

## Abstract

The mother figure appears to have been subliminally accepted as an enduring subject matter to be explored in varying themes, styles, and periods. Feminist concern is clearly expressed in Robinson's exposition of Irigaray's work, which points to the fact that this is not so. Five of the explicit paintings of the subject matter were randomly selected from Abraham Uyovbisere's collection and examined. The Feminist perspectives that are relevant for this study are drawn from the writings of Robinson (1998), Frueh (1998) and Baert (1998). The key elements that emerged from the analysis of Uyovbisere's mother figures are *Introspection*, *Domesticities and balance*, *Self-awareness*, *Etherealness*, *Introspection*, and *Brooding*. The key elements seem to engender spiritual values, which agree with Feminist values, but yet, reveal a subtle dialectic. In these paintings, his roles as *reporter* and *analyst* surpassed his role as *experiencer* and *activist* (since his paintings showed that he had not consciously decided to reinforce feminist ideals).

**Keywords:** Polemic, Dialectic, Feminist.

## Introduction

The artistic depiction of the woman in her biological role as mother became quite popular in the middle ages. Artists of this era made numerous naturalistic representations of *Madonna and Child*, or *Mary and the Infant Jesus*. Subsequent artists explored the mother figure in diverse styles, techniques, periods and contexts. The mother figure appears to have been subliminally accepted as an enduring subject matter to be explored in varying themes, styles, and periods. Feminist polemics on the subject matter, however, points to the fact that this is not so. This paper examines Abraham Uyovbisere's figural paintings of the mother figure in relation to or in contrast with (as the case maybe) feminist polemics of similar subject matter.

### Abraham Uyovbisere

Abraham Uyovbisere is a male contemporary artist who obtained a Bachelor's degree and Master's Degree in Fine Arts at the Ahmadu Bello University and University of Benin respectively. He is known for his interest in the naturalistic representation of female figures, which he begun to paint in 1981 and continued to paint consistently for about three decades. Journalists' reviews by Akintunde-Johnson (1989), Njoagwu (1993) and Adebajo (1993) identify Uyovbisere as feminist-identified. In Archibong (1997) the artist states explicitly that whatever the viewer sees is Uyovbisere's view of the world. His work, therefore, naturally becomes appropriate for the study of mother figures in relation to male artists and feminist views.

Uyovbisere succinctly states that his mother, Comfort Omote-ore Uyovbisere, largely shaped his reasoning, thereby providing a plausible reason for his avid depiction of female figures. Nevertheless, this raises questions about what views of the world that the artist's mother has passed unto her son reflect in his paintings of female forms.

### Mother and Child Figures

Archaeologists and Anthropologists have discovered and identified fertility or fecundity figures dating as far back as the end of the Paleolithic age in Europe (especially in France and Spain). The earliest known sculpture of a female fertility figurine, which is dated 23,000BC, is now called the Venus of Willendorf (Vishny, 2009). In traditional African art, the plenteous fertility figures and ancestral figures, which served as progenitors of familial lineages attests to the unilateral importance the people of Africa accorded fecundity. Images of women who hold children reflect a number of ideas ranging from symbols of lineage or clan forebears to "generalised and incarnate dead" (Sieber and Walker, 1987). Interestingly, in accordance with the African artistic concept of ephibism (the depiction of people at the prime of life regardless of age), children are not given individuality or character of their own, but are treated as extensions of their mothers' personality (Sieber and Walker, 1987).

In pre-twentieth century European iconography, the babies bore infantile characteristics regardless of the message the art work was created to pass across. For example, in the *Madonna and Child* imagery, the status of Madonna as "mother" is referential to the "infant" through whom the mother attains the status of "the adored". This contrasts significantly with concepts of deified motherhood in traditional

African art. There is, however, another significant ideological concern with the representation of motherhood that is neither hinged upon African traditional beliefs nor Christian beliefs. This is a feminist concern about the mode in which mother figures have been and are being represented.

