Olaosun Ibrahim Esan*

Patriarchy as a social construct: a gastro-semiotic criticism of the foodspheres in J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*

https://doi.org/10.1515/lass-2022-2011
Received April 4, 2022; accepted November 17, 2022

Abstract: The broad theoretical underpinning of this paper is that food is a vital part of the second-order signifying modes in literary texts. Its definite thesis, in relation to the age-long debates on power dichotomy between male and female gender, is that while men merely enjoy and noisily exercise social power sustained by patriarchy, which is a contrivance, women possess a great deal of authentic powers usually not overtly acknowledged. These theoretical and ideological (thesis) statements respectively are demonstrated through a semiotic reading and analysis of four foodspheres in J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*, using the critical lenses of gastro-criticism, social semiotics and textual cooperation theory. Through these analytical lenses, the paper recognises that each of the foodspheres in this play is a *hypertext* which transcodes or interogates the diverse gendered power relation *hypotexts* embodied in religious, socio-cultural and institutional semiospheres. It concludes that the power that women exercise in food preparation and administration, as signified in some of the foodspheres analysed, is a semiotic prototype of the many other unnoticed powers, through which the female *homo* rule the world.

Keywords: culinary tradition; food; foodsphere; paratext; semiotic prototype

1 Introduction

> When novels, plays and poems refer to food, they are often doing much more than we might think. Recent critical thinking suggests that depictions of food in literary works can help to explain the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity and social structures (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 2017).

***Corresponding author: Ibrahim Esan Olaosun**, Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria Primary, E-mail: ieolaosun@oauife.edu.ng

Food and eating are a vital part of the account of human secular and spiritual lives. Denotatively, food is the hub of the undertakings by all eating beings in the bio/hemispheres. Connotatively, through food, ideational and interpersonal meanings can be communicated and explored. As important as food is to all eating beings, women seem to be constructed as the 'lords of foods' for universally, they are believed to be in charge of food preparation and administration; the role which they enact principally through pregnancy and breastfeeding of the newborn. Paradoxically, the modern woman often rejects or holds up to vehement contestation the view that a woman's position is in the kitchen. The modern woman seems to be ignorant of the many semiotic significance of the kitchen. For instance, the kitchen gives women easy access to good food. It also makes them have controls over food administration. The kitchen, connotatively argued can be described as the circuit through which women control all the powers of life.

In order to develop the above arguments regarding women and the power that they exercise through food and the kitchen, we need to look back through the history of Adam and Eve. Although it is not clear from theological literature how long Adam lived before Eve was created to live with him in the garden of Eden, it is clear that the latter enacted a great influence on the former as, through her, Adam eats the forbidden fruit and was banished from the garden of bliss for violating the first food law. In the Edenic world, fruit (the prototype for all manners of food) was dually used as the metaphor for obedience and disobedience. For obeying the food law, food was supplied free but for violating the law, food must be sought after through sweat and hard labour.

The violation of the food law, which activated the existence of the live-in world, is often attributed to the influence of the first woman, who is the causative agent of this disobedience. The creator exploits this food law violation to complete the predetermined intent to create the earthly world. From then and times immemorial, women have been endowed to wage some powers and assert some influences on the lives of men and children, through food. As captured in many fictional and theological literatures, many kings and warlords are obsessed with women and have fallen unto their hands through food. Also, there are several undocumented stories of men, who died mysteriously through different forms of food rebellious act of their wives.

The above semiotic arguments about food, women, human existence and the connectedness of the three is to delineate the aim of this paper which is to show how J.P. Clark appropriates and deploys the sign-vehicle of food in *The Wives' Revolt* to discredit or interrogate the gender-prejudiced concept called patriarchy (especially the notion of male's absolute power) and to project his anti-patriarchy ideologies.

