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Repetition and Feminist Agency in Selected Contemporary African Women's Poetry

John Tikikus, Maureen Amaka Azuike

Department of English, University of Jos, Nigeria

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Abstract— *Repetition is a prominent formal feature in the poetry of Warsan Shire, Safia Elhillo, Koleka Putuma, and Amaka Azuike. Its recurrence across their works, however, does not indicate a uniform aesthetic or feminist politics. This paper comparatively examines the distinct ideological and experiential functions of repetition in Shire's "What We Own," Elhillo's "Infibulation Study," Putuma's "No Easter Sunday for Queers," and Azuike's "Invisible." It argues that repetition produces four related but formally differentiated modes of feminist agency: testimonial agency in Shire, corporeal-linguistic agency in Elhillo, interrogative and counter-archival agency in Putuma, and recognitional agency in Azuike. In "What We Own," the refrain "is not mine" converts familial dispossession into a structure of collective mourning and remembrance. In "Infibulation Study," repeated anatomical naming confronts euphemism and makes prohibited knowledge about the female body speakable. In "No Easter Sunday for Queers," anaphoric questions, reiterated biblical images, and recurring paternal address transform religious authority into an object of queer feminist interrogation. In "Invisible," repeated declarations of existence accumulate presence against the social erasure of women's experiences and labour. Drawing on gynocriticism and postmodern feminism, the paper demonstrates that repetition does not possess an inherent feminist meaning. Its political significance emerges from the relationship among formal recurrence, the experience represented, the speaker's position, and the structure of power confronted. The comparison therefore challenges device-centred stylistic readings that merely identify repetition without explaining what it accomplishes. The paper concludes that contemporary African women's poetry employs recurring language as a dynamic means of remembering loss, breaking bodily silence, confronting authority, and demanding recognition.*

Keywords— ***repetition, feminist agency, poetry, gynocriticism, postmodern feminism***

Introduction: Beyond Identifying Repetition

Repetition is among the most recognisable features of poetic language. A word, phrase, syntactic construction, sound, image, question, or line may recur to produce rhythm, emphasis, cohesion, memory, emotional intensity, or structural unity. In politically engaged poetry, repetition or recurrence may also imitate the persistence of violence, strengthen collective testimony, challenge prohibitions, transform private experience into public speech, or demand that readers confront what dominant discourse attempts to ignore. This paper, therefore, aims to comparatively explain how repetition produces different forms of feminist agency in selected poets.

Stylistic criticism can nevertheless reduce repetition to a label. A poem may be described as employing anaphora, refrain, parallelism, or lexical recurrence without adequately explaining why the repeated element matters. Identification becomes mistaken for interpretation and the more productive question becomes what social, emotional, epistemological, or political work does repetition perform?

This question is especially important in a comparative study such as this. Warsan Shire, Safia Elhillo, Koleka Putuma, and Amaka Azuike all employ repetition, but their poetry emerges from different national, cultural, religious, diasporic, sexual, and aesthetic locations. Recurrence consequently assumes different meanings in the poets' works.

Shire's poetry is shaped by migration, familial loss, sexual violence, traumatic memory, refugee experience, and unstable belonging. Her repetitions frequently create testimonial patterns through which individual losses become collective histories. Elhillo places greater pressure upon language itself, particularly the vocabulary through which the female body, diaspora, ancestry, and cultural violence can be named. Her repetition breaks prohibitions and establishes a counter-language of female anatomy.

Putuma's poetry, in turn, brings Black queer identity into confrontation with Christianity, heteropatriarchy, post-apartheid violence, and social erasure. Her recurring questions and biblical images acquire the cadence of public interrogation and political performance. Azuike's comparatively accessible poetry employs repetition to make women's ordinary experiences, labour, emotional lives, and social presence recognisable.

