

## MYTHOPOEIA OF THE FEMALE BODY IN CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO AND BEN OKRI

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### Abstract

The female body as a text of myriad ideologues is imaginatively explored in certain sections of Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* (1971) and Ben Okri's *Wild* (2012). This view is significant because the two poets show how a man's veneration of the bodies of women is akin to humankind's desideration for novelty and alternatives. Meanwhile, these female bodies are the same in new skins. The crave for diverse female bodies is a mythopoeic process which symbolizes how humanity seeks newer ways of exploring a recurring desire. To Okigbo and Okri, the perpetual hunt for a female body is an epistemological metonymy of larger human contexts as exemplified in modes of religious worship, distribution of political power and control of economic wealth. The poets perceive that libidinal drives after female bodies share the same ideational patterns with social wantonness, personal aggrandizement and incessant crave for power. Anchored on the Disgusting Body Theory of Winfried Menninghaus, this paper examines the inherent contradictions in seeking new female bodies as poeticized by Okigbo and Okri. Menninghaus' polemics are appropriate in situating this discussion in the African worldview and in foregrounding the universal concerns of the female bodies in the writings of Okigbo and Okri. In interrogating the crave for female bodies, it is observed that Okigbo deploys the Myth of Mother Idoto while Okri authenticates the cyclical nature of history by showing the illusion of change in the same way as a man hankers after different female bodies. Therefore, it is decipherable from the poetic oeuvres of both poets that human yearnings and aspirations are fleeting and illusory in so far as these drives are same as the longing for diverse female bodies.

**Keywords:** Mythopoeia, Female Body, Craving, Desire

### Introduction

The idea of "a female body", as one of the contemplative tools in debating and interrogating Africa's development, is mythically captured in the selected poetry of two Nigerian poets, Christopher Okigbo and Ben Okri. This position is anchored on the view that there are many ways in which African literature can be read without submitting to "...any notion of an authoritative, uniform truth, it opposes any hegemonic and monolithic political or theoretical discourse (ix)" as noted by Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski. For the poets, "a female body" is a place of corporate communion, personal contemplation and universal postulation. In *Labyrinths*, Okigbo appreciates "Mother Idoto" as a female deity whose body is suggestively used to show veneration as well as futility; in *Wild*, Okri selects certain parts of the female body to espouse their symbolic attributes of vision, therapy and aesthetics. For both poets, the history of their society can be re-

imagined, re-worked and re-made by observing the motives in the degree with which a man pants after the female zone. Okigbo's and Okri's mythic views of the female body are constructs which provide imaginative materials of reviewing and remaking Africa's processes.

Meanwhile, the concept of "a female body" as a space for sustainable ideologue has been addressed by iconic critics such as Bell Hooks (1991) who reasons that "Surely our desire for radical social change is intimately linked with the desire to experience pleasure, erotic fulfilment and a host of other passions (13)". Emphasizing the impressionable symbols in the female zone, Yvonne Vera (1999), contends for further theoretical approaches while Elleke Boehmer (2005) sees the study as a "a paradigm...to articulate a still-unrealized striving for self-expression...widening women's possibilities for articulation, witnessing and self-healing (126)". Fairly recently, Judith Butler (2013) argues that inscriptions and surface signs on the female body as ways of expressing "...external imprisonment or effect of power and subjection (581)".

As seminal as these works are, they are sparse in linking the study of a female body to the yearnings, desires and aspirations of the African continent. The dynamic structures of the continent requires a theoretical view which can speculate the causes and effects of wanton desires for power in politics, perpetual aspirations for human control in religion as well as vaulting ambitions for wealth and personal aggrandizements. Therefore, an aspect of Winfried Menninghaus' *Disgusting Body Theory* (2003) entitled "The Gaping Mouth" is appropriate in foregrounding the claims of this study. This theoretical framework is not only useful in interpreting the political, religious and economic relevance of Okigbo's and Okri's mythic views of the female body but it is also engaging in the way in which it universalizes the findings of this essay, one of which is the illusionary effect of cravings and struggles as symbolized in the libidinal drives for "a female body". But Menninghaus' speculations are not without limits. In this study, the exegesis of Okigbo's and Okri's ideas of the female space advances the theoretical standpoints of Menninghaus, especially as we are specific in how our findings relate to the quotidian processes in Africa.

