



## The quest for gender identity, self-consciousness and recognition in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*

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### Abstract

In *Behind the Clouds* Ifeoma Okoye traces the emergence and development of a new female consciousness and identity, as well as the recognition of that identity. A great deal of contemporary African women writings are narratives around women identity and the quest and the consciousness of the reality of existence. Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* is a narrative that sensitively apprehends this consciousness of the female individual in a society dominated by male values. Using the experiences of the protagonist, Ije Apia, this study applies the gender theory to explore how the characters become aware of their identity and self-consciousness as persons. This paper interrogates socio-cultural assumptions as they affect women's gender identity and self-consciousness. This paper examines the dynamic process of self-consciousness and recognition as well as the entrapping dynamics which Okoye has specified in her narrative using the experiences of the female characters. The aim of this paper is to open up a space for the expression of different levels of self consciousnesses in women writings in Africa; to provide an angle of critical interpretations and perspectives; to assess the range of representations of women's recognition of their identities and how these constructions have been homogenised in Okoye's novel. It is that in *Behind the Clouds*, Ifeoma Okoye has shown. The significance of this study is in identifying the ways that female subjectivities have been reconfigured within Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*.

**Keywords:** Ifeoma, identity, gender, consciousness, female, Africa, women

### Introduction

Ifeoma Okoye's novel, *Behind the Clouds* is a literary expression of the African woman's experience and the process of the recognition of that experience, which marks a moment of acute self-consciousness. It is a narrative that is characterized by diverse and multiple consciousnesses that redefine the African woman's identity as she acquires a new voice that rejects the totalizing traditional stereotypes that defined her womanhood within an androcentric African socio-cultural reality. The awareness of this self-consciousness is the defining literary imprint of Ifeoma Okoye's narrative.

This paper applies gender theory to interpret Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*. This is because this theory will reveal the various techniques that have been represented in the text. As Teresa de Lauretis has argued in her essay "The Technology of Gender," gender is both a "representation and self-representation" (quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi 14). And Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi has also noted that gender is "constructed through multiple techniques and discursive practices..." (14). It is this multiplicity inherent in gender relations and practices in *Behind the Clouds* that will foreground my reflections on identity, subjectivity, consciousness and recognition in Ifeoma Okoye's narrative, in order to comment on how she subverts gender stereotypes to create a new vision and liberating consciousness for her female characters.

As Bonnie Kimi Scott has argued, "Gender is a category constructed through cultural and social systems" [2]. What this means is that gender is a socially imposed identification on the female individual. Scott concludes that it is "one of many layers of identification" [3]. The paradigm of female consciousness is a social aspect of interpretation that seeks to understand how the female subject increasingly comes to

the realization of the female identity. For Okoye's protagonist, Ije this insight relates to her careful defining of her image and the formation of a consciousness that enables her to accept a life outside marriage with Dozie Appiah. In this paper, we may wish as well as interrogate the idea of consciousness of female identity as subject which Ifeoma Okoye has explored using the experiences of Ije and other female characters. The idea of identity and female consciousness in this paper is merged with the bonding of experiences of women in Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* has remarked that "the term *women* denote a common identity" (4). This means that the term is used to designate or represent persons with a common social and cultural experience. Therefore, there is a general unifying conception of the term 'women' socially and culturally across historical contexts. Women are bonded by a common unique experience that defines their identity as subjects. Butler explains that "Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex...and desire..." (30). Identity, according to Butler "is an effect of discursive practices..." (24). In order words, women's identity and consciousness is the outcome of the formation of their bitter experiences in marriage.

This essay contextualizes Okoye's text within the framework of gender with a view to unearthing the effects and consequences of female consciousness. It is within such a framework that the realities of Ifeoma Okoye's interrogation of the social and cultural category of gender can be fully apprehended in the analysis of *Behind the Clouds*. One may therefore recall Nana Wilson-Tagoe's assertion that "It is only within such a framework that the complex motivations and impulses around the category of gender may be fruitfully engaged in the analysis of a woman writer's works" (13). This requires all the processes of

identifying the socio-historical structures and representations that have undermined the woman's social growth. This analytical approach is worthwhile because as Nana Wilson-Tagoe has argued women writings have a common feature; namely, "that it is marked by gender perspectives that are mediated by history, culture and class..." (14). The woman needs to define her own identity and self-perception. To act and behave in this situation where she becomes aware of the negative images imposed on her by the social system requires a positive consciousness. To acquire this perception about life would be having what Judith Newton has called "gender ideology" which is "antagonistic to the masculine ideology of self-interest and self-advancement" (129). It is this kind of consciousness in *Behind the Clouds* that Ifeoma Okoye has used to subvert the socio-cultural systems of oppression against women,

