates the duality of cultural traditions—both as tools of marginalization and potential vehicles for liberation—while addressing colonial legacies that compound gender inequities. Wazobia's ascendancy symbolizes a decolonial reimagining of power, challenging patriarchal hegemony through indigenous epistemologies and linguistic hybridity. The play's allegorical dramaturgy, ritual symbolism, and performative resistance amplify silenced voices, positioning it as both a cultural critique and a manifesto for feminist praxis. Beyond Nigeria, the work contributes to global feminist discourse by illustrating how localized struggles intersect with broader decolonial imperatives. Onwueme's visionary narrative transcends theatrical boundaries, demonstrating literature's capacity to destabilize oppressive systems and advocate equitable futures. By centering women's agency and redefining leadership through a feminist lens, *The Reign of Wazobia* emerges as a transformative act of literary activism, urging cultural renewal and social justice in contemporary Africa.

**Index Terms**—cultural contextualization, female empowerment, gender role and resistance, social transformation, patriarchal structures

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of contemporary African literature, Onwueme (1955) writes revolutionary works that directly confront the complexities of gender politics and female empowerment. Her play *The Reign of Wazobia* was written in 1988, during a period of significant social and political transformation in Nigeria. It transcends mere theatrical entertainment to become a powerful instrument for social change. Through its rich characterisation, symbolic imagery, and bold narrative choices, the play presents a sophisticated critique of patriarchal structures while simultaneously offering a compelling vision of female leadership and social transformation.

Significantly, *The Reign of Wazobia* serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal structures in Nigerian society while presenting a vision of female leadership and social transformation. Through the character of Wazobia, Onwueme crafts a narrative that challenges traditional gender hierarchies and explores the possibilities of women's political empowerment.

In contemporary literature, the intersection of culture, identity, and gender plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives, particularly in African literature. In this respect, Tess Onwueme's play, *The Reign of Wazobia*, stands out as a profound exploration of the complexities faced by Nigerian women in a rapidly changing societal landscape. Through vivid characterisations and rich thematic elements, Onwueme delves into the struggles, aspirations, and resilience of these women, effectively portraying their quest for autonomy in both personal and communal spheres. The narrative challenges traditional gender roles while simultaneously highlighting the impact of colonialism and globalisation on Nigerian identity. As the play unfolds, it becomes evident that the barriers faced by these women are not merely personal but intricately connected to broader sociopolitical dynamics. This exploration provides a vital commentary on the multifaceted nature of womanhood in Nigeria, inviting readers to engage critically with the themes presented.

The ascension of Wazobia to power marks a pivotal moment in the community's history, challenging long-established gender norms and power structures. Her very presence in a leadership position contradicts traditional expectations, as emphasised by the male elders' reaction: "It has never been heard that a woman would wear the crown in our land. The gods forbid it!" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 23). This resistance to female leadership reflects deeply ingrained

\* Corresponding Author. Email: [inati@uowasit.edu.iq](mailto:inati@uowasit.edu.iq)

patriarchal attitudes that the play systematically challenges. Wazobia's response to such opposition is both powerful and philosophical: "The gods who created two hands—left and right—for each person created both men and women in equal measure. None was born to serve as the other's head" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 45).

In the Nigerian community, where traditional and colonial legacies often clash with contemporary gender ideals, Onwueme's play challenges audiences to consider the role of women as leaders and agents of change. This study analyses the multifaceted representation of women in *The Reign of Wazobia*, examining how Onwueme's portrayal of female empowerment transcends societal expectations and offers a vision of progressive gender roles. The objectives of this study are to analyse the complex portrayal of women in *The Reign of Wazobia*, explore the interplay between traditional and modern values within Nigerian communities, and assess the play's role in contributing to feminist discourse in African literature. Additionally, the study aims to examine the contemporary relevance of the themes presented in the play and investigate the symbolic and theatrical devices employed to convey messages of empowerment.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tess Onwueme's literary contributions significantly enrich the discourse on Nigerian women's experiences, particularly through her play *The Reign of Wazobia*. In this transformative work, Onwueme weaves a narrative that reflects the complexities of female identities within a patriarchal society. By placing women at the center of her storytelling, she not only challenges traditional gender roles but also highlights the resilience and agency of Nigerian women. Many playwrights try to shed light on the Nigerian woman and explain all the difficulties which surround her. Longdet, in her paper "Redefining the African Female Identity: A Palimpsest Re-reading of Selected African Women's Writing", writes about the exploration of female identity in certain literary works written by African women spanning multiple generations (Longdet, 2020, p. 9). The paper is a critical rereading of the chosen texts. It specifically focuses on women's identities, and it is veiled in deep ironies, creating multiple levels of meaning analysis. Unlike most earlier works authored by African male writers, most of these authors failed to entirely exclude women from literary manuscripts. The result is a persistent stereotypical depiction of women in media, such as prostitutes, murderers, and the like. The study concludes that female authors should find other ways to give their female characters new identities—identities as productive members of society who are not enslaved by patriarchy and who make positive use of the liberating and caring features of our cultures.

