

MARRIAGE, PATRIARCHY, AND FEMALE AGENCY IN IG- BO LITERARY CRITICISM: READING SELECTED AFRICAN AUTHORS THROUGH AZODO

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Abstract

*In Literary Criticism Reevaluated: Challenging a Rigid Creative-Critical Dichotomy, African literary critic Ada Uzoamaka Azodo argues that literary criticism should be recognized as a creative literary genre. Her work demonstrates that criticism can illuminate the gendered codes embedded in marriage, family, kinship, tradition, spirituality, communal expectations, and cultural memory. This article argues that literary criticism is not merely an explanatory activity but a creative and cultural practice through which Igbo social structures are interpreted, questioned, and renewed. It focuses on how Azodo's larger argument about the creative status of criticism becomes visible through her engagement with Igbo women's writing, marriage, patriarchy, and female agency, especially in relation to Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Comfort Nwabara's *Ola: The Passage of an Igbo Girl*. The article also situates Azodo's work within the broader pattern of her scholarship, where African literature functions as a social institution, a site of women's moral and spiritual agency, and a medium of cultural survival. It concludes that Azodo's book is especially relevant to Igbo literary studies because it reminds us that Igbo literature lives not only in primary texts but also in interpretation, rereading, debate, and critical renewal.*

Keywords: Igbo literature; feminist criticism; marriage; patriarchy; literary criticism; female agency; African literature.

INTRODUCTION

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo's *Literary Criticism Reevaluated: Challenging a Rigid Creative-Critical Dichotomy* is a bold intervention in African literary studies. At the centre of the book is a clear and provocative claim: literary criticism

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should not be treated as secondary to creative writing. It is not merely a response to novels, poems, plays, or stories. It is itself a creative form of writing, a literary genre, and a culturally significant practice. Azodo announces this position in the preface when she describes the book as a “clarion call” to recognize literary criticism as “a form of creative work and a genre of its own” (Azodo, 2026, p. 3). Her argument challenges the long-standing hierarchy that places creative writing above critical writing and treats the critic as a commentator rather than a creator.

This argument is consistent with the wider pattern of Azodo’s scholarship. Across her writings on Mariama Bâ, African literature, oral tradition, spirituality, ecocriticism, and African cultural identity, Azodo approaches literature not as an isolated aesthetic object but as a living institution that connects gender, culture, memory, morality, spirituality, and social transformation. In her reading of *Une si longue lettre*, for example, she identifies female spirituality as a source of moral strength and resistance. In her essay, “Surviving the Present, Winning the Future,” she presents African literature as an institution of survival and future-making. In her ecocritical reading of Birago Diop’s poem, “Souffles,” she links literature to ancestral memory, ecological responsibility, and spiritual continuity. These works show that Azodo’s criticism is holistic and interdisciplinary. It does not simply interpret literary texts; it reconstructs the cultural and ethical worlds that make those texts meaningful.

This article explores one major dimension of that critical project: the relationship between literary criticism, Igbo women’s writing, marriage, patriarchy, and female agency. Although *Literary Criticism Reevaluated* covers a wide range of African and diasporic writers, its engagement with Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Flora Nwapa, and Comfort Nwabara makes it particularly important for Igbo literary studies. The book’s discussion of love and marriage in Igboland through Nwabara’s *OLA: The Passage of an Igbo Girl*, as well as its comparative reading of patriarchy in Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Bonnie Garmus’s *Lessons in Chemistry*, provides fertile ground for examining how criticism performs cultural work.

The central argument of this article is that Azodo’s book demonstrates the creative and cultural power of literary criticism through its treatment of Igbo women’s texts. By reading Nwapa and Nwabara, Azodo shows that criticism does more than explain literary works. It opens the social world of text. It examines the cultural codes that shape gender, marriage, womanhood, family obligation, kinship, patriarchy, spirituality, and self-definition. In this sense, criticism becomes a form of cultural interpretation and renewal.