Existing scholarship provides important foundations for examining the poets' stylistic practices. Iqbal and Anwar demonstrate how Shire's diction, imagery, syntax, and repetition connect individual experience with wider questions of gender, displacement, and cultural identity (93–98). Studies of Elhillo similarly emphasise the relationship between poetic form and diasporic identity. Hussein and Salman examine how her linguistic choices, imagery, and structures articulate identity, displacement, and linguistic negotiation (1412–16), while Oluwapelumi, Onwuka, and Akujobi identify repetition and silence as important means through which Elhillo represents diasporic memory and fractured belonging (764–66). Scholarship on Putuma pays particular attention to the relationship between formal experimentation, historical memory, and political resistance. Phalafala identifies memory as the product of complex historical processes in *Collective Amnesia* (251), while Mpiti shows that Putuma's engagement with racial discrimination, homophobia, femicide, spirituality, and historical injustice is inseparable from the collection's formal diversity (2–4). Guarducci situates Putuma's poetry and performance within processes of political and epistemological "unlearning" (155–59), whereas Brusselaers demonstrates that Putuma's lists, footnotes, interviews, blank spaces, and other non-lyric forms challenge established systems of knowledge and authority (86–89). Although these studies establish the political significance of the poets' formal practices, they do not comparatively explain how repetition produces different forms of feminist agency across the four poets examined here.

This paper examines four poems: Shire's "What We Own" from *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us* (2014), Elhillo's "Infibulation Study" from *Girls That Never Die* (2022), Putuma's "No Easter Sunday for Queers" from *Collective Amnesia* (2017), and Azuike's "Invisible" from *Gentle Giants* (2008). The poems are not presented as comprehensive representatives of their authors' entire bodies of work. They are selected because each makes repetition central to the construction of a particular feminist voice.

The paper argues that repetition produces four distinct modes of agency. In Shire, it becomes testimonial and memorial: the recurring "is not mine" acknowledges dispossession while preserving absent relatives in language. In Elhillo, repetition becomes corporeal and linguistic: the repeated naming of the clitoris refuses the euphemism through which female genital cutting is concealed. In Putuma, it becomes interrogative and counter-archival: recurring questions and religious images make Christianity, paternal authority, and social forgetting answerable to queer female experience. In Azuike, it becomes recognitional: the repeated "I exist" accumulates presence against the normalisation and erasure of women's lives.

Gynocriticism provides one framework for understanding this formal diversity. Showalter defines gynocriticism as a form of feminist criticism concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning and with the history, themes, genres, and structures of women's writing (25). It therefore foregrounds women as producers of literary meaning and treats female body, emotional, sexual, familial, and social experiences as sources of knowledge.

Postmodern feminism complements this perspective by resisting a universal conception of womanhood and drawing attention to difference, instability, and the discursive production of identity. Butler's argument that gender is constituted through the repeated stylisation of the body is especially relevant to an examination of repetition and feminist agency (*Gender Trouble* 33). Her later explanation of materialisation as a process produced through the reiteration of regulatory norms further clarifies how repeated discourse gives apparently natural authority to biological sex classifications (*Bodies That Matter* 2).

Repetition as Form, Memory, and Political Action

In ordinary communication, unnecessary repetition may be regarded as redundancy. Poetry transforms recurrence into an organised formal resource. Repeated elements return with differences produced by context. A phrase does not necessarily mean exactly the same thing each time it appears because intervening lines alter the reader's understanding of it.

A refrain, for example, can accumulate emotional weight. Its first appearance may establish a proposition; subsequent appearances may expose consequences, intensify grief, create irony, or transform an individual statement into a collective pattern. Repetition therefore operates temporally: each recurrence carries the memory of its previous uses.

This temporal quality makes repetition especially suited to poems about trauma, loss, violence, and social erasure. Traumatic experiences may return involuntarily through memory. Mourning repeatedly confronts absence. Cultural prohibitions must be challenged more than once because they are sustained through habitual language. Social invisibility may require persistent declarations of presence.

Repetition can also create community. A recurring phrase may sound like a chant, prayer, testimony, slogan, call-and-response pattern, or spoken-word refrain. It can move the poetic voice beyond individual introspection towards collective address.Yet repetition can reproduce oppression as well as resist it. Gendered roles become naturalised through repeated performance; religious or cultural prohibitions acquire authority through constant restatement; and stereotypes persist because they are circulated as familiar truths. Feminist repetition may consequently operate as counter-repetition. It can appropriate an established word, phrase, ritual, or form and redirect its significance.

Butler's account of performativity is pertinent because gendered identities are sustained through repeated social norms rather than simply expressed from an inner essence. She describes gender as the "repeated stylization of the body," through which socially regulated acts acquire the appearance of natural identity (*Gender Trouble* 33). Because these norms depend upon repetition, their reiteration also creates possibilities for variation, displacement, and resistance. A recurring act or expression can consequently be performed differently, exposing the instability of the norm it appears to reproduce.