Batra (2017) discusses the effect of colonialism on the Nigerian woman in her paper "Polygamous Postcolonialism and Transnational Critique in Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*". The searcher explains the transition role of the Nigerian female character in Onwueme's play. He concludes that the Nigerian woman has significantly changed. In the past, the Nigerian woman had no interest in politics. But in the present time, the Nigerian woman has succeeded in leading her people. In this respect, Wazobia is a role model for a successful Nigerian female leader in Onwueme's play. After the death of her husband, the king, Wazobia becomes the new leader in the traditional Nigerian community. She ultimately stands for the new image of Nigerian people.

Furthermore, Nyamekye (2024) examines *The Reign of Wazobia* via the feminist lens. Feminist concepts and the sexist portrayal of women in works written by men serve as the jumping off points for the conversation. The research mainly responded to some of the feminist questions raised by Ann Dobie in her analysis of a feminist book. The text was analysed by looking at gender stereotypes, the way male characters talk about women, the way those characters treat female characters, and the way powerful social and political actors are portrayed. Women are capable and can thrive in leadership positions, according to Nyamekye (2024) in "A Feminist Appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*".

*The Reign of Wazobia* by Onwueme is the central topic discussed by Worugji (2010) in "Redefinition of the Position of Women in Osonye Tess Onwueme's Play '*The Reign of Wazobia*'." The researcher explains Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* as a play in which a group of women rally around a strong female character named "Wazobia" who defies her people's traditions. The degraded status of women in her society is something she expresses, and it is something that most contemporary female scholars see as unfairly applied to women across Africa. The play's heroine, "Wazobia", serves as the foundation for the research. Some of her attributes make her stand out in a male-dominated culture, but they also provide her with a platform to speak out for those who don't have one. Even the traditionally oppressed women in the play eventually come to terms with their place in society and become allies in the fight against gender inequality. In order for any society to progress, this paper contends that women must be educated and that males must acknowledge their existence, potential, and contributions. If women were free to take part in nation building, starting at the grassroots level, social progress must ultimately happen. Empowering women is the best way to improve society, and diverse minds are always more effective than homogeneous ones.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The feminist theory serves as the foundation for this study. African traditional notions, particularly those concerning the roles of women in society and, more especially, in patriarchal structures, provide the conceptual framework of the whole analysis. Instead of being radical or combative, feminism promotes understanding and cooperation. The ultimate

goal of this idea is to promote a balanced relationship between the sexes. To change the situation, men and women alike must rise up against patriarchy, which is pervasive across the continent and has devastating effects on women. The chameleon should be disguised by the woman in such a difficult situation. Therefore, the researchers examined and analysed *The Reign of Wazobia* by the Nigerian playwright Tess Onwueme through the lens of feminism. Analysing, contrasting, and clarifying the play through its shared characteristics, this study connects the themes related to the female characters in the chosen work with the theoretical framework. Its strong female characters also play an important role in building their identity. Furthermore, this paper helps readers better grasp the autonomous nature of the female characters in *The Reign of Wazobia*. Thus, in its persistent pursuit of depicting the challenges encountered by female characters battling for independence and their responses to those challenges, this research adopts a feminist approach.

#### IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The play embodies a microcosm of broader societal shifts, illustrating how women's voices can reshape cultural narratives. As noted in the critical analysis, Onwueme's work interrogates social constructs and offers a platform for exploring diverse female experiences, ultimately suggesting that masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the quest for societal progress (Onuoha et al., 2021). This exploration underscores the importance of women's perspectives in literature, promoting a deeper understanding of their struggles and triumphs in contemporary Nigeria.

Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* is not only a compelling narrative but also a revolutionary statement on gender equality, social justice, and female empowerment in Nigeria. Through Wazobia's character, Onwueme challenges patriarchal norms and advocates for a society that values women's contributions in both private and public spheres. The play's powerful message resonates beyond Nigeria, speaking to universal struggles for women's rights and equality. By weaving traditional symbols, contemporary feminist ideas, and dynamic characterisation, Onwueme provides a model for progressive change, making *The Reign of Wazobia* an enduring piece of feminist literature in the African theatre. This exploration highlights the play's contribution to feminist discourse and underscores its relevance in today's quest for gender equality and social justice.

*The Reign of Wazobia* stands as a masterful exploration of gender politics and female empowerment in the Nigerian community. Through its complex characterisation, rich symbolism, and bold thematic choices, the play continues to offer relevant insights into questions of gender, power, and social transformation. Its enduring significance lies not only in its artistic merit but in its continuing relevance to contemporary discussions of women's rights and leadership in Africa and beyond. The play can be regarded as a powerful critique of gender inequality and a vision of female empowerment. Through her masterful storytelling and complex characterisation, Onwueme creates a work that continues to resonate with modern audiences and contribute to ongoing discussions about gender and power in the African society.

*The Reign of Wazobia* serves as a profound exploration of the lives of Nigerian women, capturing their struggles, resilience, and resistance in a society dominated by patriarchal norms. Through Wazobia's character and her journey, Onwueme critiques the cultural and political forces that limit women's potential while celebrating their capacity for strength and solidarity. Wazobia's quest for freedom becomes a rallying cry for all women, urging to forge new paths for themselves. The play is a rich exploration of the lives and struggles of Nigerian women, revealing the complex layers of patriarchy, resistance, solidarity, and identity. Significantly, through the character of Wazobia, Onwueme presents a powerful narrative about the transformative potential of self-empowerment and collective action. Wazobia's journey challenges the restrictive norms of her society, urging all women to break free from the metaphorical doors that bind them.

Onwueme's play ultimately offers a vision of hope, suggesting that through collective action and unwavering determination, Nigerian women—and women worldwide—can transcend societal limitations and redefine their roles. Wazobia's story is a powerful reminder of the enduring strength of women's voices and their ability to shape the future.

In the traditional Nigerian community, gender roles were clearly defined, with women primarily responsible for domestic duties while men held authority in the public sphere. According to Oyewumi (2023, p. 45), "The intricate social systems in traditional Nigerian societies often positioned women with significant domestic power while limiting their presence in public spheres of influence." This societal structure creates a tension that Onwueme critically explores in her play, particularly through the character of Wazobia, who challenges these constraints by asserting her right to rule.

Therefore, *The Reign of Wazobia* is a dynamic exploration of the role of women in the Nigerian community, particularly through the character of Wazobia, a female leader who challenges patriarchal structures. The play presents a world where women are oppressed, yet one woman's resistance highlights the potential for transformation through agency and collective action. Wazobia's character stands as a symbol of empowerment, defiance, and autonomy, while the play critiques the pervasive gender inequalities in the Nigerian culture, society, and politics. In this respect, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that "Gender roles are not a fixed reality but are constructed, contested, and capable of being transformed" (Adichie, 2014, p. 49). In *The Reign of Wazobia*, Onwueme engages with this concept by portraying a protagonist who not only confronts societal norms but also proposes new forms of leadership that transcend traditional gender expectations. This paper critically analyses Onwueme's work, with a focus on the empowerment of women and the transformation of societal roles through resistance. Onwueme subverts this dichotomy by presenting

Queen Wazobia as both a symbol of traditional feminine strength and an assertive figure in the public sphere. Her character illustrates how women can redefine their roles in societies that typically marginalise them.

The traditional Nigerian society, particularly in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, operated within strictly defined gender hierarchies. This was noted by prominent Nigerian scholar Oyewumi (2023, p. 45) who argued that “The complex web of social relations in traditional Nigerian societies often placed women in positions of significant domestic authority while limiting their participation in public spheres of influence”. This dichotomy between private power and public authority creates a fundamental tension that Onwueme explores throughout the play. Onwueme’s portrayal of gender roles in *The Reign of Wazobia* exposes the profound impact of patriarchal systems on Nigerian women. Male characters reinforce stereotypes, relegating women to subordinate roles that stifle their potential. This dynamic situation mirrors broader societal tensions, such as limited access to education and political power for women. The narrative emphasises that education and economic empowerment are crucial for dismantling these structures. Thus, the female characters in Onwueme’s work consistently challenge patriarchal confines, advocating for women’s liberation and autonomy (Nyamekye & Sotunsa, 2024).