The Wives' Revolt, published in 1991 is one of the African literatures with ideological-laden food scenes, called food spheres in this paper. The immediate

spatial setting of the play is Ihuwaren, a village in the Niger Delta community of Eastern Nigeria. The conflict of the play is that the men in the village discriminate against their women by not giving them their fair share of the money received as a payout from an oil company drilling in the land. While the men want the money to be shared in three places (for elders, men and women) the women who argue that the elders are also men, ask for the money to be divided into two equal parts by scrapping elders from the sharing formula, leaving everything to just be between men and women. The climax of this conflict is the staging of a walkout by the women. Consequently, men have to face the domestic responsibilities that were hitherto reserved for women, such as cooking, baby wearing and the singing of lullabies.

This play is unique from several other African literatures that deal with issues of gender, especially those that are in defense of women, in the sense that it treats the subject matter through foodspheres. A foodsphere is a scene involving one or all of the discursive (verbal acts) and representational (visual) activities of cooking, food serving and eating. The play is also unique because food is not just mentioned in the text as a first-order or plain narrative element but as an important second-order theme-driven narrative event. The play contains three explicit foodspheres and a visual *paratext* which relates to the other discursive food scenes in driving the playwright's ideological motif of juxtaposing the powers of men and women in response to some aspects of the prevailing patriarchal system and its ideologies.

2 Basis for this study

The use of food as a *representamen* of literary themes is not peculiar to J.P. Clark. Of course, there are several mentions of food in literature. For instance, Fried Lander (*getliterature.com*), lists nine instances of English literature with interesting food references as *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia* by Sylvia Plath, *The Wallcreeper* by Nell Zink, *Pond* by Claire-Louise Bennett, *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *The Middlesteins* by Jami Atterberg, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *Vintage* by David Baker, *Sweetbitter* by Stephanie Danter and *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway. Similarly Ainechi Edoro (in *brittlepaper.com*) who says "it is hard to decide which is more comforting – eating food or reading novel … and that the blissful point of the two is reading African stories developed around the idea of food", lists such African literature with significant food references as *Criceland* by Chris Abani, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie and *Houseboy* by Ferdinand Oyono. *The Wives' Revolt* by J.P. Clark is a good addition to this list as the playwright strategically deploys food scenes to experiment and contrast the powers of male and female gender.

John Pepper Clark, pseudonym J.P. Clark was one of the foremost professors of Literature in Nigeria, who in addition to the play under study, published about eight

other plays including *Song of a Goat* (1961), *The Masquerade* (1964), *The Raft* (1964), *Ozidi* (1966), *The Boat* (1981) and *All for Oil* (2009), among others. One of the literary devices commonly used by this playwright is imagery, usually ecological imagery and many scholars have studied his works in terms of this literary-semiotic device. For instance, Olaniyan (2017) and Ngwoke (2017) have studied how he uses water symbolism and imagery in his drama texts. These works and some others such as those of Agozie (2015), Odoh (2017), Amiriheobu and Owunari (2019), and Afolayan (2020) that critically study *The Wives' Revolt* do not concentrate on the food signs in the text. This present study, drawing inspirations from the critical works of such scholars as Whitt (2011), Ajulu-Okungu (2014), Klitzing (2019), and Olaosun (2020), which show that food is an important expressive mode in literary fictions, considers food imagery as a significant sign vehicle for encoding the dominant ideology of the play, therefore focuses on this semogenic device as deployed in the text.

3 Theoretical framework

Foods, deployed referentially or conceptually in texts are atypical sign vehicles, functioning at the connotative (attitudinal, affective, cultural, ideological, etc.) veins of meaning. To account for such veins of meanings naturally requires summon of multiplicity of analytical methods. Therefore, I premise the analysis of the food scenes in the text under study on the principles of gastro-criticism (espoused by Tobin [2008]), social semiotics (espoused by Hodge and Kress [1998]) and textual cooperation theory (espoused by Umberto Eco).

Gastro-criticism is a critical approach to literature which draws upon anthropology, sociology, semiotics, history, and literary studies, to show the connections between food and culture. This approach connects food studies with literary criticism and shows that the relationship between the two can be discerned through the reading of literary text. It highlights and examines the literary significance of food and drink in a literary text in relation to their manner of preparation and consumption. This approach relates to literary criticism by its method of extensive close reading which involves the tendency to connect literary content with ideology (Nugraha 2021).

