

Esther's Political Intervention as a Paradigm for Women Socio-Political Activism in Nigeria

ASUKWO Edet Oko, PhD
Department of Religious & Cultural Studies

Akwa Ibom State University
asukwooko@aksu.edu.ng

ETIEMANA Warrie Benjamin
Samuel Bill Theological College
Abak
Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria
edymabenshalom@yahoo.com

ANIEFIOK Effiong Umanah
College of Science and Technology, Ikot Nkim
Anumanah2019@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the biblical figure Esther as a paradigmatic symbol for contemporary women's socio-political activism in Nigeria. Drawing from the narrative in the Book of Esther, the study highlights Esther's strategic intervention in the political affairs of her time, emphasizing courage, diplomacy, and advocacy for her people. It argues that Esther's actions present a powerful model for Nigerian women who seek to engage meaningfully in governance, advocacy, and community leadership. Despite structural and cultural barriers, Nigerian women continue to assert influence in various spheres, and the Esther model offers both inspiration and a framework for intentional, value-driven activism. Through a socio-theological and feminist lens, the paper examines how Esther's narrative can inform a culturally resonant yet progressive approach to political participation by women in Nigeria, advocating for a reinvigoration of female agency in the pursuit of justice, representation, and nation-building.

Key words: Political intervention, paradigms, Women, Socio-Political, Activism

Introduction

The story of Esther is one biblical example of women activism in the social and political destiny of the Jewish people. The survival of Jews in exile to a large extent depended on the wise and timeous intervention of Queen Esther. While this may be contested in scholarly discourses, Esther's timely political intervention in averting Haman's genocidal crusade qualifies her as a Jewish

matriarch. The noble strides of women amidst competing and restraining factors play significant role in global affairs. According to Olanrewaju (2015:45), women are indispensable personalities in economic, social, and political revolutions, human capital development, organizing committees in family, the street, artistic creations and in multiples ways of struggle side by side with men.

The eminent status accorded this story in a patriarchal social order like Israel shows that the history of Israel cannot be sincerely told without citing the sacrifices of some eminent women. It is an account of YHWH, men and women collaborating in different ways at different times. This trilateral representation places God as the Transcendent yet Ever-Present One of Israel, who carried on his covenant campaign throughout all generations through men and women acting as agents of providence to further his plans and purpose. On this assertion, Esther stands tall amongst Jewish women in the history of the Jews. The book Esther which is set in the Persian capital of Susa belongs to the third section of the Judaic Canon called 'The Writings'. During this time, the first remnant of Jews who had returned to Judah were struggling to reestablish temple worship according to the Law of Moses. But Esther and Mordecai, along with many other Jews, had chosen not to make the trek back to Judah. They seemed content to stay in Susa, the capital of Persia, in which the story is set.

The role of women in socio-political activism in Nigeria has historically been both significant and underappreciated. While Nigerian women have contributed immensely to the nation's political and social development, from pre-colonial times to the present, their efforts have often been marginalized or erased from dominant narratives. The marginalization of women in Africa predates colonialism; while colonialism may have worsened gender disparities or reshaped them, traditional African societies already exhibited forms of patriarchal control, male dominance, and gender-based exclusion. Many pre-colonial African societies were patriarchal, with leadership and decision-making roles largely dominated by men. Women's roles were often confined to the domestic sphere, and their access to land, inheritance, and political power was limited (Amadiume, 1987:89). Women had roles such as queen mothers or priestesses in some cultures, but these were exceptional and often symbolic. In many cases, women were politically marginalized and denied direct authority.

Chazan (1989: 23) argues that colonial administrations empowered male elders and chiefs, thus suppressing the traditional roles women had in some systems—but this suppression acted upon a pre-existing male-dominant structure. In the search for empowering models of female leadership and engagement, the biblical character Esther emerges as a compelling paradigm. Her intervention in the political crisis faced by her people in ancient Persia exemplifies courage, strategic thinking, and moral responsibility—qualities that are essential for effective socio-political activism.