### **Gender Identity, Consciousness and Recognition in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*.**

Okoye's re-constructive agenda clearly influenced her gender attitudes. Through this, she seeks to transform the way Nigerian society view gender and cultural role of the sexes. Nutsukpo has made an important observation that Ifeoma Okoye's female characters exhibits a high level of consciousness "Through this new consciousness, the characters are able... to broaden their concepts of roles they can play in society" (155). What Nutsukpo is alluding to here is that Okoye's female characters are consciously aware of their identities as female persons and the roles society assigns to them and consciously try to revert them. Characters like Ije, Beatrice, Ugo Ushie, Patiance and even Virginia manifest a high level of feminine identity and consciousness in Okoye's novel. Through consciousness women become aware of the limitations culture and society has imposed on them and by this recognition endeavour to subvert them. This in itself is an awareness of self and one's abilities.

The plot structure of *Behind the Clouds* is dominated with the bitter experiences of women in marriage relating to issue of proclivity, infertility and barrenness. In many Nigerian societies and cultures, child-birth or having children is one of the bedrocks of the marriage institution and the society expects the woman to fulfil this role or accept blame for the failure of couples to be productive. This belief is central to Okoye's novel. As the novel opens this gender belief dominates and permeates Ije's consciousness and made her and other female characters accept to subject themselves to "...all kinds of treatment, unpleasant ones and dangerous ones...in search of solution" (11, 8). At the Best Clinic where Ije goes to seek treatment for infertility at Dr Melie's hospital, Okoye through Ije's consciousness describes the condition of other women in this situation: "She walked past patients who were sitting dejectedly on a couple of long settees.... It was becoming increasingly difficult for her especially when she was alone, to keep her mind off her predicament" (1). This is a clear indication that the womenfolk in Nigerian society have thoroughly internalised their gender roles. This popular gender bias makes Isoken Sekon to remark that the female individual in many societies "have been so brainwashed and intimidated that they no longer believe in themselves" (qtd. in Stephanie Newell "Introduction" [6]. This representation of the female experience or predicament is what Ifeoma Okoye has used

her text to fracture, deconstruct, reject as the narrative structure has used the experiences of the female protagonist, Ije Apiah and other female characters like her friend, Beatrice to reconstruct the myth about infertility in marriage in the Nigerian society.

The belief that infertility must be the woman's fault is widespread. At the beginning of the novel, the female characters including Ije and her friends have thoroughly assimilated this popular gender stereotype. This is very evident in defining Ije's initial consciousness and that of her female friends:

As Ije sat there, her mind plunged deep into the past: a past full of failures that still Ranked. She remembered very vividly all the doctors who had treated her—the tests, the minor operations, and the major one that had almost killed her. She remembered also the herbalists she had approached for help (1-2).

Ije's childlessness was a major concern for her and others in her situation because they had accepted society's code of signification which defines a woman's identity. It was at this moment that she learned of Dr Melie, the owner of 'The Blest Clinic' (2): "At first she was sceptical about seeing another doctor as her optimism had been eroded by her fruitless visits to so many doctors" (2). Here in the hospital Ije met her old school mate, Beatrice, who also had also come to seek for solution for her infertility:

She had been married for eight years without a child. She had been to many Gynaecologists and to several herbalists but none had been able to help her... 'My husband is worried to death,' Beatrice reiterated. 'His parents, his relations, his Friends, all keep telling him to get himself another wife to bear him an heir.... He Flares up at me most of the time no matter what I do' (4).

