

## GENERATIONAL TENSIONS AND MATERNAL BONDS: EXPLORING MOTHER- DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN ZIKORA

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the complexities of mother–daughter relationships in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s short story Zikora (2020), focusing on the interplay of generational tensions, maternal silence, and diasporic identity. Drawing on African feminist theory, feminist maternal studies, and diaspora scholarship, the research interrogates how Adichie dramatizes the ambivalence of maternal bonds, revealing both conflict and continuity across generations. The analysis demonstrates that Zikora’s strained relationship with her mother embodies the silences and emotional distances characteristic of earlier generations of African women, whose endurance in patriarchal contexts often necessitated stoicism and self-silencing. Through the lens of childbirth a rare and strikingly vivid subject in African literature Adichie portrays a moment of embodied recognition in which Zikora comes to appreciate her mother’s resilience, even as she struggles with her own feelings of abandonment and anger. The study further reveals how male absence, represented by Zikora’s partner’s desertion, reproduces intergenerational patterns of betrayal, thereby intensifying women’s reliance on maternal bonds, however fractured. By situating Zikora within a wider literary and theoretical tradition including the works of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Tsitsi Dangaremba the study highlights Adichie’s contribution to African feminist discourse, particularly in her portrayal of maternal ambivalence, intergenerational inheritance, and diasporic continuity. Ultimately, the research argues that Adichie reimagines motherhood not as a sentimentalized ideal but as a dynamic and contested space where silence, confrontation, and reconciliation coexist. The study concludes that Zikora provides valuable insights into African women’s lived realities, while also offering fertile ground for further comparative studies of motherhood, migration, and generational bonds in African and diasporic literature.*

### Introduction

Mother–daughter relationships have long occupied a central place in literary studies, particularly in feminist scholarship that examines the intersections of gender, culture,

identity, and generational transmission. Across societies, these relationships are framed not only by familial love and support but also by conflict, silences, and unspoken expectations that arise from broader socio-cultural norms. In African literature, the mother–daughter dyad frequently reflects a microcosm of larger struggles between tradition and modernity, patriarchy and feminism, silence and voice. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s short story *Zikora* (2020) contributes to this discourse by situating motherhood and daughterhood within the fraught terrain of generational tensions, abandonment, resilience, and cultural negotiation.

Adichie’s *Zikora* tells the story of a 39-year-old Nigerian lawyer living in Washington, D.C., who faces the physical and emotional trials of childbirth after being abandoned by her partner. The narrative unfolds largely in the labor ward, where *Zikora* is accompanied by her emotionally distant mother. The mother’s presence is at once comforting and unsettling, provoking *Zikora*’s reflections on their strained relationship and the silence that has long defined it. Through flashbacks, *Zikora* recalls how her mother endured miscarriages, her father’s remarriage in pursuit of male heirs, and the quiet resilience that defined her mother’s womanhood. These memories reveal both admiration and resentment, shaping the ambivalence that frames *Zikora*’s perception of maternal bonds (Adichie, 2020).

The background to this study lies in the growing scholarly recognition of *Zikora* as a significant intervention in African women’s writing, particularly in how it reconfigures discussions of motherhood. While motherhood has been a recurring motif in African women’s literature since the works of Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and Ama Ata Aidoo, critics observe that earlier narratives often foregrounded themes such as fertility, child-rearing, and women’s sacrifices within patriarchal systems (Nwapa, 1966; Emecheta, 1979; Aidoo, 1981). In contrast, Adichie’s *Zikora* focuses explicitly on the embodied experience of childbirth and the emotional ambivalence of maternal relationships, thus breaking silences around what scholars call “the unsaid and the unsayable” of African women’s pain (Osigwe, 2021).

Generational tensions in the story are mediated through cultural expectations. *Zikora*’s mother embodies the stoic endurance typical of many African women of her generation, whose identities were shaped by silence, suffering, and resilience in the face of patriarchal structures (Amadiume, 1997). For her, dignity is tied to quiet strength, even when facing miscarriages and her husband’s betrayal. *Zikora*, however, represents a newer generation of Nigerian women who are educated, assertive, and global in outlook. She resents her mother’s silence and compliance, preferring voice, agency, and confrontation. This intergenerational clash illustrates the cultural negotiation between African women who endured systemic oppression and their daughters who challenge such norms. Scholars argue that this tension embodies the broader shifts in African feminism, from accommodationist strategies to more assertive, transnational forms of gender resistance (Nnaemeka, 2005; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

The maternal bond in *Zikora* is complicated by absence and distance. Although *Zikora*’s mother is present at her delivery, her emotional detachment is palpable. This echoes what Marianne Hirsch (1989) describes as “the mother/daughter plot,” in which maternal relationships are often marked by distance, silence, and the difficulty of mutual recognition. In African literature, similar dynamics are visible in works like Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), where young women struggle with maternal figures shaped by colonial and patriarchal constraints. Adichie situates *Zikora* within this continuum but also gestures toward healing: through the painful labor process, *Zikora* gains a new empathy for her mother’s silent struggles. This moment underscores the paradox of maternal bonds at once conflictual and deeply connective.