The play addresses the nuanced experiences of Nigerian women, weaving their stories into a tapestry of resilience, resistance, and community in the face of patriarchal oppression. Set within a cultural and political landscape where women’s voices are traditionally stifled, the play follows Wazobia, a woman whose journey reveals the complexities of female identity, agency, and solidarity in Nigeria (Akobo, 2016). By examining key moments in the play, this paper analyses how Onwueme uses dialogue, symbolism, and cultural references to underscore the struggles and triumphs of Nigerian women.

Therefore, *The Reign of Wazobia* is a compelling investigation of the roles and challenges of Nigerian women within a traditionally patriarchal society. Set against a backdrop of cultural expectations and social limitations, Onwueme’s work provides a powerful narrative about the resilience, agency, and solidarity of Nigerian women, represented through the protagonist Wazobia. Her journey symbolizes the struggle for female autonomy and empowerment, urging a redefinition of womanhood in a society where power and freedom are largely the prerogatives of men.

*The Reign of Wazobia* stands as a powerful exploration of gender dynamics and social transformation in Nigerian society. Through its rich characterization, symbolic depth, and compelling narrative, the play offers profound insights into the challenges and possibilities of female leadership and gender equality. Onwueme’s work continues to resonate with contemporary discussions about gender roles, leadership, and social justice in Africa and beyond. The play demonstrates that meaningful change requires both individual courage and collective action, while acknowledging the complexity and difficulty of social transformation.

Navigating the intersections of gender dynamics and power structures reveals a stark portrayal of women’s subjugation in the Nigerian community. Tess Onwueme’s plays challenge patriarchal narratives, particularly in the context of neocolonialism. Through themes like polygamy in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Onwueme juxtaposes traditional practices with contemporary struggles for women’s rights (Batra, 2017). Cultural discourse analysis reveals how these power structures manifest through language, reinforcing male domination while silencing female voices (Okam, 2019). Onwueme’s work critiques these dynamics and serves as a transformative medium advocating for revolutionary change and gender equality.

Moreover, *The Reign of Wazobia* intricately portrays the convolutions of Nigerian womanhood, navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity. The protagonist, Wazobia, emerges as a powerful figure who challenges conventional gender roles, asserting her independence and agency in a society that often seeks to confine women to subservient positions. This representation is significant, as it aligns with contemporary research emphasizing the importance of literature in fostering awareness and understanding of women’s issues.

Wazobia’s character embodies the struggle for self-definition and empowerment. As she confronts the patriarchal structures that seek to limit her, she declares, “I will not be a shadow in my own life” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 45). This assertion reflects a broader theme in the play: the quest for identity amidst societal expectations. Onwueme crafts Wazobia as a symbol of resistance, illustrating the potential for women to reclaim their narratives and assert their rights. The character’s journey resonates with feminist discourses that advocate for women’s empowerment and the dismantling of oppressive systems (James, 2022).

The play also highlights the communal aspect of women’s struggles. Wazobia’s interactions with other female characters reveal a network of solidarity and support among women. For instance, when Wazobia states, “Together, we can break the chains that bind us,” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 67) she underscores the importance of collective action in challenging patriarchal norms. This portrayal aligns with feminist scholarship that emphasizes the power of sisterhood and collaboration in the fight for gender equality. Onwueme’s depiction of women coming together to support one another serves as a powerful commentary on the necessity of unity in the face of adversity (Worugji, 2010).

Onwueme’s use of language and symbolism further enriches the representation of women in the play. The neologism “Wazobia”, which combines elements from Nigeria’s three major ethnic groups—Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa—serves as a metaphor for unity and inclusivity among women. This linguistic choice reflects Onwueme’s commitment to advocating for a collective female identity that transcends ethnic divisions, emphasizing that women’s empowerment is a shared struggle across different cultural contexts (Okolocha & Yuka, 2016).