### **Feminist Concern**

The feminist concern has to do with the relative diminution of the spiritual values of motherhood by "the male artists" in the motherhood images that they create. This concern is clearly expressed in Robinson's exposition of Irigaray's work. Irigaray in Robinson (1998) states that there is implicit confusion between the work of childbirth, a most wonderful creativity, and its definition within a between-men civilisation, in which women no longer have a recognised right to engender spiritual values.

The repertoire of Abraham Uyovbisere's paintings is primarily of female figures and though he claims that they represent his ideals, views and reasoning which he also claims were shaped by his mother, he is also an acclaimed feminist (as seen in journalists' reviews). Anaso (2016) in the article titled, *A Dialogue with Abraham Uyovbisere's Semi-nude Figures* examined the artist's semi-nude figures in the light of feminist principles and views and concluded that the messages therein neither reinforce nor advance feminist ideologies. It may be argued that the analysis did not bode well for the artist's labelling as feminist due to the fact that only his semi-nude paintings were analysed and semi-nude paintings may generate negative sentiments from puritanical points of view (which the artist tried to resolve by draping the figures). His paintings that are explicitly of the mother figure are thus analysed in the light of his labelling as feminist in the period in which they were made. As his semi-nude work, the paintings of motherhood ought to be evaluated within the context of feministic positions and ideals.

### **Feminist Positions**

The feminist perspectives that are relevant for an analysis of mother figures in the artist's paintings are drawn from the writings of Robinson (1998), Frueh (1998) and Baert (1998). Robinson reveals the feminist discontent about the conventional portrayal of mother figures, Frueh specifies the manner of portrayal that Feminists believe validate the identity of the woman and Baert demonstrates how the mother figure can be re-inscribed through performance.

Robinson (1998) in her essay titled *Beauty, the Universal, the Divine: Irigaray's Revaluings* focuses on a particular aspect of the thinking of Luce Irigaray (a philosopher and psychoanalyst) "in order to introduce it to a wider audience". Robinson hinges her discourse upon Irigaray's non-modernist approach in the averment of revaluation and rebuilding of terms with different values into concepts that are productive for women. The author presents Irigaray's liberation strategy for women's identity and positions of relevance, for greater self-awareness and actualisation. She further draws out from her own reading on female images the following two points upon which she bases her premise:

...First, that concepts of beauty, truth and transcendence within Western high-art practices have been predominantly produced by men; and second, that within this, since the early sixteenth century, one of the major carriers of meaning has been the image of woman. My premise, therefore, is that if one of our culture's major sources of illumination has been male concepts of beauty, then one of the shadows of this beauty consists of a beauty that is produced by and productive for women. Further, related to this shadow is another: that of women's development and determination of what constitutes their own beauty. (p160).

Women's development and determination of what constitutes their own beauty is one of the measures taken by feminists to counter the perceptions, attitudes and resulting depictions of female images that oppose feminist ideals, and to re-inscribe the identity that appropriately validates the existence of females.

Frueh (1998) in the essay *Making a Mess: Women's Pleasure* reveals the disparity between male and female artists through clarifying the concept of "messiness" as it concerns women artists and male artists. The author reveals the female qualities and manner of portrayal that feminists accept and seek to reinforce. Frueh states that beauty is the external sign of femininity, and more importantly, concerning monster/beauty. She reveals:

The richest beauty is monster/beauty, erotically saturated with a twist, a 'flaw', a nastiness of attitude or appearance, which shows up the blandness of a passive ideal. So she must suffer for the breaking of rules of decorative beauty, which like Matisse's 'armchair' aesthetics, is to provide comfort. Monster/beauty recalls the

eighteenth-century sublime by inspiring terror. She is also avant-garde allure, existing always in advance of the broken heart of art as order-out-of-chaos. Beauty is a sign of art, monster/beauty a demonstration of cutting-edge art, a knife into the viscera of convention, the risk of full-blown eros. (p147).

Frueh's theories represent a feminist position that seeks to counter the suppressive attacks of sexism and the orderly perfection of passive female beauty, which readily submits in the face of discrimination. Frueh in Anaso (2016) reveals that amongst feminists, there is a discriminatory preference for a feminist stereotype against the so-called passive beauty and the value of aesthetic is even arrogated to the monster/beauty attribute of messiness.

