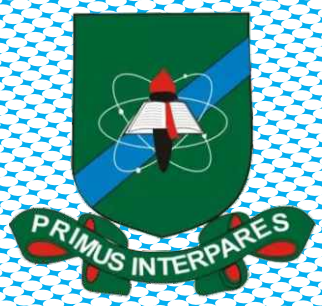

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Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (SAJOLLCOS)
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (SAJOLLCOS)
Vol. 6 No. 2: December, 2025 — ISSN: 2787-0286 & 2811-2261 (Online & Print)

Female Empowerment and Liberation of the Mind in Aiwanose Odafen's *Tomorrow I Become a Woman*

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Abstract

Discussions of women's empowerment in African literary studies have often focused on visible forms of resistance such as economic independence, social mobility, or open defiance of patriarchal authority. While these approaches are important, they tend to understate the psychological and intellectual processes that make such resistance possible. This article examines Aiwanose Odafen's Tomorrow I Become a Woman *through a postcolonial feminist framework, arguing that the novel locates empowerment primarily in the realm of consciousness. Through a close reading of the female characters' experiences, the study shows how oppression in the text is sustained not only by cultural and religious structures but also by the internalization of silence, endurance, and self-denial as feminine virtues. The article demonstrates that resistance in the novel emerges first as an inward awakening—a gradual rethinking of self, identity, and possibility—rather than as immediate material or social transformation. By foregrounding mental emancipation as the basis of empowerment, Odafen's narrative challenges dominant feminist models that equate liberation solely with external change. The study therefore contributes to postcolonial feminist criticism by highlighting the centrality of intellectual and psychological liberation in understanding women's resistance and identity formation in postcolonial Nigerian society.*

Keywords:
Postcolonial feminism; mental emancipation; women's empowerment; female identity; African women's fiction

1.1 Introduction

Discourses on women's empowerment in postcolonial societies often privilege economic independence, overlooking the deeper processes of intellectual and psychological liberation. Aiwanose Odafen's *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* reorients this narrative by portraying empowerment as an inward transformation—a liberation of the mind. Through her depiction of women constrained by patriarchal and cultural expectations, Odafen exposes how oppression persists not only through external control but also through the internalization of silence and endurance as moral virtue. The novel thus presents mental liberation as the foundation of empowerment, showing how

Nigerian women, through introspection and shared awareness, begin to dismantle inherited ideologies of silence and endurance.

The novel enters a long-standing tradition of African women's writing that interrogates the burdens placed on women by patriarchal customs, religious expectations, and lingering postcolonial structures. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, this paper examines how Odafen's female characters navigate and transcend these inherited structures of thought. It argues that mental emancipation, rather than material freedom, constitutes the truest form of empowerment in the novel. Tracing the experiences of multiple generations of women—from those who accept subjugation as tradition to those who begin to question it—the study reveals a continuum of awakening that reflects the broader struggle for female self-definition in postcolonial Nigeria. The novel follows women whose lives are framed by cultural duty and domestic sacrifice, yet whose struggles reveal a profound hunger for self-definition beyond the confines of marriage and motherhood. While existing scholarship on African women's empowerment often foregrounds economic independence or overt acts of resistance, Odafen's narrative redirects attention toward a quieter but equally radical form of liberation: the emancipation of the mind.

Although *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* depicts women navigating oppressive circumstances, little critical attention has been given to the psychological transformations that make their resistance possible. The problem motivating this study is the lack of sustained scholarly engagement with how Odafen's female characters achieve mental liberation—a process that reveals empowerment not as a financial or social acquisition, but as an intellectual awakening that reorients how these women see themselves and their world. Without addressing this dimension, existing readings risk overlooking the novel's most significant intervention: that true emancipation arises when women reclaim the freedom to think, question, and redefine what identity means within, and ultimately beyond patriarchal and postcolonial constraints.