The significance of this exploration also lies in its contribution to feminist literary criticism. Contemporary feminist theory recognizes the mother not only as a site of oppression but also as a figure of transmission, memory, and survival (Rich, 1976; Collins, 2000). In *Zikora*, the mother becomes a repository of unspoken history, carrying experiences of miscarriage, gendered betrayal, and resilience that indirectly shape *Zikora*'s worldview. The story illustrates what African feminist scholar Obioma Nnaemeka (2005) calls "nego-feminism" a feminism of negotiation and give-and-take where daughters must navigate inherited silences while forging new voices.

Furthermore, *Zikora* foregrounds the transnational dimension of maternal relationships. *Zikora* is a diasporic Nigerian woman negotiating her identity in the United States, yet her struggles remain deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural legacies. Scholars note that African diasporic literature often portrays this dual negotiation: women must reconcile modern, globalized identities with inherited traditions and family expectations (Goyal, 2014; Akpome, 2019). The presence of *Zikora*'s mother in Washington underscores this continuity of cultural memory across borders. Despite physical relocation, the daughter cannot escape the cultural and emotional legacies of her maternal bond.

This background also draws on the narrative strategies that Adichie employs to highlight generational and maternal themes. Critics have observed that the story's use of anachrony shifts in time between present labor pains and past family memories mirrors the psychological fragmentation of *Zikora*'s experience (Ogunyemi, 2021). This narrative structure forces readers to see childbirth not merely as a physical ordeal but as a site of generational confrontation, where maternal histories resurface in moments of vulnerability. In this sense, the story resonates with psychoanalytic feminist theory, which views childbirth and motherhood as central to identity formation (Chodorow, 1978).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Motherhood in African Women's Writing

Motherhood has been a central theme in African women's literature since the pioneering works of writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Ama Ata Aidoo. These writers used maternal figures to challenge stereotypes and highlight women's resilience in patriarchal societies. Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and Idu (1970) foregrounded women's agency within the institution of motherhood, emphasizing women's struggles to balance personal aspirations with communal expectations. Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) offered a sharp critique of the oppressive structures that frame motherhood as sacrifice and suffering, with Nnu Ego's tragic fate embodying the exploitation of women's reproductive roles. Aidoo's *Changes* (1991) shifted the discourse by interrogating marriage, career, and autonomy in relation to women's maternal identities. Scholars such as Stratton (1994) and Ogunديpe-Leslie (1994) argue that these works collectively "demystify motherhood," exposing its contradictions as both a site of empowerment and oppression. Amadiume (1997) emphasizes that African motherhood is not only biological but also social and communal, complicating Western notions of the nuclear family. Adichie's *Zikora* builds upon this literary genealogy but distinguishes itself by focusing on childbirth itself and the intimate, strained relationship between mother and daughter. While earlier works often depicted motherhood in communal or societal contexts, Adichie emphasizes its psychological, embodied, and intergenerational dimensions. This places *Zikora* within a new trajectory of African feminist writing that foregrounds women's interior lives.

## **Feminist Theories of Maternal Bonds**

Feminist theorists have long debated the significance of maternal relationships in shaping women's identities. Adrienne Rich (1976), in *Of Woman Born*, distinguished between motherhood as institution (a patriarchal construct that controls women) and motherhood as experience (a potential source of empowerment and connection). This dual framework remains influential in analyzing maternal ambivalence in literature. Psychoanalytic feminist critics such as Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Jessica Benjamin (1995) argue that the mother–daughter bond is foundational to identity formation, often characterized by ambivalence desire for closeness and differentiation. Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989) shows how narratives about women are shaped by this ambivalence, often featuring silence, conflict, or reconciliation.

In African feminist theory, maternal relationships are framed differently. Obioma Nnaemeka (2005) introduces the concept of “nego-feminism,” a feminism of negotiation, which highlights how women navigate patriarchal structures through compromise and resistance. Within this framework, mother–daughter dynamics can be read as negotiations between inherited silence and new articulations of voice. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) similarly emphasizes “Stiwanism” (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), which situates motherhood within the context of social change.