The selected poets employ such transformative recurrence. Shire repeats possessive language until possession becomes impossible. Elhillo repeats an anatomical word that cultural discourse refuses to use. Putuma repeats Christian images while redirecting them towards excluded queer bodies. Azuike repeats a simple statement of existence until social invisibility appears ethically indefensible. Repetition therefore participates in the production of feminist knowledge. It teaches the reader how to recognise a pattern, remember what has been excluded, and reconsider familiar language.

Warsan Shire: "Is Not Mine" and Testimonial Agency

"What We Own" begins with an immediate contradiction between its title and its content. "What We Own" promises an account of possession, continuity, or security, while the poem repeatedly removes people from the speaker's claim as excerpted below:

> Our men do not belong to us.
>
> Even my own father left one afternoon, is not mine.
>
> My brother is in prison, is not mine. My uncles, they
>
> go back home and they are shot in the head, are not mine. (1–4)

The phrase "is not mine" functions as a refrain of dispossession. Each relative is named through a familial and possessive relationship—"my own father," "my brother," "my uncles"—and then linguistically withdrawn. Possession and loss occupy the same sentence.The grammar is deliberately uncomfortable. "My own father left one afternoon, is not mine" appears syntactically compressed. The phrase "is not mine" does not integrate smoothly with the preceding clause. This interruption corresponds to the disruption of familial continuity.

The repetition creates an accumulating structure. The father's departure, the brother's imprisonment, and the uncles' deaths are not isolated experiences. Each recurrence adds another form of absence to a shared history.The refrain nevertheless performs more than loss. To say "is not mine" requires naming the person who has been taken away. Repetition preserves the absent men within the speaker's testimony. The phrase acknowledges that they cannot be securely possessed, but it refuses their disappearance from memory.This tension produces testimonial agency. The women may not control the political, social, and personal forces that remove men from their lives, but they control the poetic record of those losses. Their speech becomes an archive.

The title of Shire's collection, *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us*, extends the refrain beyond the individual poem. "Our" creates a collective female position, while "do not belong" exposes the instability of relational possession. The women's shared experience is defined partly through the recurring absence of fathers, brothers,

uncles, lovers, and other men. This does not mean that the men are always the direct sources of oppression. They are also victims of imprisonment, political violence, drugs, illness, and social instability. Shire's feminist analysis demonstrates how public crisis enters women's intimate and emotional lives.

The gendered consequences become clearer when men reject women for carrying too much grief:

Then the men we try to love say

we carry too much loss, wear too much black,

are too heavy to be around, much too sad to love.

Then they leave, and we mourn them too. (6–9)

The repeated structures of "too much" represent women's mourning as emotional excess. The women are expected to endure loss without allowing grief to affect their desirability."Then" also functions repetitively. First, women lose relatives through violence, separation, and imprisonment. Then they are criticised for carrying those losses. Then the men who criticise them leave, creating another absence. The sequence exposes the cumulative nature of gendered emotional labour.

The closing statement, "we mourn them too," incorporates abandonment into the existing archive. Mourning expands to include men who voluntarily withdraw because women's grief makes them uncomfortable.The poem later presents women sitting at kitchen tables and counting:

on our fingers the ones who died,

those who left, and the others who were taken by the police,

or by drugs

or by illness

or by other women? (12–16)

The repeated "or" produces an open catalogue of causes. Political violence, criminalisation, addiction, illness, migration, and intimate departure become different routes towards the same experience of absence.The catalogue does not establish equivalence among the causes. Being shot, imprisoned, dying from illness, and leaving for another woman are not identical events. Their conjunction shows how women's domestic memory must accommodate losses produced by several overlapping social structures.The kitchen table, associated conventionally with nourishment and family gathering, becomes a memorial space. Women count with their fingers, turning their bodies into instruments of record. The repeated act of counting confronts the magnitude of loss while acknowledging that the archive remains incomplete.

Showalter's gynocritical emphasis on woman as the producer of textual meaning clarifies this transformation (25). Shire relocates political crisis into domestic conversation, mourning, memory, and emotional labour. Women's grief becomes an important method of understanding the consequences of conflict. Repetition creates a collective voice. The poem moves from "my" relatives to "we" and "our" experiences. Individual bereavement becomes part of a broader female testimony.

Postmodern feminism prevents the collective "we" from being interpreted as a universal category of women. The losses represented arise within particular diasporic, familial, racialised, and conflict-related conditions. The poem creates solidarity through shared mourning without claiming that every woman experiences dispossession in the same way.The refrain "is not mine" consequently produces a double movement. It records the inability to possess or protect intimate relationships, while the act of repetition preserves those relationships against complete disappearance. Shire's agency is testimonial: language cannot restore the absent, but it can remember them.