This paper therefore inspects how the female characters in *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* attain liberation of the mind within a patriarchal and postcolonial Nigerian society, and how this process of mental emancipation reshapes and redefines their identities. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theories that emphasize consciousness, negotiation, and self-definition, the study demonstrates that Odafen situates empowerment primarily within the realm of consciousness, suggesting that before women can alter their external realities, they must first reclaim their capacity to think, choose, and redefine what it means to be a woman. In this light, the study interrogates how the

female characters in *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* attain liberation of the mind within a patriarchal and postcolonial Nigerian society, and how this process of mental emancipation redefine their identities.

The paper aims to investigate how *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* portrays intellectual and mental liberation as a form of resistance against patriarchy and postcolonial conditioning. It contends that Odafen situates empowerment within the realm of consciousness—suggesting that before women can alter their external realities, they must first reclaim their capacity to think, choose, and redefine what it means to be a woman.

1.2 Literature Review

Scholarship on women's empowerment in African literature has historically emphasized the visible, social, and economic dimensions of liberation. Critics such as Florence Stratton argue that African women writers challenge patriarchal domination by presenting women who confront or reject the moral and domestic strictures imposed on them (Stratton 39). Similarly, Chikwenye Ogunyemi's theory of womanism underscores female survival and family-centered strength within patriarchal systems (Ogunyemi 72). Yet, as many of these works celebrate visible acts of defiance—marital rebellion, financial independence, or migration—they often underplay the intellectual and psychological processes that precede these external expressions of empowerment.

Postcolonial feminism, as developed by scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, critiques both Western feminist universalism and indigenous patriarchy. Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" foregrounds the silencing of women's consciousness in colonial and patriarchal discourse (Spivak 287), while Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes" insists that women in postcolonial contexts must be studied through their unique historical and cultural specificities (Mohanty 65). These perspectives open space for exploring mental and intellectual emancipation as central to liberation. bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* similarly argues that "the struggle to be free begins in the mind" (5), a notion that resonates profoundly with African feminist calls for inward awakening.

African feminist theorists such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Obioma Nnaemeka further develop this intersection. Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) highlights how African women's emancipation must involve re-education and mental decolonization (Ogundipe-Leslie 104). Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism advances a dialogic form of feminism grounded in negotiation and self-definition within

cultural structures (Nnaemeka 378). Both frameworks insist that liberation must address the internalized dimensions of oppression, positioning the mind as the first site of resistance.

Within African women's fiction, writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Sefi Atta have consistently dramatized women's journeys toward autonomy. Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* exposes how motherhood becomes a tool of female subjugation, while Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* explores how education ignites mental emancipation amid colonial legacies (Dangarembga 145). Adichie and Atta similarly construct educated, introspective heroines who question social roles, revealing empowerment as both psychological and cultural negotiation. Odafen's *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* extends this discourse by centering liberation as primarily cognitive—a reordering of thought and self-perception rather than a quest for external transformation.

Recent critical engagement with *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* has begun to foreground this emphasis on psychological and intellectual awakening. A contemporary feminist review published in 2025 situates Odafen's narrative within ongoing debates on women's autonomy and cultural conditioning in Nigerian society, emphasizing how the novel exposes the subtle ways religion and tradition normalize female suffering while silencing dissent (Odusanya). The review highlights the protagonist's gradual consciousness as central to the text's feminist intervention, suggesting that resistance in the novel emerges less through overt rebellion than through an internal process of questioning and self-recognition. Although such critical reflections do not yet constitute an extensive body of peer-reviewed scholarship, they signal a growing recognition of Odafen's work as a significant contribution to postcolonial feminist discourse.

While scholars such as Gloria Ada Fwangyil have examined *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* through the lens of gender-based violence, critical attention has largely centered on representations of abuse and social inequality rather than on the postcolonial feminist frameworks that structure the novel's deeper ideological concerns. As a result, the ways in which Odafen critiques patriarchal systems through the psychological conditioning of women—and imagines empowerment as a process of mental and intellectual reorientation—remain underexplored. Even where issues of empowerment and identity are acknowledged, they are often approached as social outcomes rather than as cognitive and ideological processes. This study departs from such readings by locating empowerment in the redefinition of self beyond inherited patriarchal and postcolonial constructs, emphasizing identity formation as an act of reclaiming

agency through consciousness and self-awareness.