Esther's narrative, as presented in the Hebrew Bible, offers a profound story of a woman who, despite occupying a seemingly subordinate position in a patriarchal society, rose to challenge power structures and advocate for the welfare of her people. This paper proposes that Esther's political intervention serves not only as a spiritual or moral lesson but also as a practical and symbolic framework for contemporary Nigerian women engaging in socio-political activism. By analyzing Esther's actions through socio-theological and feminist lenses, this paper aims to bridge ancient wisdom with modern realities, offering a contextually relevant model for female leadership and activism.

In the Nigerian context, where women face significant socio-cultural and institutional barriers to political participation, Esther's story can serve as a motivational and strategic blueprint. Nigerian women have historically participated in protest movements, governance, and grassroots mobilization—from the Aba Women's Riots of 1929, EndSARS as well as recent protests in River State as a result of the suspension of Governor Sim Fubara, his Deputy and advocacy for gender equity. However, systemic inequalities and patriarchal norms continue to hinder their full inclusion in decision-making processes. This paper seeks to underscore the relevance of Esther's intervention as a metaphor and model for mobilizing, empowering, and positioning women as transformative agents in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. The study will be structured in the following sections: a contextual analysis of Esther's political intervention; an overview of the history and current state of women's activism in Nigeria; a comparative framework connecting Esther's narrative with Nigerian examples; and a concluding discussion on how the Esther paradigm can inform policy, education, and advocacy strategies for enhanced female participation in

governance and social change. In doing so, this paper advocates for a reinvigorated approach to female agency, rooted in both cultural familiarity and forward-looking activism.

Contextual Analysis of Esther's Political Intervention

The Book of Esther, set in the Persian Empire during the reign of King Xerxes (Ahasuerus), presents a unique narrative in which a Jewish woman rises from obscurity to occupy a position of influence within a foreign royal court. Esther's political intervention is situated within a patriarchal and hierarchical context where women, particularly those from marginalized ethnic groups, had little formal power. Despite this, Esther maneuvers through the constraints of her environment with remarkable tact and strategic insight. Her approach to power was not confrontational but rather calculated and adaptive, demonstrating a deep understanding of court politics, timing, and the importance of advocacy through influence. It is on the basis of this fact that "women capacities for cooperative action were a large part of the reason for identifying them as the backbone of rural development" (Davidson, Ekanem and Oko, 2024:187).

Esther's decision to intercede on behalf of the Jewish people was both courageous and politically astute. Initially reluctant, she is persuaded by her cousin Mordecai that her royal position is not incidental but providential. Her famous declaration, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16), underscores her resolve and willingness to assume personal risk for the collective good. Esther's preparation for her intervention—including fasting, garnering support, and carefully choosing the moment to present her case to the king—reflects deliberate planning and diplomacy. She skillfully navigates her dual identity as both queen and Jew, and leverages her proximity to power to reverse a genocidal decree, showcasing political agency grounded in moral responsibility.

This contextual analysis reveals Esther as more than a passive beauty queen; she is a political actor operating within constrained circumstances to effect meaningful change. Her story exemplifies the possibility of subverting oppressive systems from within and offers a nuanced template for marginalized individuals, particularly women, to assert influence. In applying this framework

to the Nigerian context, Esther's actions encourage women to adopt bold yet strategic approaches to leadership and advocacy, especially in male-dominated political landscapes. Her intervention provides an ancient yet enduring model of how marginalized voices can be amplified through intelligence, preparation, and purposeful engagement with power structures.

In Nigeria, with reference to key historical movements, milestones, and figures who have shaped women's roles in political and social advocacy. This includes the Aba Women's Riots of 1929, led by Igbo women protesting colonial taxation (Ohaeri and Oko, 2021:164); the role of women in Nigeria's independence struggle; and the contemporary activism seen in movements like Bring Back Our Girls, the #EndSARS protests, and the sustained campaigns for gender equity and political representation spearheaded by organizations such as Women in Politics Forum (WIPF) and the Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTF).