Baert's (1998) essay *Desiring Daughters* Baert deals with the feminist concern that is being examined in this paper pre-emptively by using performance as a tool for renegotiating the mother-daughter tie. Baert is explicit in her explanation of how the reconstruction of mother-daughter relationships aids in validating female identity in the essay titled *Desiring Daughters*. The essay reveals how performance is used as a tool for the renegotiation of the mother-daughter tie. More importantly, the essay reveals how through symbolic performances the female artist as daughter reclaims, re-invests, and underscores the importance of the maternal figure as a desiring subject. Baert draws her analogy on maternal figure as object of desire, and desiring object from the performances by two artists, Sara Diamond and Mona Hatoum. Narratives from the videotapes trace the shifts in ways in which feminists perceive experience and negotiate the mother-daughter relations. Baert further reveals the steps or shifts in this relation:

...from an untheorised celebration of the female sign to an interrogation of femininity as it is constructed in representations and in familial and social relation; from a repression or displacement of the psychic dimension of the troubled mother-daughter relations to its considered exploration; from a pre-occupation with 'difference' in relation to the masculine cultural text to an exploration of feminine desire in relation to the Other (as) woman. (p188).

### Freudian Dimensions

The import of conventional representations of the mother figure by male artists is disparaged by feminists. It is therefore necessary to look a little more closely at the male artist as a generic definer of the art he creates as feminists propose, yet devoid of feminist garb. Freud in Strachey and Richards (1973) explains that male artists create art in order to win honour, power, wealth, fame, and the love of women. According to Freud, the male artist presents edited versions of his fantasies and daydreams to the world through his art. He censors the otherwise unpleasant and unacceptable aspects of his fantasies and daydreams in order to attain the aforementioned goals of winning honour, power, wealth, fame, and the love of women. Freud also reveals that most adult dispositions unconsciously originate from infantile programming. One apparent infantile programming of the artist is revealed by Onoko (2001), who quotes him as saying, "I sucked my mother's breasts for two years. I remember though not too clearly how I used to feel her breasts." (P.1). A manifestation of this programming is seen in the idealisation of the breasts in all his semi-nude female figures (Anaso, 2016).

Akintunde-Johnson (1989) and Obiagwu (1989) opine that the artist's paintings are material evidence of his reaction to intimate matters in his life. The authors name "Polygamy" (I-IV), "Emancipation" (I-III) and "Rhythmic Dance" (I-VI) as paintings that represent the artist's reaction to his mother's circumstance. According to the authors, these paintings express the artist's criticism of the socio-cultural systems that place women at the receiving end of deleterious aspects of the resultant social structures.



PLATE I: Rhythmic Dance, 1997, 90cm×120cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown



PLATE II: Rhythmic Dance I, 1997, 60cm×90cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown



PLATE III: Rhythmic Dance II, 1997, 75cm×105cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown

A total number of eleven paintings were mentioned by the authors. Three of these paintings were available for viewing (shown above) and neither the actual paintings nor photographs of the remaining nine works were found. The eleven paintings are not included among the paintings discussed in this work due to the fact that explicit mother figure paintings are required for the analysis.

#### **Analytical Approach**

The method of critical analysis applied by Anaso (2016) was adopted for the analysis of Uyovbisere's mother figures. Five of the explicit paintings of the subject matter were randomly selected from the artist's collection and examined. Freudian psychoanalytical theories about the male artists' reasons for creating art and infantile programming were taken into consideration, while feminist principles as seen in the works of Irigaray in Robinson (1998) and Frueh (1998) were generally used to assess the context of the paintings. More attention was paid to formal analysis of the images. That is, a literal separation of the painting into components and parts to understand the whole, as suggested by Barnett (1985).

#### **Abraham Uyovbisere's Mother Figures**

The artist has made a number of paintings that point to the fecund attribute of women. However, in his paintings the artist puts forward the idea of fecundity in a virtual manner. For example in *Mother and Child* (Plate IV), the mother figure appears portrait-like and takes a central position on the canvas.