SafiaElhillo: Anatomical Repetition and Corporeal-Linguistic Agency

In Elhillo's "Infibulation Study," repetition confronts a different form of loss. The problem is not initially the physical absence of relatives but the cultural absence of adequate language for female anatomy and genital cutting. The poem begins by repeatedly naming what surrounding discourse refuses to discuss:

I will proceed from this point without euphemism.

The question is about the clitoris. "I

call my cousins in turn. I ask the question about the clitoris. I will begin

by writing a sentence about the clitoris" (3–6).

The repeated word "clitoris" immediately becomes conspicuous. Anatomical vocabulary is placed at the centre of a poem about a practice surrounded by euphemism and inherited silence. Each recurrence performs a different action. The speaker identifies a question, calls her cousins, asks about the body, and begins writing. Repetition creates a sequence of feminist inquiry moving from thought through conversation to textual record.

The phrase "We do not talk about this" (7) identifies the prohibition that the poem violates. The

statement attempts to close discussion, but the repeated anatomical word has already entered the poem several times. The prohibition is made visible at the moment of its failure.

Unlike Shire's "is not mine," which acknowledges an absence that cannot be reversed, Elhillo's repetition actively alters the conditions of speech. A word treated as unspeakable becomes increasingly speakable through recurrence.The poem exposes the ideology of euphemism: "The Arabic, cut by euphemism. We do not use the word cut. The word we / use, left intact, is purified" (12–13). "Purified" replaces the vocabulary of bodily injury with the language of moral improvement. It represents cutting as the removal of impurity rather than the alteration of a girl's body.The contrast between "cut" and "purified" demonstrates that naming is political. Different words do not simply describe the same procedure neutrally. They determine whether it appears as violence, tradition, virtue, injury, or moral preparation.

Elhillo responds through counter-repetition. Cultural discourse repeats the vocabulary of purification; the poem repeatedly says "clitoris." The direct anatomical term competes with the euphemism for control over the body's meaning.Cixous's call for women to write themselves and reclaim their bodies through language helps illuminate this strategy (880). Female anatomy enters literary discourse through a woman's deliberate refusal of linguistic prohibition. Elhillo's bodily writing nevertheless remains culturally and linguistically situated: her speaker negotiates Arabic, English, diaspora, family, and intergenerational memory. Female anatomy enters literary discourse through a woman's deliberate refusal of linguistic prohibition. However, Elhillo's bodily writing remains culturally and linguistically situated. Her speaker negotiates Arabic, English, diaspora, family, and intergenerational memory.

The repeated phrase "I will begin" also deserves attention. Beginning appears difficult because the speaker does not possess a complete account of what happened to the women in her family. Each proposed beginning encounters correction, silence, or uncertainty.The poem uses "False" to interrupt assumptions about cousins, mothers, and grandmothers. The word resembles the correction of a research hypothesis. The title "Infibulation Study" gives the poem the form of an inquiry whose data have been concealed.

Repetition therefore reveals both persistence and incompleteness. The speaker continues to ask even when she cannot reconstruct a complete female bodily history.The intergenerational dimension appears in questions about mothers and grandmothers. "We are never to ask" identifies silence as an inherited rule. Women share a bodily history while being prevented from knowing its details.Repeating "clitoris" becomes an archival act. It reopens questions about what happened, which terms justified it, who made decisions, and how bodily experience was transmitted or concealed.

The speaker distinguishes her own position through another recurring construction: "I was born & allowed / to mature uncut. I was born with a clitoris & remain uncut. I was born / unnamed & upon arrival was given my orders" (13–15). "I was born" initially suggests openness and possibility. Each repetition is followed by a social qualification: she was "allowed" to remain uncut, was named, and was "given" orders.

The passive verbs expose authority located outside the child. Remaining uncut is described not as an unquestioned bodily right but as something permitted by others. The girl's identity enters a system of regulation from birth.The repetition of "I was born" consequently does not celebrate a purely natural self-existing outside culture. It stages the encounter between bodily existence and social authority.

Gynocriticism clarifies the poem's corporeal-linguistic agency. Women become the investigators, sources, interlocutors, and producers of terminology through which female bodily experience is interpreted. The poem refuses to leave anatomical meaning entirely within inherited patriarchal or euphemistic discourse. Postmodern feminism reveals how "purified" participates in the construction of an acceptable gendered body. Purity is not an objective physical state. It is a moral classification attached to the body through repeated cultural language.

