

★ God of Mercy

Okezie Nw ka

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In Okezie Nw ka's dazzling and disquieting novel *God of Mercy*, battles between gods reignite a war between religions.

Ijeoma, a mute girl in Ichulu, can fly. The dibia, a religious figure of the village, understands this to be the work of the supreme Chekwu, who's in a schism with an earth goddess, Ani. And Ijeoma's parents view her gift differently, and respond to their child accordingly. Still, the divided village is unsure of whether to revere or castigate Ijeoma for her special ability. When a neighboring, Christian-colonized town learns about Ijeoma's "witch" powers, they imprison her, forcing her to convert; they hope to exorcise the demons who they think possess her.

Through its large cast, the novel explores deep bonds of love, family, and community. It is modeled like a religious tome, with song lyrics, sermons, and prayers, though it's also interspersed with diary entries detailing Ijeoma's time in confinement. She struggles to understand the vicious, dangerous world, with its instances of torture, human trafficking, and illicit activities. As she grows from a child to a nineteen-year-old woman, she becomes more confident, finding power in her imprisoned position.

An academic overview of the Igbo religion in Ichulu is used to challenge larger social questions—as of tradition's place in a village, or about self-actualization despite adversity. Built with robust descriptions, Igboland is a vibrant landscape replete with a nightmarish evil forest, comforting compounds, and the serene Idemili river. Once the lens shifts to Amalike, the folkloric prose, which is written as if translated from Igbo, shifts to a Western style that coincides with Ijeoma's learning of English and forced Bible study.

Rife with magical realism and full of promise, the novel *God of Mercy* undertakes a scrupulous review of the destructive power of colonialism through an imprisoned, gifted girl.

GEORGE HAJJAR (November / December 2021)

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