This encounter with Beatrice marked the beginning of female bonding and consciousness which Okoye has used to subvert popular patriarchal perspective. Then Beatrice continued to tell Ije: "She told Ije about the many quarrels she had had with her husband because of her childlessness. She talked about her mother-in-law pouring abuse on her" [4-5]. But amidst Beatrice's sorrowful narrative, there is a flicker emerging consciousness that questions the cultural stereotypes. It is ironical as Ifeoma Okoye shows through the experiences of Ije and Beatrice, her friend that the Nigerian culture and society will maintain a one-sided perspective that is at best flawed. Beatrice's emerging consciousness and feminine perspective mocks and rebuffs the hypocrisy embedded in this patriarchal perspective when she boldly declares: "'I don't know why in this country of ours it is *always women who take the blame when a couple is childless,*' she said contemptuously" (5), emphasis mine). This vehement rejection marks the beginning of female positive consciousness, recognition of female identity and assertion that debunks all signifying oppressive social stereotypes and hypocritical assumptions. This is emblematic of the gender question in African culture which has remained problematic. Beatrice explodes the duplicity of the Nigerian gender question. By this Okoye suggests the need to question Nigeria's gender attitudes that have hampered social growth. This discourse foreshadows the

turn of events when she goes to the Faith healer, Apostle Joseph for treatment. It is significant that Beatrice would shatter this lies later when she pointedly told Ije how the Faith healer, Apostle had successfully treated her of her infertility:

‘This baby is Apostle Joseph’s.

I don’t regret my action. My infidelity has saved my marriage, for my husband was on the verge of sending me away and taking a new wife. If my marriage breaks down now at least I’ll have a child who will look after me in old age. A childless woman in our society does not realise the extent of her handicap until she grows old’ (61-62)

Beatrice uses this confession scene not only to reiterate the importance of children but more crucially to reject the belief that failure to have children in marriage is the woman’s fault. That is why she suggests to Ije that Apostle Joseph might also help her but Ije is not yet ready to accept this option. Beatrice’s discourse is crucial to the forging of identity, consciousness and recognition which is central to Okoye’s reconstruction and reinvention of gender attitudes. After her travails in marriage Ije will come to her own moment of epiphany when she tells her friend Ugo Ushie who has come to tell her of the quarrel between Dozie and Virginia: ‘I’ve ceased being interested in what happens in that house...’ (114). Ije’s response shows that she is a self-conscious individual, who in spite of her love for Dozie has now defined her identity and recognised who she is in her own terms. When Ugo Ushie reprimanded her and wanted to know what she plans to do next now that she has decided to leave her marriage, Ije replied: “‘ I want to be alone so that I can think without anyone disturbing me. One thing I am sure of, I am not going to marry again. A barren woman is useless as a wife, at least in our country’” (114). The implication of these highly assertive words is that Ije has reached a full consciousness that marriage and childbearing alone should not be the only thing that defines the woman’s identity. She alone must recognise her worth and define her identity. This is a shrewd articulation of feminine consciousness which permeates Okoye’s narrative structure. Even Ije and Dozie’s courtship and eventual marriage is a reversion of gender roles because of Ije’s financial independence and generosity towards Dozie: “Ije’s roommate in the hostel had disapproved of Dozie. She had told Ije bluntly that Dozie had nothing to offer her: that Dozie was after her because she was working and could give him financial support” [5-6]. There are a number of gender assumptions that has been deconstructed about the Nigerian society. Unlike where women run after men for money or support and men provide for their women, Ije is financially independent and is the provider for Dozie’s financial needs. This inversion of gender roles is the focus of her roommate’s last warning: “‘You’re behaving like an English woman, Ije... Remember you’re dealing with a Nigerian. In Nigeria, men maintain women and not the other way round’” (6). Ije’s willingness to demystify this popular assumption shows that her self-consciousness defines her identity and through her self-consciousness Ifeoma Okoye dismantles these popular gender beliefs, which expect the Nigerian woman to be at the ‘receiving’ end and the man at the ‘giving’ end. Ije’s sacrifices for Dozie both in courtship and marriage deconstruct popular gender assumptions. In

response to Dr Melie’s question as to why they did not want children immediately after marriage, Ije responded:

‘My husband had not finished his course at the university. He was having difficulty paying his fees and could not combine his studies with going to work. I had to keep two jobs in order to help him pay his university fees... My husband and I therefore decided it would be too much for me to hold down the jobs if I became pregnant. We had to defer starting a family until later’ (7).

The above reveals Ije’s consciousness of the identity and role of the woman in building the society contrary to popular beliefs in the Nigerian culture. Her response also shows that failure in the marriage institution should not be blamed on the woman alone.