### **The Female Body Constructs of Christopher Okigbo and Ben Okri**

Christopher Okigbo derives the Myth of Mother Idoto as the ideologue of a female body by reworking the public idea of "Idoto", his village stream, to mean a place of worship, acceptance, entertainment, rest, connection and renewal. Eulogizing the "oil bean", the "tortoise" and the "python" (3) as her symbols of veneration, the poet surrenders himself to the highly revered Idoto in "The Passage" of *Labyrinths*: "Under your power wait I/ on barefoot,/ watchman for the watchword" (3). Ali Mazrui, in *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, remarks that "Idoto was the goddess of Okigbo's community in Ijoto with her shrine beside a sacred river...the oil bean had an intricate sacred symbolism" (53). Obi Nwakanma notes in *Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967): Thirsting for Sunlight* that :

As a child, Christopher Okigbo experienced the mystery of Idoto worship. Growing among the customs of this community he could sense the profound power of the goddess of Ojoto...the Idoto River was also the place of entertainment...Okigbo frolicked in the river purely for sport. He wrote later...with touching nostalgia...the significance of the river as "...the village stream of which I drank, in which I washed, as a child" (2)

Nwakanma adds that Okigbo's maternal family has a traditional history of tending a shrine called "Ajani", which harbored Idoto, the water goddess and the principal deity of Ojoto people (8). This

maternal foundation and connection of “Idoto”, perhaps accounts for Okigbo’s use of “Mother” in “Mother Idoto”. In Okigbo’s recreation of the Mother Idoto Myth, experiences and images such as the need for acceptance, repentance, sex, water, mother and reconciliation recur perpetually. The crave for the presence and body of Mother Idoto is Okigbo’s construct of desire and yearning of humanity for newness and renewal. The constancy of the archetypes of sex, (worship) and acceptance (refuge) is seen as a means with which Okigbo discerns human cravings in religion, politics and economics. The Mother Idoto’s body is the space of cultural and spiritual retreat because every connection with it will result in the creation of new possibilities. To Okigbo, a new beginning is decipherable when humanity reconnects and communes with what makes it productive, acceptable and free, as exemplified by the poet’s relationship with Mother Idoto. The perpetual rush towards Mother Idoto is borne “out of the depth” of sincere “cry” (3) because it is natural for humans to crave for the body of Mother Idoto.

Like Okigbo, Ben Okri had a strong affinity with his mother. Apart from being inspired by the Civil War in Nigeria (1967-1970), Okri claimed that the influence he derived was based on the oral tradition derived from the stories that his mother told him:

If my mother wanted to make a point,  
She wouldn’t correct me, she’d tell me  
A story (Anita Sethi 8)

Meanwhile, these stories from Urhobo and Igbo community of Nigeria (Stefaan Anrys 2009) are replete with female characters whose bodies are highly venerated. Hence, stories of female characters were told by Okri’s mother as a way of correcting, pruning and socializing him.

The metaphysical and mythical dimension of Okri’s idea of the female body is “...something that comes out of the African tradition” (Sophie Elmhist 2012). Like Okigbo, Okri perceives the female body as a muse of correction, contemplation and renewal. He says *Wild* is borne out of the “presence” of her mother and

That’s why it’s called “My Mother Sleeping”:  
it gives me this sense of her continuing presence  
which is very African... (1)

In Okri’s mythic view, the female body is the abiding presence of a mother in a period of dilemma, despondency and desperation. Every crave for change requires the abiding presence (body) of the mother.