Elhillo's anatomical repetition therefore produces a different feminist agency from Shire's refrain. Shire repeats language to preserve absent persons and accumulated loss. Elhillo repeats language to break a prohibition and recover bodily knowledge. Her agency is corporeal and linguistic: the woman assumes authority over the words through which her body and female genealogy become knowable.

Koleka Putuma: Interrogative Repetition and Queer Counter-Memory

Putuma's "No Easter Sunday for Queers" employs repetition through questions, biblical images, pronouns, documentary forms, and direct address. Its recurrence has a pronounced spoken-word cadence and transforms personal uncertainty into public interrogation.

Putuma's integration of personal memory, political history, performance, and unconventional textual

forms has received considerable critical attention. Brusselaers observes that the non-lyric elements of *Collective Amnesia* allow Putuma to question established systems of knowledge and literary authority (86–89). Guarducci likewise connects Putuma's poetry and performances with a process of unlearning inherited colonial, racial, patriarchal, and heteronormative assumptions (155–59). Mpiti identifies racial discrimination, homophobia, femicide, spirituality, and historical injustice among the collection's major concerns (2–4). The present analysis builds upon these perspectives by concentrating specifically on how interrogative repetition produces queer feminist agency in "No Easter Sunday for Queers."

The poem examines Black queer female identity within Christianity, family, Cape Town's divided geography, and the threat of homophobic violence. Religious language is not simply rejected. It is repeated, appropriated, and redirected.The poem's recurring biblical images include the cross, crucifixion, Calvary, tomb, stone, gospel, Jesus, Easter, Judas, Pharisees, and the Holy Ghost. These images conventionally sustain Christian narratives of salvation and sacred memory. Putuma makes them answerable to queer suffering.

The central question asks why there is "no Easter Sunday for queer bodies" when lesbians are "crucified like Christ" (134-35). The comparison recurs because the social contradiction remains unresolved. Christianity annually commemorates Christ's bodily suffering while queer women subjected to violence may remain unnamed or unrecorded. Repetition performs a counter-liturgical function. Easter returns every year through religious ritual; Putuma makes queer crucifixion returns through poetic language. Her recurrence creates an alternative ritual of remembrance.The poem's questions concerning the Holy Ghost provide one form of this interrogative agency:

> I wonder if the Holy Ghost would still come upon us if praise and worship were at the Sugar hut this morning
>
> I wonder if the Holy Ghost is picky about the bodies he comes upon
>
> I wonder about the Holy Ghost's sexuality
>
> I wonder why the Holy Ghost comes upon people without their consent. (144-147)

The anaphoric "I wonder" establishes an accumulating rhythm. Each question extends the previous one and places sacred language under ethical scrutiny.The speaker asks whether divine presence discriminates among bodies, whether queer spaces can become sites of worship, whether the Spirit possesses sexuality, and how religious language addresses consent. The questions expose contradictions between institutional sexual regulation and sacred narratives of bodily possession.

"I wonder" may initially sound tentative, but repetition transforms tentativeness into pressure. The speaker's uncertainty becomes a method of interrogating doctrines presented as certain.The questions do not seek simple factual answers. They demonstrate that religious authority has failed to account for queer female experience. Repetition turns that failure into a public spectacle.

The poem's most personal pattern develops through the repeated address "Daddy" and the questions posed to the speaker's pastor-father:

> Daddy,
>
> If I were crucified
>
> And dumped in a tomb for three days
>
> And rose again as a headline
>
> Would you preach about me?(178–82)

"Daddy" identifies the addressee as both intimate parent and representative of religious authority. Its recurrence repeatedly brings institutional Christianity into the father-daughter relationship."Would you" reverses the normal direction of moral questioning. The pastor ordinarily interprets scripture, sin, acceptable sexuality, and religious belonging. The queer daughter now requires him to account for the consequences of those interpretations.

She asks whether he would preach about her, blame her sexuality for the murder, condemn the perpetrators, identify himself with Judas, or remain silent. Each question restricts the possibility of an easy answer. Repetition creates accountability. The father cannot respond to only one question while ignoring the pattern. "Would you preach about me?" returns because the poem's central concern is not only death but remembrance.The phrase "rose again as a headline" connects biblical resurrection with documentary visibility. The murdered lesbian returns briefly as news, but a headline cannot provide the sustained cultural memory produced by an annual religious ritual.