However, there is an evidence to suggest that Ije’s moment of recognition is fleeting because she continues to define her sexual identity based on cultural and social codes, especially on her desire to fulfil her duty as a mother so that she could please Dozie and her mother-in-law, Mama: “Dozie loved children and Ije knew he did. That was one of the reasons why she felt their misfortune very much” (15). This desire to fit into the cultural role of motherhood made her to subject herself to various treatments and pay huge charges demanded by doctors who treated her: “She was paying huge amounts of money to doctors. In her predicament she always felt that no amount was too much to pay for a baby... Her husband was doing well in his business. He, too, was desperately in need of a child and was ready to pay anything for it” (9). Here, Ije’s consciousness and identity is one that accepts socio-cultural definition of her feminine identity. Ironically, Dozie, too in his subconscious believes that Ije is the reason for their childlessness because of the cultural and social belief system. He is ready to spend any amount to have Ije treated rather than him: “He... was ready to pay anything for it” (9). To show that Dozie was operating within the gender assumptions of his society, he tells Ije, his wife one evening: “‘Next Summer you’ll go overseas for treatment... I am sure the doctors there will discover where the trouble with you lies’” (48). This coming from Dozie is very ironic as events in the text would prove later. Ije, too, has internalised this belief system and had tortuously submitted to the treatments alone.

To underscore the fact that Ifeoma Okoye has used her female characters to depict the conscious woman who helps her husband achieve growth, in spite of their childlessness the protagonist Ije helps Dozie to reach an enviable height in business. Dozie tells his friend, Davies: “‘I owe my success in my business venture to her. I don’t know what I would have done without her’” (37). Contrary to gender attitudes, Ije works as hard as her husband, Dozie. But despite her contribution in building their home, Ije is blamed for the couple’s childlessness. Her mother-in-law, Mama holds her responsible for his son’s childlessness. That is the crux of the matter when she tells Dozie in the presence of Ije: “‘whoever denies me the opportunity to have a grandchild will meet with misfortune all her life’” (42). Mama’s choice of words is indicting of Ije. To buttress this point she insults Ije and rains abuses on her person: “She said her childlessness was a punishment for her unchaste life as a spinster” (42). This cultural and social beliefs held by Mama made her to arrange for Ije to be



treated by herbalists. On one of her visits she tells her son Dozie: "... 'let me take your wife to a herbalist at Nze'" (41).

Gradually Ije's identity or is it consciousness and the need for her to be alive for herself begins to emerge: "The last experience was still very green in her memory. She might have lost her life just because she had been afraid to offend her mother-in-law by refusing to see the herbalist. This time she was not afraid of her any longer" (41). At this moment Ije has reached recognition to live for herself regardless of what others think. It is this consciousness that helped her to survive Dozie's betrayal.

The whole society heaps the blame on Ije, even Dozie's maternal uncles who told him: "Without mincing their words his uncles told him it was high time he took a second wife to give him an heir" (43).

Ije herself has come to share and believe this popular gender assumption. This belied her desire to do anything to have a child for Dozie and her mother-in-law when she told Dozie about going to see the Faith healer that had successfully treated her friend, Beatrice. Dozie responded in a manner that shows that he holds his wife culpable for their childlessness: "'I have no objection, Ije,' he said at last. 'You know I am dying to have you bear my children. I'll sanction anything that will make our dreams come true'" (51). This is indicative that he holds his wife responsible like the rest of society for their childlessness.

However, Ifeoma Okoye would use a male voice in Apostle Joseph to destroy and dispel the falsehood embedded in this myth in her narrative. Ije's visit to Apostle Joseph's church is very instructive, especially in exposing the duplicity of patriarchal ideology about gender beliefs in Nigerian society. The author uses Apostle Joseph's discourse to explode the myth surrounding infertility in the Nigerian society and Igbo culture. Besides, Apostle Joseph tries within Okoye's reconstructive project to reactivate Ije's consciousness when he tells her during the wooing session:

'Some men, for some reason are unable to father children. Wise women who are married to such men tactfully find other men to give them what they so much desire. This is not adultery in the sight of men. It is not adultery in the eyes of God. Think about this, Mrs Apiah. *I have gladly done it for some women. I can do it for you too*' (55) emphasis mine). The implication of this discourse is that it does not matter for society as long as the woman fulfils her socio-cultural gender roles of childbirth. Again, Ifeoma Okoye has used Apostle Joseph's discourse to insidiously question patriarchal gender assumptions that blames the woman when couples are not able to procreate by squarely reversing the blame on men-folk. Another implication is that the protagonist's consciousness is flawed, she has been unwise and has taken no positive steps to save her marriage like her friend, Beatrice, who acted wisely by choosing the option society sanctions—childbirth. This is shown when after confessing the truth of the birth of her child Beatrice pleads with Ije not to betray her: "'I have ceased to be emotional about my baby... it is better for me to be practical. I hope Ije, you will keep my secret? I'd do anything to keep *my husband from knowing the truth*" (62), emphasis mine). This revelation confirms the veracity of Apostle Joseph's statement. After Apostle Joseph's discourse Ije's reaction shows that Ije is unwise and reveals her uneasiness to chart such a cause: "Ije was stunned. She remained silent for a second, 'To hell with you and your church!' She cried,

swearing never to set foot in Apostle Joseph's church again" (56). Ije's decision which is the outcome of the incontrovertible proof contained in Apostle Joseph's word is essentially what destroyed Ije's marriage and forced her to desert her matrimonial home because Virginia had capitalised on Dozie and Mama's desperation for a child and grandchild to foist a false pregnancy on Dozie, Ije's husband. For Mama, Dozie and the society, it is Ije's fault that they are childless. At one moment, Mama said to Dozie in the hearing of Ije: "'Dozie, why have you kept on denying me a grandchild... 'Why can't you get a second wife?' 'Mama asked 'what is wrong with marrying again when your wife cannot give you a child?'" (64-65). The discussion between mother and son reflects the gender biases which Okoye deftly debunks.

Apostle Joseph's revelation is very significant to the plot structure of the narrative. When Virginia claimed to be pregnant for Dozie, Ugo Ushie, Ije's best friend full of consciousness embedded in the revelation cautions Ije. It is within this context that Ugo Ushie's advice to Ije is instructive: "'How can you be sure the woman is not framing you, Ije? Even if her claims are true, you're not going to run away from your home, or are you? That will mean leaving all you have toiled for behind'" (76). Ugo Ushie's consciousness and perceptiveness is a recognition which Ije is yet to attain until much later when Dozie affirms the same truth.

Dozie's dilemma over Virginia's purported pregnancy is the outcome of his gender attitudes that Okoye has been reconstructing. In Dozie's subconscious mind Ije is culpable for their infertility:

Now, the consequences of his one-day affair with Virginia lay heavily on him... He loved Ije dearly and owed his success in business to her...

But he also needed Virginia because she was *carrying his baby*: a part of him, and to throw her out of the house meant *throwing away his baby*, perhaps the only one he would ever have. He was not sure now that *Ije would bear his children* even after receiving treatment overseas (79, emphasis mine).

The tragedy of Dozie's discourse is on the inherent gender biases that blame the woman when things go wrong. Childbearing is the main thing in African marital institution not love. And in Dozie's eyes Ije has failed as a wife. Ije very much believes in this falsehood when she tells her friend, Ugo Ushie who had come to console her: "'I don't want to fight a lost battle... I've lost Dozie to Virginia because I can't have his baby. In this situation, love is second-rate'" (86). After the Virginia pregnancy episode and Dozie's acceptance of responsibility Ije took a bold step to start life afresh: "she was going to start life anew" (80). As the narrative structure reveals Ije is labelled barren because of her love and fidelity to her husband, Dozie. Her husband's failure to deny the responsibility of Virginia's pregnancy had hit Ije like a thunderbolt: "Tears of anger, hurt, disappointment, regret and uncertainty flowed copiously down her cheeks... She must let them flow or they would choke the breath out of her" (77). Ije realises she needs a total break from her marriage, environment to define and regain her identity. She tells Ugo Ushie: "'Ugo, I'm thinking of getting a job. I can't stand the atmosphere of this house anymore... I must look elsewhere for solace'"

(96). This is a moment of Ije's recognition of her identity as an individual and a rejection of her life within marriage. With this new insight she informs her friend, Ugo Ushie: "As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of moving out of this house" (97). However it took Ije's illness and her admission into the teaching hospital at Enugu to carry out the decision that would alter the course of her marital life. At this moment Dozie had gone to Owerri for a tour: "Ije stayed in the hospital for a week before she was discharged... While in the hospital she took a decision which was to change the pattern of her life but not even Ugo Ushie, her best friend, was to know about it least she talked her out of it" (104). This was Ije's height of awareness and self-consciousness.