Social semiotics, as espoused by Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, is inspired by Michael Halliday's book *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (1978) which sets out a number of key premises of his linguistic theory. The theory, which is functional in orientation, has as its key features the 'metafunctions' of language and it is based on the principle that language is a system of options and meaning potential. According to Halliday, there are triadic functions of language: textual, ideational and interpersonal. The textual

metafunction relates to the linguistic resources (words, groups, clauses, sentences and other larger units) used for presenting information as text in context. These resources contribute to message delivery and convey the context of utterances in a given communication. The ideational metafunction describes the function of language in constructing users' experience of the world in terms of objects, events, and relations between them. The interpersonal metafunction describes the use of language for enacting social roles and relations as meaning in a text.

Social semiotics is a model of semiotics which studies signs and sign systems in relation to specific social and cultural circumstances. It is a semiotic theory that shares the principles of critical discourse analysis by considering signification or meaning-making as a social practice. From the perspective of social semiotics, semiosis (encoding/meaning-making and decoding/interpretation) is intricately linked with certain social interests and ideologies.

According to Lucie Guillemette and Josiane Cossette (http://www.signosemio.com/eco/textual-cooperation.asp), Umberto Eco's theory of textual cooperation, argues that a text is an incomplete product with full of gaps and therefore imposes on the reader an essential role in the process of filling those gaps for meaning makings. The reader who fulfils this challenging task by faithfully filling those gaps is that reader, known as a Model reader, who is able to decode not only the immanent meanings, that is, meanings based on adherence to the text or, according to Eco (1988), "the interpretation permitted by the textual linear manifestation", but also who is able to read acquired meanings into that text. Eco differentiates between the genuine intention of a work which he calls *intentio operis* and the intention imposed on the text by its reader which he calls *intentio lectoris*.

Though these *intentios* are disparate, they are not totally detachable because there is always a dialectic relationship between a text and its producer on the one hand and the reader and the textual interpretation on the other hand. In order to bridge the gaps between these binary distinctions, the reader of a text must cooperate with its creator so as to make sure that the individual's interpretation of the text does not lead to what is commonly referred to as the corruption of the original text. One of the ways to achieve this is for a reader to make meanings out of a text in relation to the social context which determines the text's interpretive boundaries and reader's inventive limitations. This complex connectedness of texts to their social contexts is the point at which Eco's theory of textual cooperation aligns with the principles of social semiotics.

In applying these theories, I am guided by the conviction that the foodspheres in *The Wives' Revolt* are not immanently endowed with precise semiotic properties such that they elicit the same decodings-as those of mine in this article- for all its readers. For, instance, the text's foodspheres (as prototypes of atypical texts) may elicit in some readers, a decoding that suggests that the playwright deploys them (the

foodspheres) to perpetuate (because he experiments the very important issue of dichotomy of powers between male and female genders mainly through kitchen activities) the somewhat stereotypical view that women do not have other roles than those engaged in the kitchen. Such a reader may argue that other planes of accomplishment should have been explored for the literary experimentation. Some others may treat the food scenes as just an aspect of the performance aesthetics in the play, paying attention to the laughter-provoking devices therein.

I consider the theory of textual cooperation appropriate for engaging semiotic products, as the foodspheres under study, that do not have univocal interpretation because the theory thrives on the inventiveness of the reader. I consider social semiotics as an adequate theory for pinning down to its social context certain kinds of food and kitchen significations (in the text) that may pose interpretive difficulties or generate semiotic anxieties in some readers from other social and cultural contexts. The unity of social semiotics, gastro-criticism and textual cooperation theory are helpful in the analysis that follows shortly. Gastro-criticism serves as the background theory, as the text under analysis is distinctively rich in food-related scenes; textual cooperation theory defines the interpretive boundary of the text and social semiotics allows analysis to be enriched by my personal knowledge of the pre-modern Ibo (or at large, Nigerian) kitchen technologies and culinary traditions.

