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**DOMINANT POWER AND THE MARGINALIZED AS ENABLERS OF DOMINATION IN
OKEY NDIBE'S *FOREIGN GODS, INC.***

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Abstract

Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014) depicts a Nigerian immigrant Ikechukwu Uzundu and the villagers of Utonki navigating economic desperation, religious exploitation, and cultural commodification. Existing scholarship has examined the novel through transnational migration, diaspora identity, cultural and spiritual commodification, religious appropriation, and the interplay of indigenous religion with Christianity and Western capitalism. This study shifts the focus to marginalized characters as perpetrators of dominant power. It argues that ordinary, disadvantaged individuals, needy natives, struggling immigrants, and ordinary worshippers, sustain the systems that exploit them through everyday decisions shaped by faith, economic necessity, and constrained choices. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conception of power as circulating through social relations and Frantz Fanon's analysis of the internalization of dominant values, the research uses qualitative close reading to examine relations between the vulnerable and the privileged. Pastor Uka's dominance and the Western art market's appropriation of sacred objects, exemplified by Mark Gruels, depend significantly on the enabling actions of those they exploit. By identifying this enabling role, the study addresses a gap in criticism that has emphasized immigration and cultural dislocation while under-examining how the marginalized reinforce unequal authority. Ultimately, the study positions *Foreign Gods, Inc.* as a political novel that interrogates how the marginalized aid the exploitative tendencies of the mainstream.

Keywords: Power, Marginalized characters, perpetrator, Exploitation, Immigration

Introduction

Power and marginalization remain important concerns in African literature because literary texts often represent individuals within unequal social, cultural, political, and economic relationships. Power concerns the capacity to influence the conduct, choices, opportunities, or conditions of others, while power relations refer to the interactions through which such influence is exercised. Marginalization describes the social, economic, cultural, or institutional positioning of individuals or groups at the edges of dominant structures.

The relationship between power and marginalization is not always limited to a clear division between those who possess power and those who are subjected to it. Individuals in disadvantaged positions may respond to unequal conditions in different ways, including resistance, accommodation, negotiation, or participation in existing relations of power. Enabling power in this study refers to the ways in which the actions, choices, compliance, or circumstances of disadvantaged individuals may contribute to the continuation or exercise of power by those in stronger positions. This does not place the marginalized and dominant in equal positions; rather, it draws attention to the different roles they may occupy within unequal relationships.

African literature has long examined the relationship between ordinary people and structures of domination. From Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, African writers have represented the effects of colonialism, poverty, political pressure, tradition, and social inequality on individuals. Okey Ndibe continues this tradition in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), which follows Ikechukwu Uzundu, a Nigerian immigrant who returns to Nigeria to steal the sacred deity, Ngene, for sale in a Western art market, while also depicting poor villagers who financially support Pastor Uka. The novel thus brings together economic hardship, cultural displacement, religious authority, and unequal power relations. These circumstances place characters in different relationships with power and shape their responses to their social conditions.

The problem addressed by this paper is the need to examine marginalized characters beyond their position as recipients of domination. Their marginal status does not necessarily remove them from power relations; they may also occupy positions through which dominant authority is supported or maintained. The issue, therefore, is the representation of marginalized characters in relation to the continuation of exploitative power and the implications of such relationships for their identities. The research gap lies in the limited attention to the intersection of marginalization, power dynamics, and identity, particularly the representation of marginalized characters as enablers of dominant power. While the experiences of disadvantaged characters are central to the novel, their participation in relationships that sustain unequal authority requires closer attention. This study consequently focuses on the relationship between the marginalized and dominant power rather than treating the two simply as separate and opposing categories.

This paper focuses on the representation of marginalized characters as enablers of the exploitative tendencies of dominant power in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* It considers power dynamics in relation to economic conditions, language, religion, cultural practices, and interpersonal relationships. The paper therefore brings together the concerns of power, and marginalization within the existing body of scholarship on Ndibe's novel.