LITERARY CRITICISM AS CREATIVE PRACTICE

Azodo's book begins from dissatisfaction with the way literary culture separates "creative" and "critical" writing. In conventional literary classification, novels, short stories, plays, poems, and children's literature are treated as creative genres, while literary criticism is often placed in a secondary category. Azodo rejects this hierarchy. Her preface asks: "What is literary criticism, if not a form of literature?" (Azodo, 2026, p. 4). The question is not a rhetorical ornament. It is the conceptual foundation of the book. Literary criticism, for Azodo, involves imagination, style, judgment, interpretation, comparison, argument, and cultural insight. These are not mechanical acts. They are creative acts.

This argument is especially important in African literary studies. African literature has rarely existed as art detached from society. From oral tradition to modern fiction, African literary expression has often been tied to community, history, spirituality, moral instruction, social critique, political resistance, and cultural memory. Azodo's formulation is therefore significant because she explicitly links criticism to national and cultural storytelling, asking why criticism is not recognized as capable of telling "the Nigerian story, its history, culture, people, and language" (Azodo, 2026, p. 4). If African literature performs cultural work, then African literary criticism must also be understood as part of that work. The critic does not simply stand outside the text. The critic helps shape the way the text is read, remembered, valued, and transmitted.

Azodo's view of criticism as a creative practice is also connected to her understanding of African literature as a social institution. In "Surviving the Present, Winning the Future," she presents African literature as a resource through which African peoples preserve memory, confront present crises, and imagine future possibilities. Literature, in this framework, is not merely aesthetic production; it is a mode of survival and cultural projection. This insight deepens the argument of *Literary Criticism Reevaluated*. If literature is part of the social life of a people, then criticism is one of the practices through which that social life is interpreted, challenged, and renewed.

Azodo's book is therefore not only a defense of literary criticism in general. It is also a defense of the African literary critic as a creative cultural worker. The critic interprets the text but also repositions it within history and society. Azodo insists that literary criticism, when not merely scholarly research, "can be as creative, entertaining and stimulating" as other literary forms (Azodo, 2026, p. 4). Through this process, criticism becomes one of the ways literature continues to live. This is particularly true in Igbo literature. Works such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Nwapa's *Efuru*,

Adichie's fiction, and Nwabara's *OLA* do not exhaust their meaning in the act of publication. They continue to generate new meanings through teaching, scholarship, debate, translation, adaptation, and rereading. Literary criticism, therefore, becomes part of the afterlife of Igbo literature.

IGBO LITERATURE AND THE CULTURAL WORK OF CRITICISM

Igbo literature is deeply connected to questions of history, identity, gender, kinship, spirituality, colonial encounter, and social transformation. From Achebe's representation of precolonial Igbo life and colonial disruption to Nwapa's exploration of womanhood, fertility, trade, marriage, and autonomy, Igbo literary texts frequently dramatize the relationship between individual desire and communal expectation. Azodo's work matters because she recognizes that such texts require careful cultural reading. Igbo literature cannot be reduced to a plot summary or thematic listing. It must be read in relation to social structures: family, lineage, marriage, title, gender, motherhood, religious belief, market life, and communal authority. Literary criticism, in this context, becomes a method of entering the cultural logic of the text.

This does not mean that criticism simply confirms tradition. One important function of criticism is to show where tradition is contested, negotiated, or transformed. In Igbo women's writing, especially, literature often reveals the pressures placed on women by patriarchal structures while also showing women's strategies of survival, negotiation, resistance, and self-definition. This point is important because Igbo gender systems have often been misunderstood through overly rigid patriarchal models. Ifi Amadiume's work on Igbo societies reminds us that gender, power, and social organization in Igbo culture have historically been more complex than colonial and missionary accounts often suggested (Amadiume, 1987a; 1987b). Her study of matriarchal foundations and gender flexibility complicates any simple reading of Igbo women as merely passive victims of tradition. At the same time, writers such as Nwapa and Nwabara show that women's lives are still shaped by powerful social expectations around marriage, fertility, family honor, and respectability.

Azodo's criticism is valuable because it allows readers to hold these tensions together: Igbo culture as a site of communal meaning, and Igbo patriarchy as a structure requiring interrogation. This balance is crucial. A criticism that romanticizes tradition risks ignoring women's suffering, while a criticism that dismisses culture risks imposing external categories that flatten Igbo social realities. This balance also reflects the broader orientation of Azodo's scholarship. Her critical writings repeatedly show that African literature mediates between memory and modernity. It preserves

inherited worlds while subjecting them to ethical questioning. In this sense, Azodo's criticism does not treat culture as a museum of fixed customs. Rather, culture becomes a living field of debate in which gender, spirituality, authority, identity, and communal survival are continuously negotiated.