The play also critiques the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles. Wazobia's defiance of societal expectations is evident when she asserts, "I refuse to be defined by the roles others have carved for me" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 56). This rejection of prescribed identities resonates with feminist theories that challenge the notion of fixed gender roles and advocate for fluidity in identity (Longdet, 2020, p. 6). Onwueme's portrayal of Wazobia as a multifaceted character who navigates various identities illustrates the intricacies of female existence in a patriarchal society.

*The Reign of Wazobia* serves as a powerful platform for voicing the struggles and aspirations of Nigerian women. Through the character of Wazobia, Onwueme challenges traditional gender norms and advocates for women's empowerment, illustrating their resilience in the face of adversity. The play's representation of women as agents of change contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and highlights the importance of literature in fostering awareness of women's issues in contemporary society. Onwueme's characters capture the convolutions of Nigerian womanhood, navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity. The protagonist, for example, challenges traditional gender roles by asserting her independence. This representation aligns with contemporary research that stresses the significance of literary portrayals in fostering awareness of women's issues (Agwu et al., 2022). The play provides a platform for voicing Nigerian women's struggles, demonstrating their resilience in the face of adversity.

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, cultural heritage serves as a vital lens through which the identities and experiences of women are shaped. The female characters navigate a landscape imbued with traditional values that both empower and constrain them. This duality reflects the complexities of feminine identity in a patriarchal society, underscoring how ancestral customs inform contemporary struggles and aspirations. Onwueme's exploration of women's roles resonates with the evolving discourse on identity, particularly as seen in the contrasting portrayals of masculinity and femininity in the Nigerian theater. The nuanced representation of male identities by playwrights like Soyinka and Osofisan highlights the intersectionality of gender and culture, demonstrating that constructs of masculinity are often influenced by women's experiences and narratives (Onuoha et al., 2021). Cultural heritage not only informs the characters' identities but also serves as a catalyst for challenging and redefining societal roles. Onwueme's play provides a profound reflection on the societal forces that empower and constrain women, fostering greater empathy and understanding of their lived experiences. Her characters illuminate the pressing need for gender equality and advocate for transformative change in both local and global contexts.

Onwueme frames the struggles of Nigerian women within the constraints of cultural expectations. Wazobia's character embodies both a deep-rooted connection to her heritage and a fierce resistance to the limitations it imposes. Early in the play, Wazobia articulates her frustration with the way tradition is used to control women: "They say our worth is found behind the walls of men's houses, but I know there's more to us than being their silent shadows" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 12). This line reflects Wazobia's awareness of the gendered expectations that confine women's roles within home, illustrating her desire to transcend them.

By questioning the narrow definitions imposed by tradition, Wazobia symbolizes the hidden strength and potential of Nigerian women—a strength that Onwueme believes as remaining largely unacknowledged. Tradition, often personified through male characters, stands as an obstacle to Wazobia's autonomy. When she expresses her desire to pursue her ambitions, a male character retorts: "What does a woman need with dreams beyond her family? Her duty lies here, not out there in the world" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 15). This quotation highlights how tradition enforces restrictive gender roles, assigning women a limited sphere of influence. Wazobia's resistance challenges this narrative, as she continues to question the systems that dictate her fate.

Patriarchal structures in *The Reign of Wazobia* manifest through the authority of male characters who seek to maintain their control over women. The societal expectation that women serve only as wives and mothers is vocalized by Wazobia's husband: "Your duty, Wazobia, is not to lead or question but to follow in silence, as a wife should" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 18).

Through such declarations, Onwueme illustrates the depth of patriarchal power within the Nigerian community. Wazobia's response to this command reflects her refusal to accept passive subjugation: "I will not be silent in a world that deafens itself to the voices of women. I will speak, I will act" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 19). This defiance captures the tension between Wazobia's agency and the patriarchal forces that seek to suppress her. Her decision to speak and act becomes a form of rebellion against the political structures designed to keep women submissive. In another powerful exchange, Wazobia confronts her husband's authority directly: "I am more than your wife; I am a woman of my own, with dreams that reach beyond these walls" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 23).

Here, Onwueme encapsulates Wazobia's assertion of self-identity, which defies the traditional role of wife and mother. By proclaiming her autonomy, Wazobia becomes a symbol of resistance, representing women's potential to redefine themselves outside patriarchal limitations. The play places a strong emphasis on sisterhood as a means for women to reclaim their power. Wazobia finds support among other women, who encourage her to pursue her ambitions despite the societal limitations imposed on them. In a stirring scene, she addresses her female companions: "We are not alone; our strength lies in each other. Together, we can break the chains that bind us" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 30).