Political Activism

Activism is the practice of taking direct and deliberate action to support or oppose a cause, usually aimed at promoting social, political, environmental, or economic change. It is a process of campaigning in public or working for an organization in order to bring about political or social change while Olshanskyi (as cited in Mykyta (2015) sees political activism as political groups or individual activity, connected with the formation and expression of own demands and interests with the ambition to change political, social and economic system and appropriate institutions. Activism includes coordinated efforts to promote, impede, direct or intervene in social, political, economic or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society toward a perceived greater good. Forms of activism range from mandate building in the community (including writing letters to newspapers) petitioning elected officials, running or contributing to a political campaign, preferential patronage (or boycott) of businesses, and demonstrative forms of activism like rallies, street marches, strikes, sit-ins, or hunger strikes

It is important to note that political activism is not a disruptive sequence of activities by a few hired dissenting voices, but carefully coordinated engagements to bring about desired change(s). Against this backdrop of

conceptual understanding, this study seeks to identify Esther's political activism, the change achieved and necessity for emulation.

Canonization and Historicity of the Book

The secular character of the Book Esther- mainly because the divine name is not mentioned made its admission into the biblical canon highly questionable for both Jews and Christians. Pfeiffer (1941:747) notes that the book of Esther should not be understood as coming from the pen of a religious cynic who no longer believes in divine intervention in human affairs and thus makes no demands on God and expects that God makes none on him. It has been argued also that the author intended to show how human intellect relationships can solve complex problems apart from divine help. Later in this discussion, this study shall argue that the *hiddenness* of God does not imply his *aloofness* in the narrative.

Perhaps a more serious query is about the historical accuracy of the book of Esther. For instance, Barton (2007) notes that:

The apparent historical difficulties, the internal inconsistencies, the pronounced symmetry of themes and events, the plenitude of quoted dialogue, and the gross exaggeration in reporting of numbers (involving time, money, and people) all point to Esther as a work of fiction, its vivid characters (except for Xerxes) being the product of the author's creative imagination.

Similarly, there are sources who reveal Esther should be seen as a historical novella intended to explain the origin of Purim. Coogan (2009:396) avers that considerable historical inaccuracies remain throughout the text, supporting the view that the book of Esther is to be read as a historical novella which tells a story that describes historical events which should not be taken as historical facts. But Reuter (2020: n.p) referring to the work of Herodotus notes that apart from the author's familiarity with Persian customs and life in the court, the author shows familiarity with chronological details that coincide with the events of the day, as well as the correct name of Persian names and the allusion to the extent of Xerxes' empire. He affirms that it is on the basis established above 'that the strongest evidence for an accurate historicity of Esther can be maintained and... the author invites the reader to determine his truthfulness through outside sources such as the Book of Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia' (Reuter, 2020). In all, the book has become one of "the best known

of all the Books of the Bible" to the Jewish people, due in large measure to the perception of its three main characters as "clearly drawn heroine, hero and villain."(Goldman, 1980:193) The message of the book continues to be interpreted as pointing to God's providential intervention on behalf of his people through the faith and courage of Esther and Mordecai. So, Goldman Joyce G. Baldwin concludes that the crisis in the Persian Empire "was averted through the bravery of Esther, the wisdom of her stepfather and the unity of the Jewish people" (Ronald, 1992:78).

Esther in scholarship

An excellent example of **growing feminist scholarship** that has increased interest in the **Book of Esther** is the work of **Adele Berlin** and **Carol Meyers**, among others, who approach the text from feminist and gender-critical perspectives. It is no longer a book read religiously to celebrate God's mysterious providence in making a queen out of an alien orphan or the arch-enemy of the Jews dying on his own gallows. No, it has become a literature to identify, evaluate and judge matters of chauvinism and female sexual subjugation. In fact, focus is shifted from the theological themes therein to the feminist representations of the patriarchy and the characterizations of Vashti and Esther. Little wonder why scholars have subjected the book of Esther to a myriad of divergent analyses. To some readers, Esther is a national heroine with paradigmatic grace; to some, she is one mean, compromising, opportunistic, passive and devious character in the whole narrative. To establish the fact that Esther qualifies (in all fairness) for a paradigm in socio-political activism, it is necessary to review the two positions of conformity and defiance to patriarchal conventions.