For Okigbo and Okri, therefore, the female body is an object of desideration. But the degree and motive of the yearning for the female body will determine the outcome. If the desire is founded on the need for harmony and progress, then it will yield certain fruitfulness otherwise hankering after the space called “a female body” is an exercise in futility. This is why the “The Gaping Mouth” theory of Menninghaus will be employed to delineate the view that as the female body gapingly attracts human yearning, it can either lead to quality digestion or despicable excretion. Menninghaus, with close reference to the polemics of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1978) and Michail Bakhtin (1984), holds that “...the gaping mouth’s disgust- value ...receives its license in the realm of the aesthetics: that which has been excluded now returns as something included, through the introduction of a new distinction on the other side of the earlier distinction (63)”. The desire for “a new distinction” in a gaping mouth (female body) is that human drive which craves for newness in and for something not really new as demonstrable in the selected poetry of Okigbo and Okri. Menninghaus adds that any entry into the gaping mouth leads to “... a transformation of

the elements themselves” (63). Such transformations are either retrogressive or progressive as shown in the applicability of Okigbo’s and Okri’s mythic views.

### **Emerging Political Aspiration in the Female Body**

Political ambition is akin to the way in which a man hankers after a female body. This view is theorized in Menninghaus’ “The Gaping Mouth” where he suggests that the gaping mouth is the open mouth of the female sex organ (62). The degree at which a man desires the gaping mouth of the female sex organ is similar to the way such individual desires political power. This is revealed in some of the poems in *Labyrinths* and *Wild*.

Historically, Okigbo’s personality was marked by sexual adventures. According to Nwakanma:

Christopher Okigbo’s perennial quest for sexual experience as conquest –what became his habit of compulsive womanizing in his adult life- may indeed be connected to a fundamental sense of the emptiness he felt as a child and his inconsolable longing for his late mother. (12)

This Oedipal desire to find love from a woman affirms the view that certain affection was missing in Okigbo’s life that he sought passionately and reverentially in the bosoms of women. To him, the more he had intimacy with women, the more he was accepted and the longing for fulfillment was satisfied. Hence, in “The Passage” words such “naked” (3), “watery presence”(3) and “my cry”(3) are mating images, which foreground the poet’s incessant sexual quest. These images underscore foreplays or features of sexual acts: “naked” (3) indicates an initiation of sex; “watery presence” suggests the union of male and female sexual organs with wetness and wateriness and “my cry” (3) underlines moaning and groaning during a sexual act. These images serve as prelude to conception, pregnancy, labour and birth. The desire for the body of Mother Idoto Myth underscores the poet’s desideration for power. He must enter and conquer by entering the gaping mouth of Mother Idoto. Similarly, Ben Okri reveals that the process of political conquest must involve the pleasurable pain of entering into the gaping mouth of the female body. In “The Screamer”, Okri portrays a picture of catastrophe as a nation goes through rebirth. Words such as “the bulldozed dead”, “blast of tanks”, “grief only (29)” and “volcanic heart” are used to show ongoing struggles and revolution. The pandemonium is a result of a desire for a political change. But Okri relates this chaos to a sexual act with a female:

And then I saw the cracked figure  
In a red coat, saw her  
Like a crazed opera singer  
Shake and pause for deep breath  
Before descending infernal  
Depths to release again...  
I had imagined the red woman  
Screaming... (31)

The desire for “the red woman” is equivalent to the desire for a radical political change. Red is the colour of the blood of revolution; it is also shed during the violent break of the female hymen. Similar to Okigbo’s use of “cry” in “The Passage”, Okri deploys the word “scream” ten times in this poem to show the sound made during an entry into the gaping mouth. It is a revolutionary act to desire a forceful entry into the female body.

Okigbo maintains the yearning for the female body in “Watermaid” with constant suggestive images, such as “under your power”(3), “Watermaid” (10), “shadow of rain over man with woman” (10), and “the armpit- dazzle of a lioness”. The poet uses this religious myth of a water goddess to show how political figures crave for power, even by visiting female deities for power, protection and other spiritual advantages. In Okigbo’s mythic view, for every political change and revolution there is a concomitant crave for a female intervention in form of contact with the body. The individual and society that seeks change and rebirth, must inevitably connect with a place of intimacy, dialogue, and communion. The consequence of the failure of the various ad hoc committees, which failed to reach a communion, resulted into war and social estrangement of Nigeria in 1966 (Nwakanma 235). We have a similar pattern for the cravefor power in Okri’s “The Rhino”:

My horn stands me apart  
And I have a passionate heart.  
My skin is a thick crust.  
I walk in the wonder of dust (50)