4 Analysis

4.1 A foodsphere signifying social/cultural distortions

The following analysis begins with a paratext, which is a visual signifier of the playwright's ideological standpoint in defense of women. In the global context of *The Wives' Revolt*, power and gender stereotypes are the key issues. In this text, women in Ehumweren village engage in a walk-away activism in opposition to their men for maltreating the womenfolk in the formulae used for sharing the money donated to the village by an oil company, operating in the area and men self-importantly belittle this act. The visual below (the front cover of the play), signifying cultural distortion, is a representative (through the mediation of some food preparation acts) of the consequences of the walk-away protest embarked upon by the womenfolk. The food preparation scene indicates how food is represented as a sign-vehicle of immediate resistance to the patriarchal oppression dramatized in the play.

The semiotic code Figure 1 contains some sign units which syntagmatically cohere in encoding some gender ideological messages, in addition to its textual role of summing up the narrative content and the conflict of the play: Apart from the

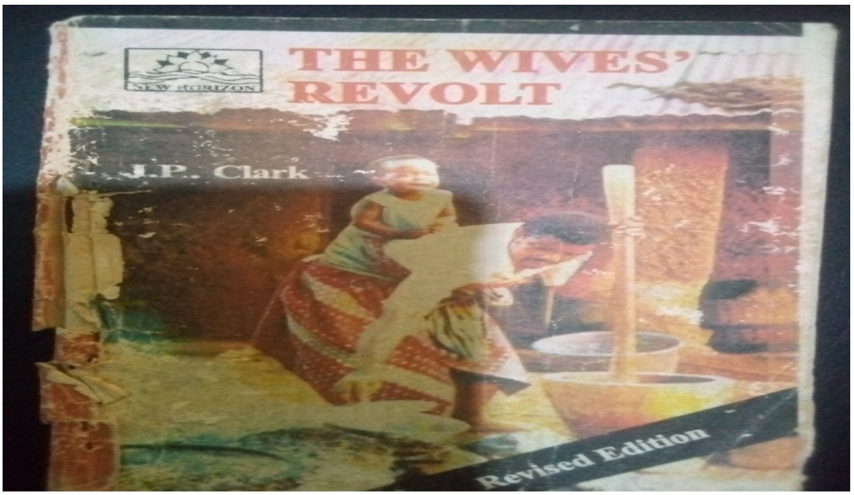

Figure 1: Visual paratext signifying the ordeals of men in food preparation.

background mud house and other sign markers of rustic life (such as the traditional basket and cooking paraphernalia) which are semiotic indicators of the spatial and temporal setting of the play, a man is represented as engaging in food preparation tasks and in baby wearing act. In the traditional African context, none of the two household tasks is a male concern. These two semiotic acts distort the gender role sharing principle in a typical traditional African community where the two roles are assigned to women by the social culture. The distortions are reflective of the gender conflict in the play and they signify the anguish of men and children when they are without women.

This paratext constructs two forms of food: food for the gastro-intestinal system and psychological food- the two are denoted by the semiotic acts of cooking and child-wearing, respectively. While the man needs the former form, the ultimate need of the baby at the back of the man is the latter. An average cultured woman provides the two to their husband and children, respectively, without much ado. For instance, in Africa and perhaps globally, the back of a woman is a haven, a space of therapy for a baby. So, whenever a baby needs more than food comfort, it is often the practice for mothers to wear their baby on their back or other body parts that function similarly as the back in some other cultures.

However, to signify that both the food mediated gastro-intestinal and psychological satisfaction are absent when women are absent, there is a semiotic depiction of uneasiness in the above visual layout as suggested first, by the symbolic objects- pestle and mortar (the two are hard wooden objects), the acts of bending,

turning and pounding and second, by the facial expression of the crying baby. There is a covert attestation to the argument about the vulnerability of men's and children's lives in the absence of women through the mediation of food in the following exchanges between Okoro and Koko, where Okoro agrees implicitly that women can overpower both men and children through hostile food acts.