Through this call for unity, Onwueme presents sisterhood as a source of strength that enables women to challenge oppressive systems. Wazobia's rallying cry to break the chains symbolises her belief in collective resistance as a path to freedom. When Wazobia and the other women gather to discuss their shared struggles, one woman asserts: "Our voices,

though silenced, are many. Together, they can rise like a river, breaking down any wall” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 32). This image of a rising river suggests a powerful, unstoppable force—one that, when combined, has the potential to dismantle the societal structures that oppress them. Through this metaphor, Onwueme celebrates the resilience of women’s solidarity, reinforcing the importance of sisterhood in their fight for justice.

The play’s investigation of female solidarity emerges as a crucial theme throughout the narrative. Women from various social backgrounds unite in support of Wazobia’s leadership, demonstrating the power of collective action in challenging oppressive structures. This unity is beautifully captured in the statement, “We are daughters of the same mother earth, bound by the same cord that ties us to our common destiny” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 67). The solidarity among women becomes a powerful force for social change, as they support each other in resisting patriarchal oppression and working toward their collective empowerment.

Therefore, *The Reign of Wazobia* presents a compelling narrative that challenges traditional patriarchal structures in the Nigerian community while exploring themes of female empowerment, leadership, and social transformation. Through the character of Wazobia, a woman who assumes a position of power traditionally reserved for men, Onwueme crafts a powerful commentary on gender dynamics and the potential for societal change through female leadership. The play’s setting in a traditional Nigerian community provides a rich backdrop for examining the intersection of gender, power, and cultural traditions.

Throughout the play, Onwueme emphasises the significance of women reclaiming their identities. Wazobia’s journey toward self-empowerment involves rejecting the societal labels placed upon her. When asked why she defies convention, she responds, “Because I am more than they say I am. My name is my own, my voice belongs to me” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 42). This assertion of ownership over her own identity is a crucial step in Wazobia’s development as a character. By refusing to let others define her, she asserts her right to self-determination.

Her resistance also resonates with the experiences of other Nigerian women, as Onwueme uses Wazobia’s journey to symbolise the collective reclamation of identity. In her closing words, Wazobia declares, “I will not fade into the background; I will stand, I will speak, and the world will remember the strength of a woman” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 48). This final declaration captures the essence of Onwueme’s message: that women, in reclaiming their voices, become forces of change in society. In another exchange with her husband, Wazobia’s defiance is apparent when she asserts, “I am more than your wife; I am my own voice, my own spirit” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 23). Here, she rejects the idea that her identity should be defined by her role as a wife, instead claiming her right to self-determination. This declaration resonates throughout the play, encapsulating Onwueme’s message about the importance of personal agency for Nigerian women.

A crucial theme in the play is the power of female solidarity. Wazobia’s strength is not solely her own. Rather, it is bolstered by the support of other women who share her dreams of freedom and justice. The bonds between the women in the play illustrate the resilience that comes from community and how, through collective support, they can confront and overcome the obstacles they face. One of the women in the community tells Wazobia, “Our voices, though small on their own, together become a storm that cannot be silenced” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 32). This powerful image of unity speaks to the importance of sisterhood in overcoming oppression.

Sisterhood is presented as a source of empowerment that allows women to reclaim their voices in a society that constantly silences them. When Wazobia calls on her fellow women to “stand together and be heard,” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 36), she is not just advocating for herself but for all women who have been marginalised. Her call to action becomes a pivotal moment in the play, as it unites the women in a shared cause, highlighting the transformative power of solidarity.

This collective empowerment is also evident when the women gather to support Wazobia’s decision to challenge her husband’s authority. “We are not alone, Wazobia,” one woman reassures her. “Your struggle is our struggle; your victory will be our victory” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 38). This shared sense of purpose emphasises how Onwueme views the fight for equality not as an individual endeavor but as a collective movement.

The themes of empowerment and resilience are central to the narrative of the play. Through Wazobia, Onwueme explores the idea that women, despite facing oppression and adversity, have the power to assert themselves and reclaim control over their lives. Wazobia’s declaration, “They have beaten me down, but I rise” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 74), encapsulates the core of this theme—resilience in the face of adversity.