MARRIAGE, KINSHIP, AND GENDERED EXPECTATION IN OLA

Azodo's chapter on love and marriage in Igboland in her reading of Nwabara's *OLA: The Passage of an Igbo Girl* is especially relevant to Igbo studies. Marriage in Igbo cultural representation is rarely a private affair between two individuals. It is a social institution involving families, lineages, obligations, negotiations, expectations, and communal recognition. Azodo summarizes the chapter as an examination of "choice and mutuality in marriage alliances," one that unearths "values, beliefs, behaviors, and worldviews indigenous to Igbo people" (Azodo, 2026, p. 31). A literary treatment of marriage, therefore, opens the door to broader questions about gender, power, identity, and belonging.

Through Azodo's critical lens, *OLA: The Passage of an Igbo Girl* can be read as a text that dramatizes the passage of an Igbo girl through culturally marked expectations. The title itself suggests movement, formation, and transition. The "passage" of the Igbo girl is not only biological or emotional, but also social and cultural. It involves learning the rules of family, femininity, courtship, marriage, respectability, and communal identity. Azodo's observation that traditional Igbo marriage "eschews romantic love" while modern marriage accepts choice, passion, and romance captures the central tension between inherited structures and contemporary desires (Azodo, 2026, p. 31).

In this context, literary criticism becomes crucial. A surface reading may treat love and marriage simply as narrative themes. A deeper critical reading asks what kind of social order produces these expectations. Who benefits from them? Who is constrained by them? How do women negotiate them? What forms of agency are available to female characters within the cultural system? Azodo's statement that the Igbo tend to see marriage as "a lifelong business" that can resemble "a business contract" is especially suggestive (Azodo, 2026, p. 31). It points to marriage as an institution structured by social economy as much as by intimacy.

Azodo's broader argument about criticism as creative practice is useful here. The critic does not invent the cultural tensions in the text; rather, they give them interpretive shape. By naming and analyzing the structures surrounding marriage, criticism allows readers to see how literature

encodes social knowledge. It reveals that marriage in Igbo literary representation is not only a domestic matter but a site of cultural meaning.

This approach is consistent with Azodo's attention to African oral and communal forms of expression. Her reading of Mariama Bâ through the Senegalese oral form of *taasu*, for example, shows her interest in women's speech as performance, memory, moral argument, and communal address. Although *OLA: The Passage of an Igbo Girl* belongs to an Igbo rather than a Senegalese cultural world, the methodological lesson is relevant: women's agency in African literature must be read through culturally specific forms of speech, silence, ritual, negotiation, and social performance. In *OLA: The Passage of an Igbo Girl*, marriage is therefore not simply a plot device. It is social grammar through which womanhood, family honor, kinship responsibility, and changing ideas of love are made legible.

FLORA NWAPA, EFURU, AND FEMALE AGENCY

Flora Nwapa occupies a foundational place in African and Igbo literary history. Her novel *Efuru* is one of the most important texts for any discussion of Igbo womanhood, female agency, marriage, motherhood, economic independence, and spiritual identity. Azodo's engagement with Nwapa is therefore significant not only because Nwapa is an Igbo writer, but because *Efuru* continues to challenge simplified assumptions about African women's lives.

In many patriarchal settings, female value is often tied to marriage, fertility, and motherhood. *Efuru* complicates these expectations. Its protagonist is beautiful, industrious, economically capable, socially visible, and spiritually significant, yet her life does not conform neatly to conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood. This makes the novel a powerful site for feminist and cultural criticism.

Azodo's reading of patriarchy in relation to *Efuru* demonstrates how criticism can recover the complexity of women's experience in Igbo literature. Patriarchy is not presented only as open domination; it also appears through expectations, social judgments, family pressures, marital assumptions, and communal definitions of female success. Yet Nwapa's protagonist cannot be reduced to victimhood. *Efuru*'s strength lies in her capacity to act, choose, trade, endure, and occupy social space despite the limitations imposed on her.