Putuma's poem responds by becoming a counter-archive. It records headlines, deaths, locations, questions, and religious contradictions that dominant institutions may fail to preserve. The recurring crucifixion imagery brings queer women into a sacred narrative from which they have been excluded. The murdered lesbian becomes a feminised Christ figure, while the dump site becomes a contemporary Calvary.

Postmodern feminism illuminates the destabilisation of sacred and social categories. Christ and lesbian, saviour and sinner, sacred and profane, daughter and queer subject occupy the same figurative field. The poem reveals that their assumed opposition is maintained through institutional interpretation rather than inherent incompatibility.

Gynocriticism foregrounds the queer daughter as a producer of religious and literary meaning. She does not accept the position of an object interpreted by her pastor-father. Through recurring questions, she becomes a counter-preacher. Putuma's repetition therefore produces interrogative and counter-archival agency. Unlike Shire's mournful refrain or Elhillo's anatomical naming, Putuma repeats in order to confront authority and build a public memorial practice. Her questions convert religious discourse into evidence against the institutions that exclude queer bodies.

Amaka Azuike: "I Exist" and Recognitional Agency

Azuike's "Invisible" employs the most direct repetition among the four poems. Its speaker repeatedly declares, "I exist," and intensifies the assertion through "I insist that I exist."The apparent simplicity of the statement contains a significant paradox. Existence is normally a condition requiring no verbal defense. The speaker's need to repeat it indicates that social recognition has failed.The poem begins: "That's me! / But wait for a minute I exist!" (1-2), the exclamations create urgency. "That's me!" identifies a visible subject, while "I exist!" confronts the observer's failure to acknowledge her.The speaker continues:

I exist in the shadows of dark desolate places,

I exist beneath drab trees, shedding their leaves

in joyful celebration of expected ones.

I exist within dreary, old buildings

earmarked for demolition. (3-7)

Each repetition locates the speaker within another devalued environment. Shadows, drab trees, and buildings marked for destruction remain materially present but socially neglected.The repeated "I exist" creates continuity across these spaces. Society may treat the woman as marginal or disposable, but her voice links each location to a stable claim of presence.The poem later declares:

I insist that I exist!

I exist in the delicate contours of a woman

Nursing a broken heart.

I exist in the lacuna of untold stories

And unfulfilled dreams. (8-12)

"Insist" transforms repetition into conscious resistance. The speaker no longer merely states a fact; she confronts the conditions that make its assertion necessary. The phrase "lacuna of untold stories" connects social invisibility to literary and historical representation. A lacuna is a gap in a text or record. Women exist within the spaces produced when their experiences are not narrated. By repeatedly speaking, the poem begins to fill that gap. The woman becomes both the subject of omission and the producer of a counter-narrative. Azuike's repetition differs formally from Elhillo's anatomical recurrence. Elhillo repeatedly names a prohibited body part to make suppressed knowledge speakable. Azuike repeats the first-person subject itself. Her concern is the recognition of the person who's bodily and emotional presence have been overlooked.

The poem subsequently locates the speaker within Nigerian urban life: "I exist in the crowded bus / Shuttling from Agege to Mushin (16-17).The crowded bus intensifies the paradox of invisibility. The speaker occupies public space among other people, but proximity does not guarantee recognition. She is visible as one passenger while remaining socially unseen."I am right beside you, almost surrounding you" (18) transfers responsibility to the observer. The speaker's presence is not distant or rare. It is pervasive.

The simile of a mountain peak covered by mist clarifies the difference between invisibility and non-existence. The mist conceals the mountain without reducing its magnitude. Similarly, social neglect does not determine the woman's actual value.The poem ends by appealing to conscience and insisting that the woman has "been there from the start." This conclusion gives repetition a historical dimension. Women's presence did not begin when it was finally recognised. It preceded recognition.

Gynocriticism illuminates Azuike's recovery of women's untold stories, emotional experiences, aspirations, and ordinary social participation. The female speaker does not wait for an external observer to validate her. She creates recognition through self-articulation. Postmodern feminism exposes invisibility as a discursive effect rather than a literal condition. The woman becomes "invisible" because social structures classify her labour, suffering, and presence as unimportant. Repetition interrupts that classification.