This study therefore fills a crucial gap in feminist and postcolonial literary criticism by emphasizing liberation of the mind as the root of empowerment in Odafen's novel. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, the paper argues that Odafen's women embody a form of self-emancipation rooted in mental resilience and intellectual awakening. Her narrative demonstrates that true empowerment for Nigerian women begins not in material escape but in reclaiming the power to think, question, and redefine what it means to exist within, and beyond, patriarchy.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a postcolonial feminist framework to explore the liberation of the mind and the redefinition of female identity in Aiwanose Odafen's *Tomorrow I Become a Woman*. Postcolonial feminism emerges from the convergence of two intellectual traditions: postcolonial theory, which critiques the lingering effects of colonial domination, and feminist theory, which interrogates gender-based oppression. Together, they provide a critical lens for understanding how women in formerly colonized societies negotiate overlapping systems of subjugation—patriarchal, cultural, and imperial.

Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", is foundational to this framework. Spivak argues that women in postcolonial societies are doubly silenced—first by the patriarchal structures within their own cultures and second by the Western intellectual discourse that claims to represent them (Spivak 287). In Odafen's narrative, this silencing is mirrored in the psychological and emotional entrapment of women like Uju, who must reclaim their voice through an internal process of awakening rather than through rebellion alone. Spivak's notion of *epistemic violence*—the erasure of subaltern women's capacity to think and speak for themselves—thus directly informs the analysis of how Odafen's characters achieve liberation by reclaiming thought as agency.

Mohanty's critique of Western feminist generalizations in "Under Western Eyes" complements this perspective by asserting that feminist liberation must be context-specific, rooted in local histories and social realities (Mohanty 65). Odafen's novel situates its female characters within the complex interplay of religion, tradition, and modernity in Nigerian society, making their mental emancipation an act of situated resistance rather than a universal feminist ideal. Mohanty's insistence on local epistemologies enables a reading of Odafen's women as thinkers who redefine freedom in their own terms.

Within the African feminist tradition, Ogundipe-Leslie's *Stiwanism* (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) and Nnaemeka's *Nego-Feminism* provide conceptual depth. Ogundipe-Leslie emphasizes that African women's oppression is not solely patriarchal but also structural, shaped by class, race, and colonial inheritance; hence, liberation must begin with the re-education of both the self and society (Ogundipe-Leslie 104). Her argument that "the African woman must first free herself mentally before seeking social transformation" (105) captures the essence of Odafen's narrative project. Similarly, Nnaemeka's *Nego-Feminism* proposes a pragmatic feminism based on negotiation and compromise within cultural contexts rather than direct confrontation (Nnaemeka 378). Odafen's women negotiate survival and selfhood within their cultural spaces, transforming negotiation itself into a mode of mental resistance.

hooks' psychological reading of liberation adds another dimension to this framework. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks argues that "the struggle to end oppression begins with the self, in the mind" (hooks 5). This assertion bridges feminist thought and psychoanalytic insight, aligning with the novel's portrayal of mental emancipation as the precondition for external freedom. By applying these intertwined perspectives, this study interprets *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* as a postcolonial feminist text where freedom is not primarily achieved through rebellion but through consciousness—through the unlearning of patriarchal and colonial conditioning that have long defined womanhood.

In essence, the theoretical framework situates Odafen's work at the intersection of *postcolonial deconstruction* and *feminist reimagination*. The female characters' liberation is both an epistemological and emotional journey: they must think themselves free before they can act free. Thus, the framework emphasizes that the most profound emancipation in postcolonial women's writing begins in the reclamation of thought—the quiet revolution of the mind that precedes all visible change.