Azodo's broader feminist criticism helps clarify this point. In her work on Mariama Bâ, she reads female spirituality not as passive resignation but as a source of moral authority and resistance. That insight is useful for approaching Nwapa's *Efuru*, where female agency is not limited to marriage, motherhood, or domestic obedience. *Efuru*'s relationship to wealth,

trade, beauty, social visibility, and spiritual calling complicates the patriarchal tendency to define women only through fertility and marital permanence. Her agency is therefore social, economic, and spiritual.

This is where Azodo's defense of criticism becomes especially important. Without sustained criticism, *Efuru* could be read narrowly as a story of marital difficulty or female suffering. Through feminist literary criticism, however, the novel becomes a meditation on agency, social value, gendered expectation, and alternative forms of fulfillment. Criticism thus expands the life of the text. It makes the cultural and philosophical questions embedded in the narrative visible.

PATRIARCHY UNDER FIRE

Azodo's comparative chapter on Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Bonnie Garmus's *Lessons in Chemistry* extends the discussion of patriarchy beyond a single cultural setting. This comparative approach is important because it shows that patriarchy is not exclusively African, Igbo, Western, traditional, or modern. It is a social system that appears in different forms across cultures. Azodo introduces the chapter with the declaration that "Feminist literary criticism is needed" to attack patriarchal injury and defeat gender discrimination (Azodo, 2026, p. 115).

For Igbo studies, this comparative frame has two advantages. First, it prevents Igbo women's experience from being exoticized, as if gender inequality were unique to African societies. Second, it allows Igbo texts to participate in wider global discussions of women's writing, patriarchy, resistance, and self-making. By placing Nwapa in conversation with a contemporary American novelist, Azodo affirms the global relevance of Igbo women's writing. At the same time, the specificity of Igbo culture remains important. Patriarchy in *Efuru* must be understood through Igbo social institutions, including marriage, kinship, fertility, market participation, spiritual belief, and communal reputation.

The challenge for criticism is to hold both dimensions together: the local specificity of Igbo womanhood and the broader comparability of women's struggles across societies. Azodo's description of patriarchy as a force that "degrades and humiliates women in social relations" gives ethical urgency to the critical task (Azodo, 2026, p. 115). Azodo's work demonstrates that criticism can perform this balancing act. It can respect cultural particularity while also opening texts to comparative analysis. This is another reason her book is valuable: it offers a model of criticism rooted in African and Igbo contexts but not confined to them.

TOWARD AN IGBO FEMINIST CRITICAL PRACTICE

Azodo's engagement with Nwapa and Nwabara points toward what may be called an Igbo feminist critical practice. Such a practice would read Igbo women's writing with attention to culture, but without romanticizing culture. It would take the importance of marriage, motherhood, family, market life, spirituality, and communal belonging seriously, while also questioning the gendered inequalities that can operate within these institutions. An Igbo feminist criticism would not simply import theoretical categories from elsewhere. It would listen carefully to the cultural textures of Igbo texts. It would ask how women speak, choose, negotiate, resist, accommodate, and redefine themselves within specific social worlds. It would recognize both constraint and agency. It would also understand that women's empowerment in Igbo literature may not always appear as open rebellion. Sometimes it appears as endurance, economic independence, spiritual authority, maternal influence, verbal skill, or the ability to survive social judgment.

This point aligns with Azodo's engagement with African feminist criticism, particularly her reference to Obioma Nnaemeka's observation that some first-generation female writers avoided creating overtly strong female characters because they remained bound by tradition and community expectations (Azodo, 2026, p. 147). It also resonates with Ifi Amadiume's work on Igbo gender systems, which appears in Azodo's scholarly apparatus and helps complicate readings that portray Igbo women as merely passive within tradition (Azodo, 2026, pp. 118, 156, 166). Nnaemeka's concept of "nego-feminism" is useful for reading female agency in Igbo and African contexts because it emphasizes negotiation, relationality, and strategic engagement rather than only confrontation (Nnaemeka, 2004). Such a framework helps clarify why characters like Efuru should not be read only through Western liberal models of emancipation, but through the culturally specific forms of agency available within Igbo social worlds. Azodo's book contributes to this critical tradition by treating criticism as active, creative, and responsible.