Azuike's agency is recognitional. Her repeated declaration does not primarily preserve loss, break anatomical silence, or interrogate religious authority. It accumulates presence and makes the ethical failure of social disregard visible.

Four Functions of Repetition

The comparison reveals that the four poets use repetition to produce different modes of feminist agency: "Shire: "is not mine". The repeated phrase records dispossession while preserving absent relatives in memory. Its primary function is testimonial and memorial. Elhillo: "clitoris." The recurring anatomical word confronts cultural euphemism and makes prohibited bodily knowledge speakable. Its primary function is corporeal and linguistic.

Putuma: "I wonder," "Would you" and "Daddy". The recurring questions and apostrophic address subject Christianity and paternal authority to queer feminist scrutiny. Their primary function is interrogative and counter-archival. Azuike: "I exist." The repeated declaration accumulates social presence and resists the erasure of women's emotional experience, labour, and historical participation. Its primary function is recognitional.These distinctions do not confine each poet to a single aesthetic or political mode. Shire's repetition can also affirm life; Elhillo's can preserve memory; Putuma's can express mourning; and Azuike's can challenge authority. The categories identify the dominant function of recurrence within the selected poems.

The comparison demonstrates why stylistic analysis must proceed beyond labelling. To state that all four poets employ repetition reveals only a superficial similarity. Their recurrences differ in grammatical form, tone, object, audience, and political purpose. Shire's refrain is grammatically negative: "not mine." It repeatedly acknowledges the removal of possession. Elhillo's repetition centres a noun: the anatomical object that euphemistic culture refuses to name. Putuma's recurrence is principally interrogative and vocative. "I wonder," "Would you," and "Daddy" creates questions and identifies the authority expected to answer them. Azuike's repetition is declarative. "I exist" makes an affirmative claim about the speaking subject.

The grammatical differences correspond to different relations of power. Shire's women cannot prevent loss but can record it. Elhillo's speaker confronts a linguistic prohibition by saying the forbidden word. Putuma's queer daughter reverses religious authority by asking the questions. Azuike's invisible woman responds to social disregard by repeatedly asserting herself. Repetition also constructs different audiences. Shire's collective "we" speaks among women who share experiences of loss while addressing readers who must witness their mourning. Elhillo's speaker calls cousins and reconstructs a female intergenerational conversation. Putuma addresses her pastor-father, Christianity, and a public performance audience. Azuike directly confronts the socially inattentive "you."

The four poems thus transform repetition into relational practice. Recurrence joins speaker, subject, community, and audience within a structure of memory or accountability.

Repetition, Gynocriticism, and Women's Production of Knowledge

Gynocriticism is valuable to the comparison because the selected poems do not merely represent women as objects of social experience. Their female speakers produce interpretations of loss, bodily regulation, religious exclusion, and invisibility. Shire transforms women's mourning into knowledge about the intimate consequences of conflict. The kitchen table and the act of counting become sites of social analysis.

Elhillo transforms female anatomy and intergenerational silence into a field of inquiry. Women call one another, ask questions, test assumptions, and create a vocabulary resistant to euphemism. Putuma transforms queer female experience into religious and political criticism. The daughter interprets crucifixion, resurrection, the Holy Ghost, and pastoral responsibility from the position of a body excluded by heteronormative Christianity. Azuike transforms ordinary female presence into an ethical demand. The invisible woman identifies social neglect and makes her experience the basis of a politics of recognition.

Repetition supports each act of knowledge production. It establishes patterns that dominant discourse might dismiss as isolated incidents. One departure could be interpreted as personal misfortune; repeated losses reveal a social condition. One use of an anatomical word could be dismissed as provocation; repeated naming establishes a counter-language. One question could be avoided; sustained questioning reveals institutional failure. One declaration of existence could be ignored; recurrence makes disregard ethically conspicuous.

Gynocriticism also helps explain why the poems locate knowledge in bodies, domestic spaces, relationships, emotions, and oral patterns. These locations have often been treated as secondary to official political or historical discourse. The poets show that they are among the principal sites through which power is experienced.

The female body remembers violence, the kitchen table records conflict, the queer daughter produces theology, and the crowded bus becomes a location of feminist recognition. Repetition gives these forms of knowledge duration and authority.