In mythology, “horn” is a symbol of strength and power and it is considered sacred (Cirlot 151). E. Cirlot holds that the horn is an emblem “symbolizing the spiritual call to join the Holy War” (151). The poet uses the “horn” to move to the “skin” of an object that he is “passionate” about. Okri suggests that the crave for power is only complete against the backdrop of “skin”. Power of the “horn” is negotiated at the “thick crust” of the “skin”. This is re-echoed in Okri’s “The Age of Magic” where a beggar is seen hankering after the body of a mermaid (72). The beggar here is someone who craves for revolutionary power. Meanwhile, the power is in the light of the desideration of a mermaid’s body:

Miracle took place when a woman laced  
In reds and blues sprouted  
Dark beautiful wings from behind  
Her neck, under the astonished  
Gaze of a gypsy child  
The age of iron is over.  
The age of magic has begun.  
Unveil your eyes. (73)

Another instance of the political dimension of the crave for Mother Idoto is found in Okigbo’s “Siren Limits”, where Mother Idoto is referred to as “Queen of the damp half light” (23). This is a phrase, which evokes an amorous image, especially the use of “damp” which resonates with “watery presence” (3). The poet describes his sexual relationship with the “Queen” (23) as a form of purgation or sanctification:

Queen of the damp half light,  
I have had my cleansing,  
Emigrant with air-borne nose,  
The he-goat-on-heat. (23)

The “cleansing” (23), which Okigbo refers to here, is from ideology, orientation and views that have alienated individuals/nations from their personhood/nationhood. The poet needs to be intimate with the “Queen of the damp”(23) so that the union will, so to say, sanctify him and place him in a condition of growth and development because

...HE was a shrub among the poplars,  
Needing more roots  
More sap to grow from sunlight,  
Thirsting for sunlight (24)

It is the yearning for the body of Mother Idoto that enables Okigbo to predict that in order “to grow from sunlight”(24), it is imperative to have an intimate union with the “Queen of the damp light” (23). Growth and development can be only achieved in the place of communion, intimacy and dialogue, because issues such as restitution, pardon and forbearance will be raised. The sexual relationship between the persona and “Queen of the damp light” (23) is a communion service, marked by the persona’s intention to have an invaluable union. Hence, he is “The he-goat-on-heat” (23) who is craving for intimacy with the body of Mother Idoto. There is an extension of this body and memory of the mother in Okri’s “Wild” (51). Here, the memory of a mother is taken as the Platonic form where other human activities are determined:

Everything should connect  
With everything...  
The world as it is,  
A system of co-operation,  
Where things are both themselves  
And systems and correspondences...  
Some of our best moments  
Are the reverse thoughts  
Of our dead mothers (53)

To Okigbo and Okri, the gaping mouth are the bodies and memories of mothers. The crave for the body of a mother in Okri is equivalent to the desideration for power. For Okri, memory is the tangible presence of a dead mother:

And that wild inspiration  
Which surprises thinkers,  
And poets, inventions and musicians...  
Through the infinite dialogue  
Of the big and small,  
Seen and unseen,  
Felt and unfelt,  
Like lovers coming back... (54)

Meanwhile, for Okigbo the contact with the body of Mother Idoto does not necessarily have to produce desired change or political revolution. This is in “Lament of the Silent Sisters” where the poet announces that

IS THERE...Is certainly there...  
For as in sea-fever globules of fresh anguish  
immense golden eggs empty of albumen  
sink into our balcony...  
How does one say NO in thunder...  
For in breakers in sea-fever compass or cross  
makes a difference: certainly makes  
not an escape ladder...  
Where is there for us an anchorage; (39)