Fair enough it is not only Ije who had suffered the stigma of childlessness. Dozie too had had his own fair share of the suffering. Ugo Ushie's consciousness informs the reader about the cultural attitudes: "The worst misfortune that could befall a man in Nigeria was to be childless, and only a Nigerian in a million would not take a second wife if the first failed to bear him a child, not just a child but a son" (104). There are a number of background assumptions here-- the failure is the woman's fault. Besides, the woman still would have failed if she gives birth only to a female child. That is why Dozie is "planning to send Ije overseas for treatment" (104). Finally, it took Virginia's blatant accusation and Dozie's seeming acquiescence for Ije to leave Dozie's house: "Virginia accused her of sprinkling some poison into their food and her amazement at Dozie's tactless query which seems to accept the veracity of Virginia's allegation when he asked: "Why did you do such a thing, Ije?" (106). The veiled acceptance of this by Dozie forced her to act: "In a twinkling of an eye she was out of the house in search of a flat of her own" (106). After some hours of search she found a flat of her own at Uwani Street in Enugu. Two days after the poison accusation Ije called her maid Teresa and said: "I'm leaving this house, Teresa" (107).

Even Virginia manifests her moments of consciousness and recognition and manipulates Dozie to a large extent to achieve them. She perfectly uses Dozie's desperation about a child and used her pregnancy as a bait to entice him to get what she wants in material terms. Her demand leads to a quarrel because Dozie had refused to give her the money she demanded. As a result Virginia threatened to desert Dozie with the pregnant baby and Dozie said: "That baby you're carrying is mine" (111). Virginia at this moment decided to divulge the truth as she told him:

'I had better tell you the truth now...' The baby is not yours. I chose you as the father because you're the richest of the lot' and because you wanted a child so badly. Do you call yourself a man? Look here, if you don't give me that money I'll tell the world about you... (111).

This is a very crucial moment in the narrative Ifeoma Okoye has manipulated to dispel and deconstruct gender beliefs in the Nigerian society and connect back to Apostle Joseph's claims about infertility, and certainly prompts Dozie, though belatedly to abandon and repudiate his long held gender ideology. This is the focus of his dual consciousness:

Dozie sat in the sitting- room for the best part of the

night. Virginia's words kept on ringing in his ears. Did she mean all that she had said?... Was she trying to blackmail him or was she speaking the truth? He wished he knew the answers to these and many other question that drummed in his ears (112).

The reconsideration of his gender beliefs is like an epiphany. As a result, he resolves to send Virginia away from his house and decided to go to a London hospital to present him to medical examination. When Ugo Ushie told Ije about what had happened between Dozie and Virginia as she had it from Dozie's cousin Adaku, Ije responded: "I've ceased being interested in what happens in that house..." (114). Ije's response shows that she is a self conscious individual who in spite of her love for her husband has defined her identity outside matrimonial home with Dozie. When Ugo Ushie reprimanded her and asked: "Now, Ije, where do you go from here?" (114). Ije answered in a manner that depicts her new-found identity and consciousness. It is revealing of the African woman's recognition that marriage is one option among many: "I want to be alone without anyone disturbing me. One thing I am sure of, I am not going to marry again..." (114). This is a supreme recognition of her identity and a rejection of patriarchal assumptions. The implication of Ije's highly assertive reply to Ugo Ushie's question is that she has reached full awareness and consciousness that marriage and childbearing are options among many others. Besides in defining her identity, the woman alone must recognise her worth and define her being. This is a shrewd articulation of feminine consciousness which permeates Ifeoma Okoye's narrative structure

After Dozie had come back from the London hospital, he goes to see Ugo Ushie and the conversation below ensued:

'How was your trip?'  
 'Rewarding and revealing, Ugo, I must see Ije. You must help me see her at once...'  
 'I must see her... I'm sending Virginia out of my house'  
 Ugo was incredulous. 'What has she done?'  
 'Many things...'  
 'What about your baby?'  
 'It is not my baby for all I know...'  
 'You will understand me later. But first, help me by coaxing your friend, Ije to let me come and see her' (116).