OKORO: I don't see what you women can do. You cannot even speak with one voice on any one matter at any time. We saw a good display of your unity today at the assembly, didn't we? All you can do is buzz about an issue like a swarm of house-flies, unable to move a little object in the way that ants in all their mute state do so well with ease.

OKORO: I don't see what you women can do. You cannot even speak with one voice on any one matter at any time. We saw a good display of your unity today at the assembly, didn't we? All you can do is buzz about an issue like a swarm of house-flies, unable to move a little object in the way that ants in all their mute state do so well with ease.

KOKO: You wait and see. You beat a child and you say he should not cry. Oh, you wait and see.

OKORO: We'll wait and see nothing. So give up this matter and get your husband his dinner to eat. There's getting to be too much debate in this house. Come and cut my nails for me, it is a debate, fetch me a match to light my cigarette, it is a debate.

KOKO: Of course, my dear husband who delights me, I'll not talk anymore; now I go in full flight to get your dinner. And better make sure you eat against hungry days ahead (*She goes to the kitchen*)

OKORO: Oh, so you are going to starve us, are you? Are you going to fight us with food? Is that the new coup you people are plotting? Go and carry it out. I suppose you'll also starve your own children to death in your unnatural plan to floor your men?

KOKO: Nobody is going to fight you with food. That will be giving you further license to stay out.

The dramatic exchanges above are a semiotic coding of the playwright's point of view in regard to men's obsession with food. Okoro's demand for food from Koko in this exchange is an instance of thematic incongruity and topic shift oddity which signifies the former's unbridled love for food. In terms of structural choice and turn structure, the conversation between them has the themes of disagreement and negative feelings. As a result of this, it is not expected of Okoro to ask Koko to give him food to eat at that point in time. The thematic shift from arguments over who is right or wrong, what women can and cannot do; to his request for food is a distortion of textual flow, which has significant semiotic implications.

At the primary level of signification, the distortion makes sense as it signifies the power of food in mitigating spousal conflicts. At this level also, it is a sampling of the repressive patriarchal system wherein a woman is not expected to fight her husband to the extent of denying him food. The simple act of going to the kitchen by Koko to cook for Okoro, which whom she has hot arguments over a law that banishes women's goats from their village is a pointer to this female quietism and passive acceptance of patriarchal oppression. Implicitly and at the secondary level of

signification, it implies Okoro's eccentric love for food and by semiotic extension it signifies that men are slaves to food. It also suggests the mistaking trust that the male gender has that, women in a patriarchy system have absolute allegiance for the female repressive regulations and one of the explanations for why most oppressive men die through venomous foods from their presumed submissive wives.

4.2 A foodsphere signifying women's power in food deception

Women sometimes fight men with food and exercise this power over men who often fall for different forms of food deception acts by women as the following food scene signifies.

OKORO: Woman, am I going to have my food or not?
KOKO: You can see I'm bringing it, can't you? (*She returns with dishes of food in both hands, setting them down before her husband. Next, she brings him water in a bowl to wash his hands before taking her seat*)
OKORO: (*He washes his hands: then critically sorts out the dish with stew*) What is in the dish? Don't say that's fish I see there like chunks of yam from Umunede. I don't have teeth to go at this dry fish they feed us on these days. The other day, I ate at Piniki's , and a bone from one of those miserable small fish that his wife always serves almost stuck in my throat till my eyes welled up with water. Why do some women cook such miserable fish eh? Don't their husbands give them enough money for food?
KOKO: (*Watching him more in amusement than anger*). Money for food? Which housewife receives that these days? It must be going to the girlfriends. Now, what wouldn't I do with the house allowance I had as a bride?
OKORO: I knew you would personalize the issue. You always do, but I'm not going to let you make food go down my wind-pipe.
KOKO: Oh, please don't. I don't want to be stoned to death for killing a good husband.
OKORO: (*He dips his finger further in the dish*). Oh, this looks like good fish after all, not one of those stiff wooden things warmed up from the pace of death.
KOKO: Be grateful, man; it is these cold wooden fish that keep everybody alive these days, the Izon included.
OKORO: Count me out: I wouldn't touch the thing. (*He sprinkles some gravy and throws some pieces of bone outside across the door step*). That's for you evil ones. Stay out there and eat in your own bad company. (*Next he sprays some gravy and pieces of flesh indoors immediately about him*) And now, you eat, you spirits that are good and give us protection. (*Then he starts to feed himself*). Very good, Koko, very good, and the fish is as soft water yam in oil, delicate and dissolving on the tongue.
KOKO: Such sweet praise for iced fish!
OKORO: No, you don't say it's iced fish I've been eating all the time?
KOKO: I'm afraid so! It's the cooking that matters!
OKORO: A witch in the kitchen, that's what you are. Why don't all women stay that way and leave affairs of state to us men? Life would so much better for everybody.
KOKO: Life is going to be so much worse, if you don't listen to us women while making you laws.