The critic is not merely classifying themes. The critic is participating in the ethical and cultural task of making meaning. This is where Azodo's broader method becomes particularly useful. Her reading of female spirituality in *Bâ*, her attention to oral tradition through *taasu*, and her understanding of African literature as a social institution all reinforce the need for a culturally grounded feminist criticism. Such criticism does not flatten African women's experiences into a single universal pattern. Instead, it reads agency through the specific institutions, symbols, rituals, and moral languages available within each society. For Igbo literature, this means

that agency may appear through market success, marital negotiation, kinship diplomacy, maternal authority, spiritual vocation, refusal, endurance, or the capacity to reinterpret social expectations from within.

CRITICISM, MEMORY, AND THE AFTERLIFE OF IGBO TEXTS

One of the strongest implications of Azodo's book is that literature survives through criticism. A novel may be published at a particular historical moment, but its meaning changes as readers return to it under new conditions. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for example, has been read through the lens of colonialism, masculinity, tragedy, language, nationalism, religion, gender, and postcolonial identity. Nwapa's *Efuru* has been read through the lens of feminism, motherhood, trade, spirituality, and female autonomy. Adichie's fiction has been read through the lens of migration, memory, war, gender, class, and global African identity. Azodo's own formulation of the critic as a reader who must "break down the text" to uncover its deeper significance captures the labor involved in this process (Azodo, 2026, p. 12). These texts continue to live because critics keep asking new questions about them. This is precisely the point Azodo makes when she challenges the devaluation of literary criticism. Criticism is not an afterthought. It is one of the engines of literary continuity. It carries texts into new classrooms, journals, conferences, and communities of readers.

For Igbo studies, this is vital. Igbo literature is not only preserved by writers. It is also preserved by critics, editors, teachers, translators, reviewers, and scholars. The critic helps determine what is remembered, how it is remembered, and why it matters. In this sense, literary criticism is part of cultural memory. Azodo's wider scholarship reinforces this view of criticism as memory work. Her ecological reading of Birago Diop's "Souffles," for example, treats literature as a space where ancestral memory, the natural world, and human responsibility meet. While that essay is not directly about Igbo literature, it reveals a pattern in Azodo's thought that literature is a medium through which communities remember, interpret, and renew their relationship to the world. Applied to Igbo literary studies, this insight suggests that criticism does not merely catalogue themes. It participates in the preservation and transformation of cultural consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo's *Literary Criticism Reevaluated* offers an important opportunity to rethink the place of criticism in African and Igbo literary

studies. Its central claim that literary criticism is a creative genre is not only a theoretical proposition; it is also demonstrated through Azodo's engagement with African texts, especially those concerned with gender, patriarchy, marriage, futurity, and cultural transformation. The book is especially valuable because it shows that Igbo literature lives through ongoing interpretation. Achebe, Nwapa, Adichie, Nwabara, and other Igbo or Igbo-related writers remain important not only because they produced significant texts, but because critics continue to return to those texts and make them speak to new questions. Azodo's reading of Igbo women's writing shows how criticism can illuminate the social codes surrounding marriage, the pressures of patriarchy, and the creative agency of women within and against cultural expectations.

The larger lesson of Azodo's book is that criticism is not the shadow of literature. It is one of the forms through which literature continues to do its work. Azodo's preface calls the book "an apologia for the craft of literary criticism as a genre of literature" (Azodo, 2026, p. 15). In the context of Igbo studies, this means that literary criticism is not peripheral to cultural preservation or literary development. It is central to both. Through criticism, Igbo literature is reread, revalued, debated, transmitted, and renewed. Azodo's broader scholarship deepens this conclusion. Whether she is reading women's spirituality, African literary identity, ecological consciousness, oral tradition, or Igbo marriage and patriarchy, her criticism insists that literature is bound to life. It mediates between memory and modernity, tradition and transformation, gender and community, spirituality and social justice. That, finally, is the creative power of criticism that Azodo's book so passionately defends.

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