PLATE IV: Mother and Child, 1993, 53cm×60cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown

In Plate IV, the artist totally obscures the baby but convincingly alludes to its presence in the painting. There are certain nuances that point to the likelihood that the woman has a baby strapped to her back

in the manner that is common in Nigeria. The positioning of her arms behind her back as though to support the baby's weight alludes to this. In addition, the figure of the female is appareled such that a wrapper is tied across her upper back, and above her breasts (as though to hold the baby to her chest). The fold of the wrapper at the waist suggests that in the usual (Nigerian) manner, a piece of cloth or shawl lifts the baby's bottom and straps it firmly to the female's back. Unlike the Madonna and Child imagery, the viewer is not meant to see the baby but to perceive and envision its inclusion as a definer of the identity of the female figure (as mother).

The artist presents a three-quarter view of the female's visage. The slight angling of the head towards the left and the furrowing of the forehead in what appears to be a resolute facial expression, which suggests that what the artist aims more at in this painting is aloneness and freedom from unwelcome disturbances rather than unhappy loneliness as Onoko (1993) suggests. Apart from the earth colours of the female figure's face, which are further muted to suit the background; the artist largely uses blue and purple tones in this painting. According to the artist, red signifies bravery, while blue signifies anticipation (Odigbo, 1994). This implies that he attempts to convey an admixture of anticipation, bravery and lonesomeness. However, what the artist manages to convey is an emblematic picture of a mother figure, which though sturdy, appears to float in a surreal foreground (with other lone figures in the background) as the lower part of her body blends and disappears unto the serene foreground. Interestingly, the figure appears to have emerged from the cool receding background. As she advances towards the viewer (an effect created by the purple tones), the blue of the background replicated in a single broad stroke on her left thigh restrains her.

It is important to note that details of the subject's face bear some resemblance to that of the artist (Abraham Uyovbisere). For example, the similarity is manifest in the long oval face, the high forehead, the high cheekbones, and in the symmetry of the eyes, nose and lips. The slight inclination of the head towards an angle is one of the artist's peculiar mannerisms. The artist appears to have produced his own female version on canvas. This is consistent with the saying that "... every portrait is a self-portrait ..." (Barnet, 1985). It reinforces the idea that the artist uses the female form to express his emotions and recapitulate experiences.



**PLATE V: Motherhood, 2000, 75cm×105cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown**

Plate V shows a landscape painting in which the figures appear to stand out in the horizon and dominate the foreground. The painting is simply titled "Motherhood". In concordance with the title of the painting, the two females in the foreground have babies on their backs. The positioning of the moving figures to be viewed from the posterior obscures their physiognomy. This is indicative of the artist's intentional deviation from individuation in favour of expressing his views on the concept of motherhood. The picture he paints is not that of opulence and joyous satisfaction rather it is that which elicits ambivalent considerations about the incipient multiplicity of the mothers' responsibilities.

The figure that is largest and closest to the foreground is the most interesting feature in the painting, though she completely backs the viewer. The basket on her head tilts to the right thereby aptly balancing her frame, which bends leftwards. She balances the basket with her right hand and the baby on her back with her left hand. Her left hand cups the baby's bottom and holds the baby firmly in place. The juxtaposition of the range of yellow ochre and burnt sienna for the basket, and red, pale blue, and white for the woman's wrapper, the baby on her back, the woman's blouse, and her head-tie affect value and balance. This part of the painting that consists of a female figure, with a baby behind and a basket on the head forms a rhythmic and engaging pattern, but primarily alludes to an essentially maternal quest and *striving* (or resultant capability) for balance/equilibrium. The other

female figure in the foreground is positioned such that only a quarter of her visage is seen. In the same manner as the first figure, an earthenware pot on top of her head balances on a small round support. In the background of this painting (at the left side of the painting between a tall shelter and a small house) an indeterminate number of fuzzy female images stand. One of these fuzzy female figures appears to be heavy with child. One female figure in the far right moves farther into the horizon and appears to be holding a baby to her left side with her left arm.