(continued)

OKORO: Oh, are we going through all that again?
KOKO: Oh, just repeal the law, and give us our fair share of the money.
OKORO: Oh, go and get me some water to drink, and stop nagging. A man can't enjoy or digest his food, when his wife is forever cackling like a hen all round him. (*She goes and brings the water and bobs while giving it to him. He takes it and drinks in a grand style, belching.*)
OKORO: You'll forever be my favourite, even when I take a younger wife. You need some help in the house, you know, a little girl you can train to your taste.
KOKO: So that's where your own share of the oil money is going. Now we know.
(Pages 12, 13 and 14)

The most important ideological viewpoint encoded in the foodsphere above is that an archetypal man does not understand what he eats'**.** The food scene, through implicit semiotic contrast, represents two degrees of power- the power that men, in a patriarchal system, exercise to make women cook food for them (or by extension, give them sexual pleasure and provide other services) even in atmospheres of provocation and the power that women, in this system, have to determine the quality of what their men eat. Through the food scene, the playwright encodes and dramatises African fashion of patriarchy and the African woman's form of patriarchal resistance. The playwright also encodes woman's ability to manipulate realities through food preparation.

The food scene is a semiotic paradox, reflecting and transcoding gender relationships, especially the notion of absolute male power, in an African society through the mediation of food and eating. The first of these paradoxes is that the woman is a cook who plays some visible and invisible roles on what the man eats and the second is that the man, who, in many African communities, is believed to be in charge of food provision, is a slave to what he eats, -the foods that his wife cooks for him.

The food scene is a prototype of the global theme of power and power contestation in the semiotic space of *The Wives' Revolt*, where the food eating representational acts and food evaluative discursive signs symbolize the patriarchal hegemonic power and some vital features of gender relations in Africa. The food scene reflects and implicitly critiques the dominant patriarchy ideologies of the society represented in the play. In the excerpt, Okoro enacts some verbal acts and contemptuous eating manners that are a representation of patriarchal excesses. First, the choice of the generic address label "woman" as referent of his wife and the series of scornful attitudinal directive acts such as "Oh, go and get me some water to drink and stop nagging" and contemptuous eating manners such as eating with two fingers instead of handful (representing the culinary behavior of the Ibo people of Eastern Nigeria) and deliberate snobbish belching are indexical of patriarchal arrogance.

4.3 Semiotics of a foodie man who does not know what he eats

After all the shows of arrogance by Okoro in the foodsphere above, Koko surprises him by making him, through the power of cooking, sings sweet praises for iced fish. All along, Okoro does not know what he eats and has been singing praises for the good meal prepared by his wife. In Ibo culture which is the immediate hypotext of this play, the general attitude to iced fish is negative. In this culture, being a region with abundant rivers with plenty of varied kinds of fish, iced fish is consumed in the absence of better alternatives. In a semi-formal interview I conducted with Professor Kamalu Ikenna of the University of Port-Harcout, Nigeria, on this subject, the professor of Cultural Semiotics revealed that "it is because of their attitude to iced fish that some elders in this part of Nigeria insist that when they die, their corpses should not be deposited in the mortuary because they do not want to look like iced fish before being buried". At the primary level of signification, this scenario signifies that Koko is a good cook and that Okoro has no good sense of taste. At the secondary degree of signification, it signifies the power of women to imbue food with outstanding delicious appeal- some kind of female's wit or deception in food preparation and male's ignorance in food consumption. This food preparation trickery is a semiotic representation of one of the silent ways in which some women fight their men with acrimonious cooking.