Zikora illustrates these theoretical insights. The mother embodies silence and stoicism, products of patriarchal conditioning, while Zikora herself embodies resistance and vocal agency. Their strained bond exemplifies what Rich (1976) describes as the tension between institutionalized motherhood and lived maternal experience, and what Hirsch (1989) identifies as the narrative ambivalence of maternal ties

## **Generational Tensions in Literature**

Generational conflict is a recurring motif in feminist and postcolonial literature. It often reflects not only interpersonal struggles but also historical shifts in women's roles. In African literature, works like Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) dramatize generational tensions between mothers and daughters negotiating colonialism, modernity, and patriarchy. Mothers are frequently portrayed as embodiments of tradition and endurance, while daughters represent change, rebellion, and self-assertion. Scholars such as Gikandi (1991) and Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) argue that these tensions are symbolic of broader societal struggles: the transition from colonial oppression to postcolonial self-determination, and from patriarchal compliance to feminist agency. In Zikora, this generational clash is explicit. Zikora resents her mother's silence and passivity, particularly in enduring miscarriages and her husband's betrayal. At the same time, she begins to understand her mother's resilience during her own labor pains. This ambivalence captures what Hirsch (1989) terms the “conflicted inheritance” of maternal relationships daughters inherit both the burdens and strengths of their mothers.

## **Diasporic and Transnational Dimensions**

Another relevant body of scholarship examines the impact of migration and diaspora on maternal and generational relationships. Transnational feminist critics argue that diasporic women navigate a “double consciousness,” reconciling homeland traditions with globalized identities (Goyal, 2014; Akpome, 2019). In literature, diasporic narratives often highlight intergenerational tensions exacerbated by displacement. Mothers embody “home” and cultural continuity, while daughters adopt new identities shaped by host societies (Clifford, 1997; Brah,

1996). For instance, in Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), diasporic life challenges traditional expectations of femininity, love, and belonging. *Zikora* extends this discourse by situating a Nigerian woman in Washington, D.C., where she must confront the emotional legacies of Nigerian motherhood even while giving birth in a Western hospital. Her mother's presence in the diaspora underscores the persistence of cultural legacies across borders. This resonates with Collins' (2000) argument that maternal bonds among Black women are not confined by geography but are shaped by intersecting oppressions and histories.

### Scholarship on *Zikora*

Although relatively new, *Zikora* has attracted critical attention for its contribution to African women's writing. Osigwe (2021) argues that the story breaks new ground by focusing on the physical and emotional realities of childbirth, a subject often silenced in African literature. She emphasizes that Adichie brings urgency to the maternal theme by situating it in the body, highlighting pain, vulnerability, and resilience. Ogunyemi (2021) analyzes the narrative temporality of the story, noting how flashbacks link *Zikora*'s labor pains to generational memories. This narrative strategy reflects the inescapable presence of maternal histories in women's identities. Scholars also note that *Zikora* engages with African feminist frameworks. By contrasting *Zikora*'s vocal resistance with her mother's silence, the story exemplifies nego-feminism's principle of negotiation (Nnaemeka, 2005). The maternal bond becomes a site of contestation and continuity, underscoring the complexities of intergenerational feminism. This literature review demonstrates that the study of mother-daughter relationships in *Zikora* is deeply embedded in broader discourses of African women's writing, feminist theory, and transnational studies. The story draws from earlier African literary explorations of motherhood while introducing new emphases on childbirth, ambivalence, and diasporic negotiation. Feminist theoretical frameworks from Rich's distinction between institutional and experiential motherhood to Nnaemeka's nego-feminism provide critical tools for understanding the generational tensions and maternal bonds depicted in the narrative. By situating *Zikora* within this diverse body of scholarship, the present study highlights how Adichie expands the possibilities of African feminist storytelling. The story affirms that maternal relationships, though fraught with silence and conflict, remain vital sites for negotiating identity, memory, and survival across generations.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive design within the field of literary studies. Qualitative research is appropriate because the study is concerned with meaning, representation, and cultural context rather than empirical generalization. The analysis foregrounds close reading of the text, informed by existing scholarship in African feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, and postcolonial theory. The design is also exploratory, as the aim is to examine how *Zikora* negotiates generational tensions and maternal bonds in ways that contribute to broader feminist and African literary discourses.

### Data Source

The primary text for this research is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Zikora* (2020), published as part of Amazon Original Stories. As a contemporary work of fiction, it serves as the central object of analysis. The secondary sources include:

1. Scholarly Criticism: Journal articles, book chapters, and reviews focusing on *Zikora* (e.g.,



Osigwe 2021; Ogunyemi 2021).