Conformity Interpretation

Lewis Paton expresses this hostility: "Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place in the herd of maidens who become concubines of the King. She wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty." This judgment is most often championed by feminists. One feminist scholar recognizes Esther's courage but faults her for not being a feminist **is Judith Plaskow**. Plaskow acknowledges Esther's bravery in approaching King Ahasuerus without being summoned—an act that risked her

life and ultimately saved her people. However, Plaskow criticizes Esther for **not challenging the patriarchal structures** of the Persian court or **advocating for women's rights**. She sees Esther's actions as operating within a male-dominated system rather than resisting or transforming it. Plaskow argues that while Esther's actions are heroic, they fall short of a feminist model that seeks to disrupt systemic gender inequality.

Esther's character is also full of compliance with patriarchy. It is only through her traditional role as a wife (not as a political office holder) that Esther brought about the political redemption of the Jews. The fact that Esther does not transcend expected family roles but rather finds ways to adapt to the limitations placed on her and to use them to her advantage suggests to some that Esther re-inscribes traditional patriarchal values (Lewis, 1988:96).

Fuchs describes Esther to be "pretty, obedient, silver-tongued, and somewhat manipulative"; in contrast to "the willful Persian wife" Vashti. Through her adherence to patriarchal norms, Esther ultimately reinforces the status quo. For Fuchs (1999:82), "Ruth and Esther personify the reinstitution of patriarchal order. Only by reenacting the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal system as wives and mothers can women become national heroines". The book of Esther both reflects and reinforces patriarchy, portraying the male fantasy of a female heroine: Esther enacts victory for her people while conforming perfectly to male expectations of women.

Similarly, Mary Gendler prefers Vashti to Esther as a model woman with a harsh critique of Esther's characterization in the story. To her, 'In most ways she sounds like an ideal woman—beautiful, pious, obedient, and courageous which researchers find objectionable. Esther is certainly the prototype—and perhaps even a stereotype—of the ideal Jewish woman, an ideal which we find restrictive and repressive (Gendler, 1976:242). Fuchs and Gendler believe that the story of Vashti serves as a cautionary tale. The woman who defies patriarchy will not succeed; the woman who conforms to it is upheld as an exemplary woman.

Bea Wyler also evaluates Esther in terms of her conformity to patriarchy but recognizes that Esther is doubly disadvantaged because she is a Jew in a foreign empire as well as a woman. Esther ultimately succeeded in the liberation of the Jewish people, but not in the liberation of women....Her emancipation is one-

sided and thus incomplete. She has no influence to bring to bear on this state of affairs for herself or for other women, due to her blindness about her situation as a woman; at the single moment when power is concentrated in her feminine hand (8.1), she hands it all over to Mordecai (8.2) (Wyler, 1995:132). For Fuchs, Gendler and Wyler, Esther is lacking as a model for female liberation, for Esther chooses national freedom over freedom for women. In this vein, Crawford tends to be far more sympathetic in her assessment when she argued that Esther serves as a role model for diasporic living and she is "the epitome of a cooperative courtier," a character who achieves success by working "within the system."(White, 1989:162). Esther's strategy should be seen as effective for her context but recognizing that it doesn't embody modern feminist ideals.