4.4 Semiosis of two men that cannot light a fire

The arrogance of men in this patriarchal system is further put to question through the food scene below where two men cannot light a fire.

OKORO: Oh, yes it is. Come my friend, let the women go on their useless march and protest. Right now, I have some other character protesting attention.
IDAMA: Who is that if I may ask?
OKORO: It is a whole goat crying to be roasted. Do you want to partake of the feast or not?
IDAMA: Of course, I do.
OKORO: Then let's start the fire. You'll find the matchbox up there in that corner. That's where Koko normally hides it so I wouldn't find it to light my cigarette. … I will show her I can do without her. Let me get some firewood, already split. Good for her, it's the fresh bundle she brought from the farm yesterday. (*Both men go on their knees and begin making the fire, bringing the pieces of wood together downstage center. They strike a match, it doesn't light the first time. When it does eventually, they apply the flame to the wood splinters but it does not light*.)

One of the ways through which J.P. Clark encodes his anti-patriarchal motif in *The Wives' Revolt* is through kitchen duty. Through this, the playwright represents food preparation for men as a nerve-racking experience as opposed to its consumption which brings them pleasure. The two male characters in the excerpt above painfully experience cooking in spite of the fact that the necessary pre-cooking tasks of getting the matchbox and flammable firewood had been done by the woman before the protest that put the men in the trouble. The authorial comment- *They strike a match, it doesn't light the first time* and *when it does eventually, they apply the flame to the wood splinters but it does not light,* is a semiotic representation of mannish failure; light is generally a *denotata* of life and perfection. The representation of the two men as being unable to do what a single woman will do is a mortifying semiotic paradox- 'what a woman can do, two men cannot do it' and this implicitly encodes the playwright's ideological leaning in connection with gender related powers. The following lamentation by Idama is an indirect reverence for the power of women in food preparation:

IDAMA: My hands are flagging. And there is ash on my tongue. Oh, my mother who bore me, is this what it takes to light a fire?

Through this difficult food preparation experience, men's incompleteness in the absence of women is connoted and the notion of absolute male power is contested. The matchbox and the firewood as well as their provision by Koko (a female character in the excerpt) symbolically associate women with success and its other positive connotations while the negative signifying verbal group "does not light" and adversative clause "but it does not light" represent men in the off-putting end of the 'life giving' semiosis. This message of mannish failure in bringing light to life is amplified through the semiotic contrast of smokes explicitly associated with men and light inferentially associated with women in the following exchanges between two male characters:

OKORO: No, kerosene is too expensive these days. There is tinder where you got the match.
IDAMA: (*He goes out briefly*. Yes, here it is, you miser! (*They prime the tinder among the pieces of wood, and apply a flaming match-stick, starting up more smoke than fire*)
OKORO: What's this?
IDAMA: Blow it, man.
OKORO: I'm blowing, can't you see?
IDAMA: You have no wind left in your bags. Spent it all making proclamations!
OKORO: And you've spent yours dancing around women. There, use your hand to fan it (*Still the fire does not come to life, although both men, now on their knees, necks craning, crawl around it bumping their heads in the process, until thoroughly spent, they fall back on their hunches*)

In the food scene above, J.P. Clark projects his ideological thoughts (about the tribulation of men in the absence of their women) through the deployment of implicit methods of characterization, making his characters express (through their speeches, looks and actions) frustrations and regrets around food preparation. This method of characterization is strategic in helping the playwright to maintain some detachment to the ideological stance in defense of women and thereby enhances the verity of the gendered point of view. These verbal and visual sign vehicles of frustration are semiotic epithets creating, by implicit method of binary opposition, important qualities around women in food preparation.