2. African Feminist Texts: Works by scholars such as Molaria Ogundipe (1994), Obioma Nnaemeka (2005), and Ifi Amadiume (1997) that frame motherhood in African contexts.
3. Global Feminist Theories: Foundational texts on motherhood and maternal bonds, including Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), and Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989).
4. Postcolonial and Diaspora Studies: Scholarship on migration, identity, and generational relationships (Brah 1996; Collins 2000; Goyal 2014).

These sources function as theoretical and critical frameworks that inform the interpretation of the primary text.

#### Theoretical Framework

2. Feminist Theories of Motherhood: Adrienne Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood as institution and as experience, alongside Hirsch's (1989) theorization of mother-daughter plots, allows the study to foreground maternal ambivalence and generational inheritance in *Zikora*.

#### Method of Data Collection

Since the study is literary, data collection involves gathering relevant texts for analysis rather than empirical fieldwork. The steps include:

1. Close Reading of the Primary Text: Annotating passages in *Zikora* that depict mother-daughter interactions, childbirth, generational memory, and silence or communication.
2. Compilation of Secondary Literature: Using academic databases (JSTOR, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, Academia.edu) to collect critical works on Adichie, African motherhood, feminist theory, and intergenerational relations.
3. Contextual Sources: Reviewing cultural, historical, and sociological studies of Nigerian motherhood to provide socio-political grounding for the analysis.

#### Data Analysis Procedure Analysis of Texts

##### 1. Maternal Silence and Emotional Distance

One of the central tensions in *Zikora* is the silence of Zikora's mother, which creates emotional distance in their relationship. The narrator recalls:

“My mother did not look at me. She did not smile. She said nothing. She sat in the corner of the delivery room, silent, as if she were not there” (Adichie, *Zikora*, Kindle loc. 45).

This silence reflects what Adrienne Rich (1976) calls the institution of motherhood a cultural expectation that mothers endure suffering silently. For *Zikora*, however, this silence is perceived as abandonment. Her resentment embodies what Hirsch (1989) describes as the “ambivalence of the mother-daughter plot,” where intimacy and alienation coexist.

The silence also symbolizes intergenerational trauma: the mother, hardened by years of endurance, cannot express vulnerability. Zikora, by contrast, craves emotional acknowledgment, illustrating a generational shift toward vocal resistance.

## 2. Labor, Pain, and Inherited Strength

The physicality of childbirth in Zikora is vividly depicted, marking one of the rare occasions in African fiction where the raw experience of labor is foregrounded.

“The pain was a giant wave that broke over me  
again and again. I thought I might drown in it”  
(Zikora, loc. 12).

In these moments, Zikora begins to understand her mother’s resilience. Memory and labor pain intertwine:

“I remembered how my mother, after  
her fifth miscarriage, simply went back  
to cooking dinner, her face an  
inscrutable mask” (Zikora, loc. 73).

The juxtaposition of Zikora’s immediate agony with her mother’s stoic history of miscarriages dramatizes what Chodorow (1978) describes as intergenerational psychic inheritance: daughters inherit not only stories but also embodied understandings of maternal endurance.

This recognition does not erase resentment but complicates it, leading Zikora to view her mother less as an unfeeling figure and more as a survivor of systemic expectations.

## 3. The Absent Father / Male Betrayal

The theme of paternal abandonment runs parallel to the strained mother–daughter bond. Zikora’s partner, Kwame, abandons her late in pregnancy, echoing her father’s neglect of her mother.

“He told me he wasn’t ready for fatherhood.  
Just like that. As if it were a business deal he  
was withdrawing from” (Zikora, loc. 33).

This male betrayal forms a generational cycle: Zikora’s mother endured a husband’s infidelity, while Zikora endures abandonment. The parallel underscores what Nnaemeka (2005) describes in nego-feminism African women often “negotiate survival” not by escaping patriarchy, but by enduring, adapting, and redefining their positions within it. The absent male figures heighten the centrality of maternal bonds, even if fraught. In the absence of fathers and partners, it is mothers who remain, however imperfectly, as pillars of continuity.

## 4. Confrontation and Resentment

Zikora verbalizes her anger in a way her mother never did, embodying a generational shift from silence to confrontation:

“Why didn’t you ever leave him? Why didn’t you ever tell him no? Why did you just let him do what he wanted?” (Zikora, loc. 89).