Samuel Kwesi Nkansah's "Navigating Transnational Realities: Migration in Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*" examines migration, cultural commodification, and the experiences of Nigerian immigrants, arguing that Ike's experience reflects the struggles of immigrants pursuing the American Dream and that cultural commodification becomes a survival strategy shaped by continuing colonial relations (3). Thobekile Masombuka's "Gods for Sale: Religious Appropriation and Capitalism in Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*" reads the novel as a postcolonial post secular text, arguing that capitalism functions as a "faux religion" through which African gods become commodities for Western consumers (61). Similarly, Nnaemeka Ezema and Dele Maxwell Ugwanyi's "Making Divinity out of the Mundane: Faith and the Failing Indices of the Postcolony in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel" draws on Achille Mbembe's concept of the postcolony to examine poverty, weak institutions, and Pastor Uka's prosperity preaching (107).

Other scholars focus on indigenous religion, colonial legacies, and competing systems of meaning. Adriaan van Klinken's "Rewriting Colonial Legacies: Indigenous Religion, Christianity and Embattled Gods in Nigerian Literature" examines the continuing effects of colonial religious encounters, while Juan Zhong's "'Two Normative Orders': Time, the Body, and Memory in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*" explores Igbo cosmology, time, the body, memory, colonialism, and capitalism (61). Katherine Hallemeier's "Cosmopolitanism and Orality in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*: Globalization and Its Discontents in Contemporary Literature" examines cosmopolitanism, orality, immigrant disillusionment, and the tensions between piety and personal desire.

Scholarship on *Foreign Gods, Inc.* has examined migration, cultural commodification, religious appropriation, indigenous spirituality, and the interplay of Christianity with Western capitalism within Nkansah; Masombuka; Ezema and Ugwanyi; van Klinken; Zhong; Hallemeier's ideologies. While these studies illuminate economic hardship, cultural displacement, and religious exploitation, they have given limited attention to the ways marginalized characters themselves perpetrate dominant power. Collectively, these studies establish the importance of migration, capitalism, cultural commodification, religion, indigenous spirituality, globalization, and identity in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* However, their emphases remain largely on immigrant experience, religious appropriation, postcolonial conditions, colonial religious legacies, indigenous cosmology, and globalization. Less attention has been given to how power operates through the actions of marginalized characters themselves. In particular, the ways marginalized characters comply with, negotiate, resist, or reproduce unequal power relations, and how these processes shapes and position them, as both the victims and the perpetrators of domination. This study therefore extends existing scholarship by examining marginalized characters not only as subjects of domination but also as participants in the reproduction of power.

This paper adopts Michel Foucault's relational theory of power, which reconceptualizes power not as a possession held by authorities but as a force that circulates through social relations, exercised "from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations" (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* 94). Power is productive, operating through everyday practices, language, and knowledge rather than through constant coercion or force. The choice of Foucault's relational theory of power is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for examining the dynamic and shifting relationships through which marginalized characters respond to unequal power. While existing scholarship on Ndibe's narratives has examined marginalization, oppression, identity, and social inequality, less attention has been given to the ways marginalized characters comply with, negotiate, resist, or reproduce unequal

power relations, and how these processes reshape their positions within those relations. Foucault's conception of power as relational and mobile makes it possible to examine how characters move between positions of subordination and agency. The theory therefore enables this study to focus beyond a simple oppressor–victim binary and to examine marginalized characters as active participants within networks of power. This perspective fills the identified gap by examining marginalized characters not only as subjects of domination but also as participants in the negotiation and reproduction of power, thereby revealing how changing power relations influence the construction, negotiation, and reconstruction of identity in Ndibe's narratives.

The study adopts a qualitative research design centred on close textual analysis of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* Close reading is appropriate because the research examines the representation of power relations, character agency, and the circulation of domination within a literary text. The analysis focuses on the novel's language, narrative technique, characterization, symbolism, and thematic patterns, with particular attention to the third-person omniscient narration and its shifting focalization between Ike and other characters.