In the landscape in which these figures go about their mundane tasks, tufts of grass serve as delineator for a clearing, which appears to be a road emerging from the foremost left angle of the painting. Interestingly, the two foremost female figures appear to have emerged from the bush (which is foremost right) and head for the point between the shelter and the small building where other fuzzy female figures stand. It is probable that this point of meeting is a mill, where the women converge to grind grains and other food types, and engage in some chatter. However, there is no sign of a milling machine at that point; therefore, it suffices to state that that point is a meeting point for the women, except one who moves away from that point into the far distance. It is probable that the inclusion of a meeting point for the females in this painting bears an allegorical significance, a preconceived and precursory submission that the underlining similarity in females is their domestic inclinations and their physiological adaptation for bearing children. Feminists would regard this as an essentialist and constrictive view of femaleness or motherhood.



**PLATE VI: A Day in Epkoma, 2001, 120cm×90cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown**

The female figure in Plate VI has an infant tied to her back and a little boy by her right side. She stands by the bank of a stream, probably waiting (for something or someone) and is probably lost in thought. She stands facing the stream as though oblivious of the viewer's gaze, but something in her elegant posture and the slight angling of her head suggests a high degree of self-awareness and a bit of self-consciousness. The scenery gives an impression of quiet, and patient waiting (the empty canoes out in the water, waiting to be manned, the calmness of the stream, and the female figure that stands at the bank). The brushstrokes, which actuate the vegetal surroundings of the stream, curve and curl outwards in unobtrusive layers of pigment, therefore creating an effect of gentle enclosure around the water in non-threatening manner. The tonal value of blue hues and the relative sizes of the vegetation and empty canoes in the stream in this monochromatic painting contribute to the illusion of perspective and most importantly three-dimensionality.

The artist reveals that blue symbolizes anticipation and truth for him, thereby validating the idea that the mood that the painting communicates is that of waiting. More importantly, the female figure with her back to the viewer shows calmness, poise and motherly actuation, a desirable image of femininity and motherhood. This image, however, does not validate Frueh's (1998) and Perry's (1999) criticism of the imaging of females as "objects" of decorative beauty in art even though it does elicit an impression of Frueh's much criticized "passive beauty" due to its characteristically feminine posturing and allusion to calm, seemingly unperturbed acceptance of essentialist motherhood and its between-men attributions that is also criticised by Robinson (1998). Frueh's criticism is referential to the stereotypic imaging of females in the Western art scene, while this particular image painted by Uyovbisere is true to life albeit the artist's infusion of his own ideals of femininity and motherhood.





**PLATE VII: Expectation I, 1997, 75cm×60cm, oil on canvas, collected by Joke Giwa**

*Expectations I* (Plate VII) is more obvious than *Mother and Child* (Plate IV) in its reference to the fecund attribute of women. The artist places both female figures (the first carries a baby in her arms, and the other is pregnant) in a cloud-like background of red, blue and white hues. The figures stand out against the shadowed part of the background. The placement of the figures in a background that is completely cloud-like and lacking a ground (land) gives the painting an ethereal effect. The figures are cast against the backdrop of etherealness. This alludes to the wonderment and otherworldliness with which the artist views the act of conception (as seen with the pregnant female) and birth (the female figure with a baby in her arms). The figures, with obscured legs and feet, appear to float away from the clouds towards the viewer as the light source brightens their forms and enhances the effect of three-dimensionality, and this gives their floating forms solidity.

As in Plate IV, purple is conspicuous in the painting indicated as Plate VII not only in the apparel of the pregnant female figure but also in the effect created in the separate red and in blue patches that form the cloud-like background. The visible arm of the foremost figure appears thin in comparison to the body. Similarly, the pregnant figure behind is supposedly standing with arms akimbo, whereas the placement of umber to show reflection of light impairs the effect and disfigures the lower arm. The execution of both female forms is realistic; thus, the anatomical problems impinge on the aesthetic appeal and success of this painting.