Still maintaining sexual images of water and wetness, Okigbo observes that not all communions have the tendency of producing developmental results. The poet reveals that though the communion and convergence of certain ideology produces “golden eggs” (39), such beautiful eggs have “empty albumen”(39) because the “breakers”(39) (the owners of the eggs such as “Leidan” and “Flannagan”) do not make “an escape ladder”. So he asks: “Where is there for us an anchorage” (39). Certainly, a convergence of inhumane capitalists and exploiters who “sink into our balcony” (39) will only produce alienation, estrangement, civil unrests and underdevelopment. If those who have contacts with the body of Mother Idoto are inhumane, they will only produce “golden eggs empty of albumen” (39). The intention of exploiters will be exposed because they will produce nothing but emptiness after their contacts with the body of Mother Idoto. Meanwhile, Okigbo mythologizes that the harsh consequences of their meetings and communions can be prevented:

THIS SHADOW...  
 Urges us; gathers up our broken  
 Hidden feather-of-flight,  
 To this anguished cry of Moloch (40)

Here, like in *The Holy Bible*, John Milton in *Paradise Lost* and Allen Ginsberg in *Howl*, Okigbo reworks the myth of “Moloch” as an antithesis to Mother Idoto. Moloch is a mythic god who demands a very costly sacrifice as espoused in Semitic mythology (Smith 478). Hence, Okigbo describes Moloch’s cry as “anguished” because of his insatiable thirst for blood, money and sex (479). In the same way as God warns the children of Israel against Moloch in Leviticus 20: 2 that “thou shall say to the children of Israel, Whoever he be of the children of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, that giveth any of his seed unto Molech; he shall surely be put to death...” so also Okigbo warns his society of the “anguished cry of Molech” (40). The kind of body desired will determine the kind of result to be produced. This is harped in Menninghaus’ gaping mouth theory where he posits that “The widely open mouth...elicits disgust – in both a direct and a metonymical manner (62)”. “Moloch” is the disgust while “Mother Idoto” is the delight. Therefore, maintaining suggestive archetypes such as “well”, “cry” and “one dips one’s tongue”, (40,44) Okigbo provides an insight to a new beginning where Moloch’s calabashes will eventually be smashed because the persona embraces “a continual going to the well”(40) of Mother Idoto for constant communion, re-orientation and cleansing. By sexually embracing Mother Idoto in continual worship, communion, and supplication, the poet is of the mythic view that there will be an upturning of the existing ideology, which will eventually guarantee a rebirth. The smashing of the calabashes is like the destruction of an old myth for the creation of another. The new creation is borne out of an intimacy or the “continual going to the well” of Mother Idoto:

...there will be a continual going to the well  
 Until they smash their calabashes.  
 So, one dips one’s tongue in ocean, and begins  
 To cry to the mushrooms of the sky (40)

Okigbo’s Myth of Mother Idoto affirms the view that a rebirth is inevitable, provided that a struggle against an existing ideology is permitted. When there is an imaginative, ideational and even physical confrontation against Moloch, change is inevitable:

What cast-iron steps cascading down the valley  
 All forged into thunder of tanks;

And detonators cannoned into splintered flames,  
In this jubilee-dance of fireflies!(40)

To Okigbo, no “jubilee-dance” is guaranteed without “iron steps” against Moloch. But the condition for the veracity of this mythic claim is that the continual union between Mother Idoto must never be severed. This is corroborated in the mythic vision of Okri in “A Vision of Ti” (88). In line with the gaping mouth theory or the wide entrance of the female, Okri writes:

Through the hole in the wall  
Don't you notice  
The energy of the gods  
Shining through me?  
I am in the next door realm,  
And your future is clear to me  
As the desert is clear  
To the sky (90)

The “hole in the wall” is the entrance to the female body which brings illumination and direction to corporate politics. The more it is craved for the clearer the future. Because the crave for political power is borne out of progressive motive, then “The energy of the gods” (90) in going “Through the hole” is not wasted.