Postmodern Feminism, Difference, and Counter-Repetition

Postmodern feminism prevents the comparison from turning "African women" into a homogeneous category. The four poets occupy different cultural, national, diasporic, religious, and sexual positions. Their repetition responds to different structures of power. Shire's collective mourning emerges from conflict, migration, racialisation, and unstable family belonging. Elhillo's bodily language is shaped by Sudanese inheritance, Arabic euphemism, diaspora, and unequal relationships to genital cutting. Putuma's questions arise from Black queer life, Christianity, apartheid geography, and violence against lesbians in South Africa. Azuike's declarations emerge from ordinary Nigerian experiences of social neglect and unrecognised female presence.

The recurrence of repetition across the corpus should not be used to erase these differences. Formal similarity becomes critically valuable precisely because it enables the comparison of different functions. Postmodern feminism also illuminates counter-repetition. Gendered and sexual norms acquire authority through recurrence. Women are repeatedly told that they are too emotional, that respectable bodies must be purified or concealed, that queer desire is sinful, or that women's labour is natural and therefore unremarkable.

The poets respond by repeating differently. Shire turns the repeated production of loss into testimony. Elhillo replaces repeated euphemism with repeated anatomical directness. Putuma redirects recurring Christian rituals towards queer memory. Azuike answers habitual social neglect with habitual self-assertion.Their poetry demonstrates that recurrence is not necessarily conservative. A repeated form can expose, vary, parody, or resist the norm from which it emerges.

Repetition as Memory, Voice, and Agency

The selected poems establish a close relationship between repetition, memory, voice, and agency. Shire repeats because loss continues to return. Elhillo repeats because bodily knowledge has been suppressed. Putuma repeats because religious and social authorities have not answered. Azuike repeats because women remain unrecognised. In each case, recurrence responds to an unresolved condition. The poems cannot end the conflict, reverse bodily violence, resurrect murdered women, or guarantee recognition. Repetition registers persistence while refusing silence.

This refusal should not be mistaken for an uncomplicated triumph. Shire's absent men remain absent. Elhillo cannot reconstruct every mother's or grandmother's bodily history. Putuma's queer gods remain in their tombs. Azuike's need to insist upon existence reveals that recognition is still incomplete. Agency therefore does not mean total liberation from constraint. It means the capacity to interpret, testify, question, name, remember, and address others within conditions the speaker has not fully chosen.

The four poems demonstrate that formal agency may take several shapes. It may mourn rather than celebrate, repeat uncertainty rather than provide answers, or insist upon a fact that society continues to deny. Feminist agency is not restricted to confident declarations of independence. Repetition makes such qualified agency audible. It allows voice to return even when the structure of power remains unresolved.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of "What We Own," "Infibulation Study," "No Easter Sunday for Queers," and "Invisible" demonstrates that repetition has no fixed ideological function. Its feminist significance emerges from the relationship between recurring language and the experience it constructs.

Shire's refrain "is not mine" transforms familial dispossession into collective testimony. It acknowledges that conflict, imprisonment, death, illness, addiction, and abandonment have removed intimate relationships while preserving those relationships in women's memory. Elhillo's repeated "clitoris" confronts the euphemistic vocabulary that transforms cutting into purification. Recurrence makes female anatomy speakable and converts women's questioning into a form of bodily and intergenerational knowledge. Putuma's repeated "I wonder," "Would you," and "Daddy" turns religious uncertainty into sustained queer interrogation. Biblical recurrence becomes counter-liturgical remembrance for murdered lesbians excluded from Christian narratives of resurrection.Azuike's "I exist" accumulates presence against the social invisibility of women's bodies, emotional lives, labour, aspirations, and participation. Repetition becomes a recognitional demand addressed to the reader's conscience.

These four functions—testimonial, corporeal-linguistic, interrogative-counter-archival, and recognitional—demonstrate the formal diversity of contemporary African feminist poetry. What unites the poets is not a uniform style or universal account of womanhood. It is their transformation of recurring language into a means of confronting structures that produce loss, silence, exclusion, and erasure.

Gynocriticism clarifies how the poets make women's bodily, domestic, sexual, emotional, and social experiences sources of literary knowledge. Postmodern

feminism preserves the cultural and ideological differences among those experiences while explaining how repeated norms may be contested through altered repetition.

The paper's broader implication is methodological. Stylistic analysis should not conclude when it identifies a device. It must explain what the device accomplishes, for whom, against which form of power, and within what cultural and textual circumstances. Repetition preserves what has been lost in Shire, names what has been forbidden in Elhillo, questions what has been sanctified in Putuma, and affirms what has been overlooked in Azuike. Through these different operations, recurrence becomes not redundancy but feminist action.

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