**PLATE VIII: Anticipation, 2005, 120cm×90cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown**

*Anticipation* (Plate VIII) is a monochromatic (blue) rendition of a landscape with a pregnant female figure (that appears tucked to the left corner of the painting). Here, the rendition of female anatomy is quite accurate (when compared to the figures in Plate VII). Acquiescing to the subject matter of fecundity, the dense shrubbery all curve outwards and bend towards the pregnant female form as though blown northwards by a gentle breeze. The female figure faces the sparse shrubbery with face downcast; her neck equally bends gracefully towards the direction of the shrubbery. The long full hair, full breasts, and graceful shoulders emphasise the femininity of this female figure and subsume the physiological state of pregnancy as a desirable attribute of femininity. At a reasonable distance and on the same plane as the pregnant female is the blurred silhouette of another female figure. Irradiation from the light source at the middle of the background reflects rays across the entire painting, illuminating the impressive female figure in the foreground. However, the stiffness of the figure's wrapper undermines the creative prowess that the execution of this realistic female figure evinces.



**PLATE IX: Reflection, 2008, 63.8cm X 103.8cm, Oil on Canvas, Abraham Uyovbisere's studio**

The subject of *Reflection* (Plate IX) is a young woman postured in the same manner as the female figure in Plate VIII (the artist presents us with a three quarter view of the figure whose face is downcast). However, while the figure in Plate VIII represents an imagery that tends towards fantasy, the imagery in Plate IX seems almost true to life as a few anatomical flaws abound. The protrusion of the female figure's belly unmistakably indicates that she is pregnant, though the belly curves abnormally. The figure's lower left arm, which lifts to touch the left side of her belly, is abnormally thin in comparison to the upper arm despite the fact that the artist portrays a slender female figure. The wrapper that covers the lower part of her body appears stiff and steel-like.

Somberness is detectable on the shadowy face of this female figure as she touches her belly. In the background is a blurry image of what appears to be the same female figure with a baby clasped to her right side thereby representing the aftermath of birth as the figure's visage is still downcast as though dissatisfied about some unknown circumstance. In view of the fact that pregnancy and birth is the centerpiece of this painting, it is not out of place to conclude that the circumstance of conception and birth are not one that elicits feelings of joy and excitement in this picture. The downcast somberness of the female's visage, the allusion to the acts of conception and birth, and the choice of colours (darkness of the colours in the foreground and brilliant light in the distance) culminate in an imagery that speaks of brooding.

### Conclusion

Renee Baert is one of the feminist artists who depicts motherhood images in forms, moods, attitudes and ideas that they believe are appropriate to them in order to neutralize the male symbolic "power", which they believe objectifies the woman and fosters discrimination. Robinson does not clearly explain the between-men definition of "the work of childbirth" she criticizes in her polemic, however the key elements that emerged from the analysis of Uyovbisere's mother figures are *Introspection*, *Domesticities* and *balance*, *Self-awareness*, *Etherealness*, *Introspection*, and *Brooding*. A close look at these elements in the paintings that they describe against the backdrop of feminist values reveals a subtle dialectic. The key elements seem to engender spiritual values, which agree with feminist values, however, the paintings which were made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century all reflect unilateral view of feminine existence. None of the mother figures reflects the type of world, activities, and challenges that arise in feminist debates and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century urban world.

A probable explanation of the dialectic nature of the Uyovbisere's mother figures is found in the Freudian dimension. The artist used the mother figure to express his views on polygamy. The artist bluntly calls himself "a victim of polygamy" and further states that most of his works are reflections of his personal experiences. It is interesting to note that a good number of the artist's personal experiences are recorded using female forms. This feature in the artist's mode of expression is not a paradox; rather, it is consistent with the artist's admittance that his mother largely shaped his reasoning. Consequently, the world view presented by the artist in his paintings are a meld of ideologies and conceptions that are significantly his mother's and those he picked up from sources that are outside her sphere of influence.

Abraham Uyovbisere, through his works, agreed with and advanced some feminist ideas and viewpoints to the same degree that he advanced ideas that are against feminist ideals. This is the dialectic that is evident in his painting of mother figures. In these paintings, his roles as reporter and analyst surpassed his role as experiencer (since he reported another person's experiences) and activist (since his paintings showed that he had not consciously decided to reinforce feminist ideals).



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