This conversation coming after Dozie's return from a London hospital confirms Virginia's ranting as truth and confirms Apostle Joseph's revelation and proves Beatrice's strategy to save her marriage appropriate. In addition it shatters and destroys all the gender myth about infertility in marriage.

About two days after Ugo Ushie had the conversation with Dozie, she went to coax her friend Ije to agree to have Dozie visit her in her flat. When Ije remained adamant in her refusal, Ugo Ushie told her: "And remember a good wife must allow her husband to humiliate himself before her" (117). Having said that Ugo Ushie took Dozie to see Ije. When Dozie met Ije he was very sorry and told her:

I'm extremely sorry for all I've done to you, Ije.'  
 Dozie said. His voice was loaded with grief, remorse,

and regret... I've wronged you in every way. All I ask you is to forgive me... I've made a grievous mistake in life... 'I'm sorry *that you've subjected yourself to all kinds of treatment, unpleasant ones and dangerous ones, when I have all along been the cause of our childlessness*' (118, emphasis mine).

This scene of Dozie's revelation of his fertility deficiency based on his visit to a London clinic is significant to the plot development of the novel. It can be described as the climax of Ifeoma Okoye's narrative which functions to deconstruct gender attitudes in the Nigerian society: "He told her the minutest detail of the examination and tests he had undergone in a clinic in London. *The tests had revealed that he had a minor blockage*, but the doctor had assured him that the fault could be corrected by a simple operation" (119, emphasis mine). This confession is very significant within the context of socio-cultural assumptions. It reinforces the need for a flexible gender attitude. Ifeoma Okoye has used this to comment very clearly the dangers of inflexible patriarchal gender beliefs, resulting in degenerating socio-cultural development. This is because negative patriarchal belief has put the family under threat. The implication is that had Dozie been more flexible of his chauvinistic orientation and gone for these tests earlier rather than subjecting his wife to so many "unpleasant" and "dangerous" tests they might have had their children. This is a sad commentary on the hypocrisy of the Nigerian culture and society. Therefore the Virginia episode in the narrative structure of the text is used to heighten the danger such a rigid culture. Okoye laments that Nigeria's gender beliefs have led to a degeneration of positive interaction between the sexes. It is a blessing in disguise, as Dozie's dual consciousness captures: "... Virginia episode was a blessing in disguise, he thought. Without it he would not have thought of submitting himself for a test" (119). Herein is the tragedy of Nigerian gender ideology which rests on blackmailing the woman into accepting blame for failure in marriage as Okoye shows. Dozie's misfortune in marriage is aggravated by negative patriarchal gender assumptions. Earlier on Dozie had told Ije: "'I've come, Ije, he said, 'first to ask for your forgiveness, and second to take you to London so that you'll be with me while I undergo the operation'" (119). In asking forgiveness from Ije Dozie Apia has come to the recognition of Ije's identity, consciousness as an individual person not as a signifying object or representation, thereby empowering and elevating her individuality at the same time.

### Conclusion

The basic concerns of this paper can now be restated. This study has used the gender theory to interrogate and how Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* reveals and reflects the popular gender biases in the Nigerian society. The paper posits that gender is an important conceptual category in cultural studies and the Nigerian culture manifest its discursive practices. The paper pointed out how Ifeoma Okoye has complicated gender attitudes in her narrative. The paper has argued that there are underlying gender assumptions which categorise the woman in Nigerian culture. These signifying practices are destructive to society, because they are masking, distorted images which Ifeoma Okoye has used the work to deconstruct. It is argued that Okoye's text not only deconstructs the false gender beliefs

prevalent in her society but also through the experiences of the female characters formulates a new identity and consciousness for the Nigerian woman.

The study within its goal has interrogated the formation and complication of consciousness in the novel. In a similar way, it has argued that the identity we designate woman is the product of bitter socio-cultural experiences in Nigeria, especially in marriage. Finally, the paper has examined how Okoye's work has been used to fracture, reconstruct, deconstruct and demystify infertility in marriage in the Nigerian culture. The argument is that it is within this female centred consciousness that Ifeoma Okoye's characters are able to interrogate culture and history. In the end Okoye's novel has shown more particularly the privileging of the female voice, identity, recognition and consciousness.

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