### **Religious Ideologue of a Female's Body in Okigbo and Okri**

Referring to Mother Idoto as “Oblong – headed Lioness” (27), and “Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong” (5), Okigbo extends his recreation of Mother Idoto Myth to mean a place of refuge, security and fulfillment. After the intimacy with his imaginative conviction (Mother Idoto) which births a new beginning, the next stage is protection against inevitable external invasion:

Time for worship:  
*Anna of the Panel oblongs*  
*Protect me*  
*From them fucking angels*  
*Protect me*  
*My sandhouse and bones (17)*

“Angels” here refers to Western religious myths, which means supernatural beings who act as messengers of God by bringing good news to mortals. Okigbo’s intimacy with Mother Idoto enables him to see the “fucking” side of the angels. The “sandhouse”, which connotes a weak geographical/political region and the “bones”, which means internal structural system of a sovereign state must be protected against the invasion of “fucking angels”. Okigbo’s mythic view is that is not only enough to crave for the body of Mother Idoto, but it is crucial to be protected by it. After the craving for the body, it is crucial to abide there so that “fucking angels” will not weaken the structures derived from the desideration of Mother Idoto. The various challenges in

21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria such as terrorism, social upheavals are as a result of invasion of “fucking angels” (17) who have made their Western religious myths the hegemonic standards of worship.

Okigbo observes that the political structure of Nigeria is weak (“sandhouse and bones”). He suggests that by abiding in the body of Mother Idoto – peculiar, cultural imaginative perspective – there is protection. Okigbo’s imaginative delineation of craving for and abiding with Mother Idoto is an extension of Menninghaus’ “The Gaping Mouth”. The latter, even with his philosophical odyssey into the polemics of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Mikhail Bakhtin, does not delimit the application of “The Gaping Mouth” which, to Okigbo” is the protection of the opened body. After Mother Idoto opens up for the prodigal, there must be a way in which she must be protected. This mythic view is supported in Okri’s “My Mother Sleeps” (9):

I watch over her as she gently sleeps.  
The soft dreams flutter her eyelids.  
Her quiet breathing, and the blessedness  
Of kindly eyes that are shut tight  
And the parted lips soothe  
My anxious soul...(9)

The “anxious soul” is the yearning man panting after the “parted lips” of a female. After entering the “parted lips” (the gaping mouth of Menninghaus), then he must “watch over” her by means of protection. The crave for spiritual or political power is only meaningful and tangible if the result of the craving is protected. The result of the craving is a system (like a sustained institutional policy with far reaching benefits), which must be protected. Meanwhile, Okri holds the view that this protection of systems is mutual as versified in “A Love Song”:

When on another day  
You see me smile  
Know that I have emptied  
My silver cup  
In quiet lamentation  
Of your absence...  
I sing when your nude form  
And joyful face of blue  
Makes the night stray  
Into my sea-chambers...  
I hide my wounds  
In the intoxication  
Of your dark remote eyes...(18)

As the craver pants after the nudity and eyes of the female, he receives healing to his wounds. But the spiritual therapy will only be experienced if the supplicant or worshipper endeavours to sacrifice for the body:

The mingled laughter in bars  
Draws the bow of my ecstasy:  
Out of my bleeding love  
I pluck the fiery arrows... (18)

Furthermore, in Okigbo, apart from protection against external “fucking angels” (17), Mother Idoto also cleanses every mentality of inferiority, slavery and servitude. A new orientation begins after a refuge is guaranteed in abiding in the body of Mother Idoto.

Oblong headed Lioness  
No shield is proof against her  
Wound me, I sea weed.  
When you have finished  
& done up my stitches  
Wake me near the altar  
& this poem will be finished... (24)

Blending archetypal images/figures, from Egyptian folklore such as “sarcophagus” (28), “the beast” (28) and “Enkidu” (28) and Christian ritual worship such as “altar”(28), Okigbo describes Mother Idoto as performing certain ritual cleansing on the persona so that the worshipper can be initiated properly into the Idoto clan. When a nation or institution, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, contends for the necessity of national orientation as a catalyst for sustainable development, then it recalls Okigbo’s embracing Mother Idoto. It is equally imperative to know how to operate in the system of Idoto so as to remain progressive. If the cravers of Mother Idoto refuse to take refuge in her body, then social and psychological experiences such as alienation, disorientation and cultural inferiority complex are bound to happen because the ideology of the “fucking angels” will take over:

*Who would add to your statue,  
Or in your village accept you?  
He fed them on seed wrapped in wonders;  
They deemed it a truth-value system,  
And they took the key off  
And they hid the key of...  
That none may enter. (29)*