4 Conclusion

The contemporary industrialized world is a gender liberal space characterised by gender role merger or role swapping such that men and women engage in roles hitherto partitioned along gender dimension. Nowadays, in many African countries, young men are attending catering schools and are working as professional cooks and women too are making a living through engaging in certain stereotypical male jobs such as farming, automobile mechanics, commercial driving and military/para-military professions. Also, technological advancement has made cooking a pleasant chore for male and female with the invention of luxurious kitchen gadgets and easy-to-manipulate fire starters. In view of gender roles revolutions and advancements in kitchen technologies in the social culture, the power arrogated to women through their representation in the micro-culture of *The Wives' Revolt* as 'anointed' cooks, together with all sorts of anti-patriarchal claims (in defense of women) that the playwright intends to make through this representation, may be disputed in the contemporary time when men are making significant impacts in gastronomy businesses.

Therefore, reading the text, especially its foodspheres, within these modern contexts of gender and technological revolutions that brought about new cooking equipment and methods will amount to a counter-factual reading capable of reducing the literary-semiotic effects of the food semiosis in the text. So, the only way in which the foodspheres will generate the significations envisaged by the playwright is to (as espoused by textual cooperation theory) act as the model reader by locating them within the traditional cultural context when the kitchen was not luxurious and food was crude in preparation, hence the need to read the text following the principles of textual cooperation theory.

References

Afolayan, Bosede Funke. 2020. Sex strike in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, J.P. Clark's *Wives' Revolt* and Julie Okoh's *Edewede*. *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature* 4(II). 163–178.

Agozie, Uzo Ugu. 2015. Dramaturgy of social relevance and conflict resolution: A dialectical study of the wives Revolt by J.P. Clark. *Nile Journal of English Studies* 1(1). 87.

Ajulu-Okungu, Anne. 2014. Power and sociality of food and drink in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Dottie and Pilgrim's way. *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 1(3–4). 130–139.

Amiriheobu, Frank Ifeanyichukwu & George Owunari. 2019. Praxis of gender inequality in J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* and the Nigerian experience. *International Journal of Innovative Research in Education, Technology & Social Strategies* 6(1). 65–79.

Boyce, Charlotte & Joan Fitzpatrick. 2017. *A history of food in literature from the fourteenth century to the present*. London and New York: Routledge.

Eco, Umberto. 1988. Intentio Lectoris. *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* 2. 12.

Halliday, Michael. 1978. *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

Hodge, Robert & Gunther Kress. 1998. *Social semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Klitzing, Anke. 2019. My Palate Hung with Starlight: A gastrocritical reading of Seamus Heaney's poetry. *East-West Cultural Passage* 19(2). 14–39.

Ngwoke, Omeh Obasi. 2017. Symbolic water imagery in the drama of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo. *African Research Review* 11(1). 156–170, No. 45.

Nugrah, Dipa. 2021. Hot coffee for the guest: Gastro criticism on Budi Darma's Tamu. *Leksema: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra* 6(1). 23–31.

Odoh, Onyeka Emeka. 2017. Towards a universal tragic vision in J.P. Clark's song of a goat. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics* 32. 48–57.

Olaniyan, Modupe Elizabeth. 2017. Symbolism in the drama of J.P. Clark and Femi Osofisan. *Imbizo* 5(1). 71–81.

Olaosun, Ibrahim Esan. 2020. Food semiology in selected poems in 'Lere Oladitan's 'Poem of the Week'. *International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric* 4(1). 49–58.

Tobin, Ronald. 2008. "Thought for food: Literature and gastronomy". Lecture given at the University of California Santa Barbara. Video. www.uctv.tv/schedule (accessed 30 March 2022).

Whitt, Jennifer Burcham. 2011. *An appetite for metaphor: Food imagery and cultural identity in Indian fiction*. East Carolina University, USA. Master's thesis. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10342/3535.

Bionote

Olaosun Ibrahim Esan
Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
ieolaosun@oauife.edu.ng

Olaosun Ibrahim Esan is an Associate Professor, lecturing in the department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. His research interests are in the areas of Cultural semiotics, Stylistics and Rhetorical Discourse Analysis.