In this respect, Audre Lorde writes, “The survival of the oppressed is not an act of passivity but of active resistance” (Lorde, 2019, p. 41). This is exemplified in Wazobia’s actions throughout the play, where she not only survives but thrives in her quest for power and justice. Her resilience becomes a symbol of the broader struggle for gender equality in a society that seeks to marginalise women’s voices.

Onwueme uses Wazobia’s character to demonstrate the importance of self-belief and collective support in achieving empowerment. Wazobia’s ultimate triumph is not just an individual victory but a victory for all women, as one character in the play remarks, “When one of us rises, we all rise” (Onwueme, 2002, p. 82), illustrating the interconnectedness of individual and collective empowerment. Through her leadership, Wazobia teaches the women around her that they, too, can take control of their destinies, thereby shifting the power dynamics within the society.

Empowerment is a central theme in the play. Wazobia’s rise to power, despite overwhelming opposition, represents the ability of women to claim authority and agency. Her journey is a personal win and a statement for all women who

want to lead. This theme is reinforced in Wazobia's declaration, "My strength is not borrowed from men; it is born from within me," (Onwueme, 2002, p. 48) which underlines her self-reliance and the innate power of women to lead. Thus, all the female characters in the play actively resist oppressive structures in order to redefine their identities. This resistance is both personal and collective, with women uniting to challenge societal norms and advocate for change. Research shows that collective action among women can foster significant advancements in gender equality (Akobo et al., 2021). Onwueme's depiction of solidarity among women underscores the potential for transformative change in the Nigerian community.

The play ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that Wazobia's leadership will have a lasting impact on future generations of women, as Wazobia reflects at the end of the play, "The doors we open today will be the gateways to a future where no woman is ever silenced" (Onwueme, 2002, p. 110). This final line signifies the intergenerational impact of Wazobia's resistance and the potential for future women to inherit the spaces of power she has carved out. By portraying the long-term impact of Wazobia's leadership, Onwueme emphasises that the struggle for women's rights is not a fleeting battle but a continuous process that requires persistence and vision. Simon Gikandi suggests that "The fight for gender equality in Africa is an ongoing process that involves both individual and collective struggles across generations" (Gikandi, 2018, p. 74). Onwueme's play reflects this notion by showing how the actions of one woman can inspire countless others, creating a ripple effect of change that transcends time and space.

## V. CONCLUSION

Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* offers a profound exploration of Nigerian women's experiences, shedding light on their struggles, resilience, and aspirations. By examining the play within the broader context of Nigeria's gender dynamics, this analysis emphasises the critical role of representation and the ongoing necessity for advocacy in advancing women's rights. The interplay of cultural, social, and political influences profoundly shapes the lives of Nigerian women, and Onwueme's work makes a vital contribution to the discourse on gender equality and empowerment. The play intricately examines the complexities of gender roles in Nigerian society, focusing on themes of female empowerment and resistance. Onwueme's portrayal of Wazobia challenges traditional norms that restrict women's agency, presenting a transformative vision of leadership, solidarity, and self-determination. The play transcends its cultural setting, resonating with global dialogues on gender equality and positioning Wazobia as a universal symbol of hope and resilience. Through her critique of patriarchal structures, Onwueme envisions a future where women rise to positions of power, reshape their societies, and reclaim their voices.

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**Ikhlas Muhammed Nati** is a married female professor born in 1975 and residing in Kut, Iraq. She earned her B.A. in English Language from the University of Wasit (1999–2002) and her M.A. in English Literature from the University of Baghdad (2006). Currently, she is a professor at Wasit University's College of Education, specializing in English Literature with a focus on Drama. Nati is fluent in both English and Arabic, has published 12 research papers, and participated in many national and international conferences.



**Farideh Pourgivi** is an emeritus faculty member at Shiraz University's Department of Foreign Languages & Linguistics with an extensive publication record in both international and Persian-language journals. Her research focuses on literary analysis, translation studies, and gender and cultural issues, exemplified by works such as "Middlemarch on Screen: From Theory to Practice." She has contributed through articles, reviews, and book chapters on topics including Iranian travelogues, Hafez translations, and feminist writing, while also authoring several books and serving on various editorial boards. Additionally, Pourgivi has actively participated in international conferences and supervised PhD dissertations in both Persian and English literatures.