Key sites of interaction, such as workplace discrimination and linguistic exclusion in America, coded language at Nigerian checkpoints, economic and spiritual transactions between Pastor Uka and his congregation, Ike's marital relationship, and the desecration and commodification of Ngene. However, the analysis is grounded in dialogue, symbolic language, narrative descriptions, and representations of economic desperation, religious performance, and cultural commodification.

Synopsis of Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*

Foreign Gods, Inc. is a darkly funny yet sad story that follows Ike Uzundu, a Nigerian immigrant living in New York City. Ike is a very smart man who graduated with high honors in Economics from the well-known Amherst College in America, even with his good education, his strong Igbo accent stops him from getting a befitting job, in America. Instead, he works long hours as a taxi driver and grows more bitter and disappointed with the American Dream.

Ike is overwhelmed and disillusioned by his financial problems, he is deep in debt, because of a bitter divorce from his African-American ex-wife, Bernita, whom he married mainly to get a green card. He is also expected to send money regularly to his sister and widowed mother back in Nigeria, and he has lost a lot of money to gambling. One day while driving his cab, Ike finds a fancy art gallery in Manhattan called "Foreign Gods, Inc.", owned by a clever, strange, and greedy White man named Mark Gruels. The gallery buys and sells sacred objects and gods from different cultures around the world. Desperate for money, Ike comes up with a risky plan: go back to his village in southeastern Nigeria, steal the sacred statue of Ngene, the powerful war god of his people, and sell it to Gruels for a lot of money.

When Ike returns to Nigeria, he faces the difficult changes at home. He meets his family and old friends again, including his uncle Osuakwu, who is the chief priest and keeper of Ngene. Osuakwu is a proud man who is fully committed to the traditional god. Ike also meets Pastor Uka, the strong and aggressive leader of a growing Pentecostal church in the village. The church is working hard to wipe out traditional worship and destroy "idols" like Ngene. This creates a deep split in the village between the old gods and the new Christian faith.

As Ike plans and carries out the theft of the Ngene statue, he struggles with guilt, feelings of being a stranger in his own land, spiritual discomfort, and serious moral questions. The act makes him realize how far he has moved away from his roots and the damage caused by selling something sacred just to make money for Western buyers.

Nkiruka is Ike's sister and Ibrahim, Ike's Ghanaian friend and fellow taxi driver in New York, represents a conformist attitude that accepts and reinforces the existing norms, Bernita, Ike's African-American ex-wife, stands out as resistive. Nkiruka, conforms to traditional expectations by constantly pressuring Ike to fulfill his role as the family provider and send money home, upholding long-standing cultural and familial norms without question. Similarly, Ibrahim conforms to the harsh realities of immigrant life by accepting his situation, offering practical but cautious advice, and choosing to survive within the system rather than challenge it. In contrast, Bernita is more resistive, she boldly rejects unsatisfactory conditions, fights for her own interests through the divorce, and refuses to quietly accept limitations placed on her, demonstrating a stronger individualistic push against the status quo.

The novel builds strong tension as Ike tries to smuggle the statue out of Nigeria and deliver it to Mark Gruels in New York. Okey Ndibe mixes exciting thriller moments with sharp social commentary. Through Ike's story, the book looks at important themes like the failures of the immigrant experience, the conflict between tradition and modern life, the selling of African culture and spirituality, greed, identity problems, and the heavy price of desperation, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is a rich and interesting novel that is funny, satirical, and deeply tragic at the same time. It gives a strong criticism of globalization and the unequal relationship between Africa and the West.

Dominant Power and the Marginalized as Enablers of Domination in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, inc.*

Through Ike's linguistic discrimination in *Foreign Gods, inc.*, the coded exchanges at the Nigerian Police checkpoint, Nigerian Customs 'Post in the airport, Pastor Uka's manipulation of worshippers, the commodification of Ngene, and the colonial encounter with Reverend Stanton, the novel demonstrates that dominant power does not operate solely through direct coercion. It becomes embedded in language, economic necessity, religious belief, cultural valuation, and everyday conduct, foregrounds Foucault's conception of power as relational and productive, whereby power circulates through social relations and produces forms of conduct through which subjects participate in their own regulation (27). Fanon's analysis of the psychological effects of hierarchical domination complements this perspective by demonstrating how marginalized subjects may internalize dominant values and seek recognition by approximating the language and culture of the "Other" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 17). Taken together, these perspectives provide a framework for moving beyond a simple oppressor–victim binary and for examining how marginalized subjects may comply with, negotiate, resist, or reproduce the power relations that subordinate them.