Defiance View

Conversely, some scholars have viewed Esther as a political actor who takes an active role. Thus, they have found her to be exceptional, viewing her as noteworthy because she is so different from the portrayal of other biblical women. According to this view, she stands out as a paradigm of an exceptional woman who, against all odds, defies gender stereotypes by playing a role in public affairs. One reason for this view of her is tied directly to her portrayal in the biblical text as a woman who is politically effective through the persuasiveness of her words: Esther 7:3–4 records Queen Esther's speech to King Ahasuerus in which she pleads for her own life and the life of her people.

For instance, Costas (1988:67) finds the book of Esther to represent a significant challenge to the societal norms. He states:

The story of Esther offers a paradigm of liberating theological reflection. Its central episode represents a radical questioning of the status quo. It does not accept a negative event as fate or an accident of history. Rather, it identifies it as a wicked historical deed and challenges it in the name of justice. It sees history as open to change for the better because it is led by a providential and liberating God who stands behind the powerless and oppressed

The nachronistic to even expect Esther to act *the feminist* and misleading to think of Vashti as a representation of patriarchal resistance by a single act of disobedience. She was deposed and had no means whatsoever of fighting the decree that ousted and barred her *forever*. If Esther's marriage is alliance with

patriarchy and gender expectations, it was a good one. If Esther did not exercise any kind of public authority but worked within the privacy of home, it still brought needed results. Who should be more celebrated? Haman who held a high administrative position, a citizen, but had his plans thwarted or a lady with no political identity who leveraged on her relationship to instigate great political activism? The fact that she dared to meet the king against the law stresses a radical questioning of the status quo, and a subversion of societal norms and expectations. For Esther, Jewish lives mattered, so 'If I perish (like Vashti) I perish (4:16). It took conformity on one hand and defiance on the other hand to build the story to its climax.

Esther: The Role Model

The view that Esther is a paradigm has not gone unchallenged. Beal suggests that Esther highlights the complex problems of identity politics, rather than offering a straightforward model to emulate. For him, Esther is not a projection of a particular image but rather "the *aggregation* of many identity convergences, shifting alignments, ambivalences, and margin locations (Beal, 1997:9). Beyond the views of submission and defiance to male domination, Esther is still to some a victim of patriarchal system, putting forth her best effort while limited by societal constraints. She has been hailed as noble, criticized as an emblem of women's subjugation, and held up as victim of sexual parade to be pitied rather than scorned. Merton's Role Model Theory refers to an individual whose behaviour is a particular role provides a pattern or model upon which another individual basis his behaviour in performing the same role. The role model provides a standard used by the other person in determining the appropriate attitudes and actions of an occupant of the role (Merton, 1957).

Esther did not need any political parade across the streets of Susa nor was it necessary to seize power from King Xerxes and clench to same just to satisfy die-hard today's feminists who feel strength lies *always* in open insubordination and public resentment. Imagine that one day Esther stomps into the inner court and issues a series of bold, non-negotiable demands, calls for the death of the second most powerful man in the empire, demands immediate restoration of Vashti and the equality of all women in the realm. This fragile nature has proved her "taking domineering influence on many occasions in history of mankind"

(Davidson, Ekanem and Oko, 2024:184). May be later in the day, she steps out and gathers all the women in Susa with placards and chanting anti-patriarchal songs. Would the king have found it entertaining?

Esther had the initial qualifications

After unseating Queen Vashti (a role model for feminists), King Xerxes needed a replacement and 2vs2 spells out the criteria for who becomes the next queen. Such nominees must be beautiful, young and virgin. Beauty, age and sexual innocence may not make sense to the modern reader and especially to feminist writers who may see such qualifications as satisfying male sexual appetite. Lewis points out that Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place in the herd of maidens who become concubines of the King. She wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty (Lewis, 1988:96). Who needs beauty, age and sexual innocence to be relevant today? Can those replace education, intelligence and skills required to run the 21st century world?