Okigbo observes that the “truth-value system” (29) is determined by quality national orientation as exemplified by his strong avowal for a refuge in the body of Mother Idoto. Otherwise, there is total rejection and alienation from the “fucking angels” who brainwash with “seed wrapped in wonders” (29) with cynical remarks such as:

*Who would add to your statue,  
Or in your village accept you?*

In a related sense, Okri, using the word “beauty” to refer to the body of the woman in “To the Full Moon” (59), underlines the idea that a woman’s body is a space of vision:

The earth quivers under your glow;  
And the core of man, fertile...  
You nourish our secret  
Selves with that invisible food  
Of the heavens. Every living thing  
Is enchanted by that silent  
Song you sing...  
White visions tread the land  
At your oblation  
And everything that feels  
Reels lightly in an unknown intoxication.

You who lead us like a faithful  
Guide in the dark,  
Back to the transfigured  
Gateway of the son,  
Whose name is – beauty (60)

The body of the female is replete with visions because it provides an epistemological template with which humanity understands the “roundness of the world” (59). The crave for the erotic zones of the woman’s body is described as “climbing the hidden/Stairs of ...magnetic light” (59). This is suggestive of discoveries and visions. To Okri, the discovery of palpable innovations and far-reaching ideas for sustainable growth is similar to the way in which a man explores the female body.

The foregoing is reinforced in “Carpe Diem: A Love Song” (66) where Okri, using religious images, demonstrates that the female zone is therapeutic. Eulogizing the space as “The rich flow of your hair/ Your loving flair” (67), “Your gentle eyes alone”, “You are the mysterious smile/ I never understood” (67), “Your gentle eyes alone/ Redeem and bring much ease”, the poet defines the therapy of the female body as “...innocence of herbs that heal/ Makes the god in me real” (67). The tone of yearning is further captured in:

I need someone to sing  
To ...  
I saw you standing there lovely  
Like the roses of Spring...  
The beauty of your eyes  
Speak to me of the suffering  
That youth weaves into love’s offering  
And then suddenly cries...  
When I think of you my soul sings  
Of rainbows and magic things.  
Your voice rings in me like a golden bell.  
You have the grace of an African gazelle.

It is noteworthy that that Okri describes the female zone as “the grace of an African gazelle”. This is his view that the continent of Africa is as rich as the erotic zones of the female. It must be craved for and explored because it has a “poetic frame” (68), an opening like the gaping mouth of Menninghaus. But if the yearning is motivated by greed and personal aggrandizement, the visionary and therapeutic benefits of the female body become illusionary. This is exemplified in “The Difficulty of Seeing” (62):

I found it hard to see  
My mother’s face;  
The more I looked,  
The more her face eluded me.

If the motive of the aspirer is questionable, the effect becomes a project of delusion. An impaired socio-political space is a function of wrong aspirations and carnal cravings.

## **Conclusion**

Both Okigbo and Okri delineate their ideas of the female body as a space for epistemological debates and humanistic constructs, respectively in *Labyrinths* and *Wild*. Their specifications of the

female have been discussed engagingly, using Menninghaus' "The Gaping Mouth" from the *Disgusting Body Theory*.

In addition, this study has proven that yearnings and aspirations are processes of evolvment in the African continent. But these activities of crave for political power, religious maneuvering and economic exploitation are not without their contradictions because they can either lead to progression or retrogression.

Comparatively analyzing the selected poetry of Okigbo and Okri, this study sees the mythical engagements of the female by these poets as containing manifold signifiers, one of which is the consequences of hankering after the ever gaping mouth of the female space. This vaulting ambition for the grasp of the female is symbolic of the quest for power and the desire for economic wealth and religious control in Africa's quotidian experiences.

Meanwhile, Winfried's Menninghaus theoretical tool has provided methodological frame of approaching the discourse of female desire. But the methodology of the gaping mouth has been imaginatively mediated by the mythic touches of Okigbo and Okri because both poets provide perspectives that reveal the implications of entering the female zone. The interpretation of Okigbo's and Okri's poetic speculations of the female body is prescriptive in that it advances polemic schemes of investigating the motives behind aspirations in the economic, political and religious spheres in Africa.

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