Ike's rejection because of his "crappy" accent, represents a marker of social inadequacy (32). The encounter resonates with Fanon's theorization of language as a site of hierarchical differentiation, where linguistic difference becomes a source of alienation (82). At the Nigerian checkpoint, the warning against "big grammar" and the coded demand "Anything for the boys?" turn language into a technology of survival and compliance (76, 81). Subjects internalize

expectations and regulate themselves according to the anticipated gaze of authority, sustaining disciplinary power through constrained agency.

Ike's decision to steal and commodify Ngene intensifies this pattern. Economic frustration, marital difficulties, patriarchal expectations, and cultural exclusion enable him to convert a sacred communal object into a marketable commodity. Bhabha's concept of hybridity illuminates his unstable position between Nigerian heritage and American market values, producing ambivalence rather than simple betrayal or defence of culture (86). Stuart Hall's conception of identity as continually produced through representation further clarifies the process: the same Nigerian identity that marks Ike as foreign in America grants him access to an object whose value is determined by an external market (44). The episode also extends Fanon's analysis of internalized hierarchy (18) and Ngũgĩ's critique of colonial consciousness (16). No external authority needs to order the act; power structures what appears possible and desirable. Ike's dealings with Mark Gruels confirm that his intermediary role makes him useful to the system without granting him control. Ike's most consequential enabling action is the desecration and successful sale of Ngene. Driven by economic failure, marital pressure, and the desire to recover masculine dignity, he transforms a sacred communal object into a marketable commodity for the Western art market. He alone possesses both the cultural access required to obtain the deity and the economic desperation that makes its sale appear viable. By removing Ngene from its spiritual and communal context and delivering it into the hands of Mark Gruels, Ike becomes the indispensable intermediary through which Western capital extracts value from indigenous sacred heritage. No American buyer could have reached the deity without him. His marginal position therefore becomes the precise mechanism that enables the market's appropriation. Mark Gruels exploits Ike through specialized knowledge of the artefact market.

Mark Gruel advances a seemingly sophisticated argument in a magazine: "In the postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality. Any deity that remained stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund" (64). On the surface, the claim presents cultural mobility as necessary for the continued vitality of sacred objects. In reality, it functions as a deceit that legitimizes the extraction and commodification of indigenous deities such as Ngene. Gruel's assertion masks the unequal power relations that make such "travel" possible. He does not speak as a neutral cultural theorist but as a dealer who profits from relocating sacred objects into the Western art market. By framing the removal of Ngene from its cultural context as a condition of its survival, he transforms cultural appropriation into an apparent act of preservation. His discourse therefore strips the deity of its communal and spiritual significance and reconstitutes it as a commodity whose value is determined by the market.

This strategy becomes particularly effective when it draws a marginalized subject into the process of domination. Ike, already disadvantaged by economic failure and cultural displacement, encounters a discourse that makes the sale of Ngene appear less like a betrayal of his cultural heritage than a means of economic survival and even preservation. Gruel thus exercises productive power in the Foucauldian sense: rather than relying solely on force, he produces a discourse through which exploitation becomes intelligible and acceptable. As a dealer, he understands both the commercial value of African sacred objects and Ike's limited bargaining position, allowing him to determine the terms of exchange, diminish the spiritual significance of Ngene, and secure the object at a low price. Ike's participation consequently

becomes instrumental to the continuation of the very power structure that exploits his marginal position.