1.4 The Weight of Endurance

The women in *Tomorrow I Become a Woman* enter the narrative carrying a long history of female subjugation normalized by culture and sanctioned by religion. Their identities are shaped by expectations that marriage confers dignity, motherhood secures relevance, and endurance is the highest moral virtue. This internalization of patriarchal values becomes the first site of struggle, for it creates a psychological environment where pain is rationalized and personal desire is silenced. Odafen's novel insists that the true conflict for these women is not simply the brutality of their husbands or the pressures of their society, but the mental frameworks that have taught them to

accept suffering as destiny. As postcolonial feminist thinkers such as Ogundipe-Leslie and Nnaemeka assert, the deepest form of oppression often lies in the mind, and liberation begins when women interrogate the beliefs that bind them (Ogundipe-Leslie 104; Nnaemeka 378).

Uju's journey encapsulates this transformation most clearly. At the beginning, she embodies the ideal daughter and submissive wife, convinced that endurance is proof of womanhood. Her decision to marry Gozie, despite early red flags, stems not from naïveté but from a culturally reinforced belief that marriage validates her existence. Yet Odafen allows cracks to form in this worldview. As Gozie's abuse intensifies, Uju begins to question the logic of suffering, asking herself whether love should require silence, fear, and self-erasure. These moments of self-questioning mark the birth of mental emancipation, for they challenge the patriarchal script that has defined her worth. This shift aligns with Spivak's critique that the subaltern woman begins to reclaim agency the moment she recognizes the ideological nature of her oppression (Spivak 287). Uju's eventual refusal to internalize blame or rationalize violence becomes a radical act of self-definition.

Adaugo's liberation follows a different trajectory, grounded more in emotional clarity and intellectual resistance. Unlike Uju, she possesses an early awareness of injustice, refusing to accept the belief that a woman's value lies in her ability to endure. Her questioning of marital norms and her refusal to be absorbed into silence reflect a consciousness shaped by negotiation rather than submission. When her husband hit her and she went to Uju's house for shelter, during their conversation

> 'I took the things to him and, can you imagine, this idiot started asking me why I was searching his things. So, I told him he was liar and a cheat.' She paused and turned to me, this time with venom in her eyes. I'd never seen Ada like that. 'He slapped me. Can you believe that? I didn't let him get away with it. Agwo emeghi ihe o jiri buru agwo, umuaka ejiri ya kee nku,' she said. If a snake doesn't show its venom, little children will use it to tie rewood. I was afraid to ask, but I did anyway. 'What did you do?' 'I fought back. When he hit me, I hit him back; when he punched, I punched him back. The only way he was going to win was if he killed me, because I was ready for him and I told him that (Odafen 197).

Through Adaugo, Odafen dramatizes Nnaemeka's idea that African women resist not always through rebellion but through strategic thinking and self-awareness. Ada's strength thus arises from her ability to name her suffering and articulate her desire

for a life that does not require her annihilation. Her mental liberation is evidenced in her refusal to normalize trauma, abuse and in her insistence that dignity is not negotiable.

Sally emerges as a vital counterpoint to Uju's internalized conditioning, functioning as both a mirror and a catalyst for Uju's intellectual and emotional awakening. Her presence disrupts the domestic isolation that has long shaped Uju's conflicted sense of self. Unlike many women in the novel who remain constrained by familial or cultural expectations, Sally embodies a more assertive, modernized form of womanhood shaped by her university education and broader understanding of female autonomy. From a psychoanalytical feminist perspective, Sally represents the "other mother"—a figure who helps reconfigure Uju's psychic framework by offering emotional validation and modeling alternative possibilities of selfhood (Chodorow). She intervenes not merely as a supportive friend but as an agent who helps Uju see her suffering outside the distorted lens of patriarchal normalcy. Through Sally, the novel foregrounds the political significance of female solidarity within postcolonial societies where state institutions and cultural structures frequently fail women. Her support allows Uju to name her trauma, confront her husband's violence, and reclaim her capacity for choice, reinforcing the idea that consciousness-raising among women is essential to breaking cycles of oppression (hooks 5). Sally's influence also demonstrates a hybrid postcolonial identity, negotiating tradition and modernity, akin to Bhabha's "third space," where new forms of selfhood emerge.