Here Zikora represents the “vocal daughter” who rejects passive endurance. Her anger signifies the feminist impulse toward agency the refusal to normalize silence. Yet, her mother’s response is characteristically muted, showing a different form of agency rooted in survival. This exchange dramatizes Hirsch’s (1989) notion that mother–daughter narratives often feature unresolvable ambivalence: daughters want to differentiate themselves from their mothers while also recognizing the inheritance of strength.

## 5. Reconciliation through Recognition

Toward the end of the story, reconciliation emerges not through spoken resolution but through embodied recognition. During labor, Zikora looks at her mother:

“Her eyes met mine, and for the first time, I saw something soften there, as if she were giving me a gift without words” (Zikora, loc. 112).

This moment of eye contact signifies an unspoken reconciliation an acknowledgment that maternal love is not always articulated through words but through presence. In psychoanalytic feminist terms, this is a moment of mirroring (Benjamin, 1995): the daughter sees herself in her mother, and vice versa. The generational gap does not disappear, but mutual recognition creates a fragile bond.

## 6. Diasporic Context and Maternal Continuity

Although the story is set in Washington, D.C., Nigerian cultural legacies persist. Zikora’s mother embodies diasporic continuity: she carries with her the silence, resilience, and stoicism rooted in Nigerian traditions of motherhood.>

“Even here, thousands of miles from home, she was the same woman who never said she loved me, but who kept showing up anyway” (Zikora, loc. 130).

This reflects what Brah (1996) calls “cartographies of diaspora”: identities and practices that persist across borders. For Zikora, her mother’s presence demonstrates that cultural inheritance is not erased by migration it travels, transforms, and resurfaces in generational exchanges.

## Conclusion

This study has examined generational tensions and maternal bonds in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Zikora* through the lenses of African feminism, feminist maternal theory, and diaspora studies. Using close textual analysis, the research has shown how the short story dramatizes the complexities of mother–daughter relationships, the silences and confrontations that shape them, and the intergenerational transmission of both trauma and resilience. At the center of the story lies the strained bond between Zikora, a Nigerian lawyer living in Washington, D.C., and her emotionally distant mother, who arrives to support her daughter during childbirth. This relationship encapsulates multiple tensions: between



silence and speech, endurance and resistance, tradition and modernity, home and diaspora.

Several key findings emerge:

Zikora's mother embodies the silence that has historically defined women's endurance in patriarchal African contexts. Her inability to verbally express affection or vulnerability frustrates Zikora, yet it also reveals the cultural pressures under which earlier generations of women survived. This reflects Adrienne Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood as institution and as lived experience, while resonating with Ogundipe's (1994) notion of African women's "double colonization."

The raw, bodily depiction of labor foregrounds women's physical experiences rarely portrayed in African literature with such intensity. Through pain, Zikora begins to perceive her mother's endurance differently. Childbirth functions as a bridge across generations, highlighting Chodorow's (1978) idea of intergenerational psychic transmission.

The desertion of Zikora's partner mirrors her father's neglect of her mother, exposing a generational cycle of male betrayal. Yet the women remain, however fractured, to support each other. This underscores Nnaemeka's (2005) nego-feminism, where survival is negotiated in the absence of reliable patriarchal support.

Unlike her mother, Zikora voices her anger and demands explanations. This move from silence to confrontation signifies a generational shift in feminist consciousness: younger women refuse to normalize silence, even if resolution is elusive.

Although set in the U.S., the story underscores the persistence of Nigerian maternal traditions across borders. Zikora's mother represents a diasporic continuity carrying cultural patterns of endurance into a new geographical context (Brah, 1996).

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study offers the following recommendations for scholarship, pedagogy, and creative practice:

Much of Adichie scholarship prioritizes her novels (*Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah*). Yet *Zikora* shows that her short fiction provides equally rich material for feminist and diasporic analysis. Future research should engage more systematically with her short stories and those of other African women writers.

Scholars of African literature should integrate insights from feminist psychology, sociology, and diaspora studies to deepen analyses of maternal relationships. The complexity of *Zikora* benefits from multi-theoretical readings that bridge disciplines.

**Foreground Maternal Ambivalence:** Feminist discussions of motherhood in African contexts should move beyond binary notions of nurturing versus oppressive motherhood. Adichie demonstrates that maternal relationships are ambivalent, marked by both trauma and tenderness.

**Value Women's Silences:** While Zikora's frustration with silence is valid, feminist discourse should also examine silence as a cultural and survival strategy rather than only as oppression. Understanding silence as "strategic" can nuance interpretations of African women's endurance.

As African women increasingly give birth and raise children in diasporic spaces, feminist discourse must interrogate how maternal practices adapt and persist across borders.

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