This dynamic resonates with Abba Abba's discussion in *Postcolonial Mythology and Ethnic Self-Canonization in Biafran Fiction and Activism*. Abba complicates the conventional opposition between the powerful and the marginalized by demonstrating that marginalized subjects are not merely passive recipients of domination. He notes that counter-mythology enables victims of injustice to challenge dominant narratives, while also cautioning that such processes can produce "self-canonizing myths" (143). More significantly, drawing on Foucault, he emphasizes that individuals have an active role in producing themselves as subjects and that power operates through the relationship between knowledge, discourse, and subject formation (147). Although Abba primarily considers this participation through resistance and self-reaffirmation, the present study extends this Foucauldian implication to a different dimension: the capacity of marginalized subjects to participate in and sustain their own domination. In Ndibe's works, therefore, victimhood does not necessarily exclude complicity; marginalized characters may become enablers of oppressive power through their actions, choices, dependence, or participation in practices that sustain domination

However, the historical encounter between Reverend Stanton and the people of Utonki extends this dynamic into colonial religious power. Stanton's rejection of Ngene and elevation of Christianity constitute an epistemic struggle over the authority to define the sacred. Foucault's power and knowledge formulation intersects with Fanon's and Ngũgĩ's accounts of colonial domination: colonial authority becomes durable when the knowledge of the colonized is represented as illegitimate while the colonizer's knowledge is established as universal truth (Ngũgĩ 3; Fanon 19). Once the imposed religious order acquires legitimacy, its continuation depends less on direct force than on the participation of those who come to inhabit it.

Cumulatively, these illustrations further reveal that marginalization does not produce a single response. Some subjects conform, some negotiate, and some reproduce the structures that constrain them. The central paradox of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is that the marginalized can be both victims of one structure and participants in another. Ike experiences discrimination yet enables the commodification of Ngene; Uka's followers experience insecurity yet sustain his authority; citizens subject to institutional corruption reproduce it through necessary accommodation. These representations do not assign responsibility for oppression to the marginalized. Rather, they show how unequal systems survive by incorporating the actions of those who have limited alternatives.

The connection between marginalization and power agency however, becomes even more pronounced in Ike's personal life, patriarchal expectations place him under pressure to fulfil the conventional role of the successful man, provider and source of family pride. His inability to attain the professional and financial success expected of him intensifies his sense of inadequacy, particularly within the additional pressures created by immigration and economic insecurity. These expectations become especially significant in his marriage to Bernita. Her stronger economic position and greater social security contrast sharply with Ike's struggles, while her treatment of his accent and foreignness further diminishes his sense of masculine authority. Ike's family expectations and marital experience are therefore interconnected: his failure to embody the patriarchal ideal of male success contributes to the imbalance within his relationship with Bernita and deepens his desire to regain dignity, autonomy, and control. Against this

background, Ike's decision to pursue the sale of Ngene acquires a deeper significance. His action is not simply motivated by greed; it emerges from the intersection of economic hardship, cultural displacement, patriarchal expectations, and the desire to recover a sense of masculine and personal autonomy

Consequently, Ndibe moves beyond a simple victim–perpetrator opposition. He portrays power as a relational process in which constrained agency can reproduce domination even when motivated by the desire for liberation. The novel's deeper critique lies in this paradox: the reproduction of dominant power often depends not on the complete submission of marginalized subjects but on their participation in the everyday practices through which unequal systems endure.

Conclusion

The novel reveals that individuals who are economically disadvantaged, displaced, excluded, or otherwise marginalized may, under conditions of constraint, contribute to sustaining the very systems that oppress them. Motivated by belief, necessity, or the hope of improvement, their actions can unintentionally reproduce unequal power relations, they however, reinforce power such as the fraudulent pastor and the affluent gallery owner. Ndibe therefore criticizes both the exploitative power and the manner in which ordinary people's decisions, however, limit their options and help preserve unjust structures of control.

In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, marginalized characters are not merely passive victims. They also function as enablers of the high-handedness of power. Through faith, desperation, and restricted choices, they uphold the authority of Pastor Uka and the Western art market. The novel demonstrates that power is not only imposed from above; it is continually sustained by the everyday actions of those who suffer under it.

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