Uju's mother represents an earlier generation of women whose identities were formed in stricter, more rigid patriarchal frameworks. Yet her story is essential for showing how internalized beliefs are passed across generations. She teaches Uju endurance because endurance was the only survival strategy available to her. Her mental imprisonment illustrates the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal consciousness. The novel also introduces other women whose stories contribute to a larger collective portrait of mental awakening, like Sister Bolatito who helped Uju while her daughter was on admission. Their whispered conversations, shared anxieties, and quiet solidarities create a communal consciousness that challenges patriarchal norms.

> At the hospital gate, Sister Bolatito stopped her car and turned o the engine, and I thanked her. As I turned to leave, she touched my shoulder, causing me to pause. 'You can talk to me, you know. Something is wrong. You said you fell down the stairs, but I know that's a lie. I have been there. I want to help you. We women have to stick together; we have to help each other.'

> Something about those words penetrated the false walls of strength I'd built around myself. The tears didn't come softly, but in a torrent like heavy rainfall after a drought. I covered my face with my hands and gave in to my emotions. Sister Bolatito rubbed my back gently in silent comfort as I cried. When I was done, she handed me a handkerchief to wipe my face and listened patiently. 'I'll help you,' she said immediately. 'I'll give you the money for the bill.' The tears came again, but this time they were ones of relief. She was the miracle I'd prayed for (Odafen 361).

These women recognize the contradictions in their lives yet are constrained by economic dependence, religious teachings, or fear of social ostracism. Still, their reflections and private doubts signal mental resistance that may not translate into physical escape but nonetheless disrupts the ideological grip of patriarchy. Their experiences echo Dangarembga's emphasis on internal rebellion as a critical step toward empowerment in *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga 145).

Across these narratives, mental emancipation emerges as the most transformative force in the novel. The women's liberation is not framed through dramatic departures or economic breakthroughs but through a reorientation of thought—an inward refusal to accept narratives that diminish their humanity. As they interrogate cultural expectations, reinterpret the meaning of womanhood, and redefine themselves outside patriarchal validation, they enact the core of postcolonial feminist resistance. Odafen shows that empowerment begins when women claim authority over their minds, challenging both the colonial afterlives and local patriarchies that dictate their identities. By reclaiming thought, they reclaim selfhood; by transforming consciousness, they transform their lives.

1.5 Conclusion

Tomorrow I Become a Woman demonstrates that the most enduring form of female empowerment arises not from economic independence or physical escape, but from a profound reorientation of consciousness. Through Uju, Adanna, Uju's mother, and the other women whose stories intersect with theirs, Odafen shows that liberation begins in the mind long before it manifests in action. The novel portrays patriarchy not only as an external system that limits women's possibilities, but also as an internalized ideology that shapes how they interpret duty, suffering, and identity. By tracing the moments when these women begin to question inherited beliefs, reinterpret the meaning of endurance, and imagine alternatives to the roles imposed upon them, Odafen foregrounds mental emancipation as the core of postcolonial feminist resistance.

Postcolonial feminist theory helps illuminate the significance of these internal shifts. Spivak's emphasis on consciousness, Mohanty's insistence on cultural specificity, Ogundipe-Leslie's call for mental decolonization, and Nnaemeka's focus on negotiation collectively reveal that empowerment in postcolonial societies often begins subtly, privately, and psychologically. The women in the novel exemplify this truth. Their resistance may not take the form of dramatic rebellion, yet their intellectual and emotional awakenings disrupt the patriarchal narratives that seek to define them. In reclaiming the freedom to interpret their experiences differently, they reclaim the power to redefine themselves.

Ultimately, the novel argues that the mind becomes the first site of liberation in contexts where women are denied autonomy in public life. Odafen's portrayal of mental emancipation expands the understanding of empowerment within African feminist discourse, demonstrating that genuine transformation requires the courage to think against the grain of cultural expectation. By centering mental liberation, the novel invites readers and scholars alike to reconsider what resistance means for women whose circumstances prevent physical escape but cannot extinguish the possibility of intellectual freedom. Odafen's work thus enriches postcolonial feminist conversations by asserting that the journey toward selfhood begins with the radical act of reimagining one's own identity.

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