Demeaning the attributes that qualified Esther to be taken based on modern metrics is faulty and unkindly misrepresentative. Readers need to consider the time, culture and extant values. Call it patriarchy or sexism, or anything, those were the social expectations of that time, and they served as the credentials for the vacant office. Esther got them all (2:7). Or would anyone deny that beauty, youthfulness and virginity were highly prized among the Jews and Persians? However, occasion will present itself where Esther must draw upon her previously untested and unexpected intellectual powers and courage. Whereas beauty, youthfulness and virginity may not be popular credentials today, female youths and women in men's world need to understand extant requirements and adjust according to the direction of social changes. The 21st century operates in an entirely different milieu, where knowledge, skills, brainpower, courage, hard work, creativity, expertise, etc., replaces beauty, youthfulness and virginity. Female relevance today is not so much in beauty and youthfulness that dwindle with time, nor with sexual pureness (though treasured by some), but with beautiful undertakings, youthful energy translated into meaningful endeavors and inventive and virgin ideas that will better the present civilization. Esther had something that qualified her; Nigerian women must have something that

qualifies them as determined by current market situations. There are opportunities in the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of the country. In the academia and in private sectors, there are platforms for political activism aimed at social good. If women need a voice beyond the decided percentage allocated to them in Nigeria for instance, they must intentionally boost their mental, socio-political, economic and even religious capacities, because some offices of influence need some criteria. Note that Esther already possessed the qualifications prior to the public call for the screening. Getting set for opportunities that may never come is wisdom, being unprepared for an opportunity is imprudent.

Esther was still closer to the Grassroot

Esther was an orphan raised by his older cousin Mordecai (2:7). It is evident Mordecai played a significant role in her journey to queendom. Those who accuse Esther of being heartless to the plight of her fellow woman (Vashti) and as being desperate (to the point of not revealing her Jewish identity) need to note that there was a command and decree that young women be gathered at Susa and decrees have to be obeyed (2:8). It is doubtful that Mordecai himself pushed her cousin (raised as his daughter) into what people call sex contest which he was not sure of the outcome. He had to check up on her daily, for he was anxious of her safety and survival (2:11). However, Esther, after the specified beauty preparations and all that became queen (2:17) still obeying her older and admittedly wiser cousin even as a queen (2:20).

When the plot to annihilate the Jews came up in chapter 4, the queen was accessible enough to hear and empathetic enough to be disturbed by it – for it is possible to hear and not bothered at all. Nehemiah was also in the citadel of Susa and in the service of King Artaxerxes. His advantaged station did not stop him from identifying with the plight of the remnants in Jerusalem. The story of Nehemiah thereafter records how he used his privileges to set in motion socio-religious changes in Jerusalem (Neh.1-2:1-10).

The success of Esther as a socio-political activist depended on her accessibility and empathy with her people. It would have been possible to be

immanent yet transcendent –present yet distant by virtue of her advantaged position. She literally kept the communication line open. It is a regular experience amongst most politicians in Nigeria that during elections, they are at home with the common man - free and accessible to the electorates. Soon after elections, these politicians relocate to their utopias and literally cut off links with the electorates. As someone remarked, 'A friend who ventures into politics is a friend lost'. Friendship ties are severed and difference in class creates a chasm. But the late Lucky Dube advised, 'Be good to the people on your way up the ladder, because you will see them on your way down'. Why would Esther be troubled about the safety of other Jews who did not even vote her into office? Yes there was an initial reluctance to act. Her willingness to identify with her people was constrained by extant palace laws which she was aware of. But she needed to be reminded that she may have 'come to the kingdom for a time as this (Esther 4:14). When women become influential, it is wise to still maintain necessary ties with their dependent masses.

Strategic Preparation before Undertaking a Task

Going by Benjamin Franklin's maxim, 'By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail' is a factual, it is safe to assert that with the right preparation great feats can be achieved. Preparation gets one organized to do the actual work. Great leaders like Esther know how to use their strength to better prepare themselves for proactive and efficient problem solving. Political activism is not a project to be hurried into by any nonentity. Public affairs need ample knowledge of the situation, *modus loquendi* and *operandi* and people skills.

The secular nature of the book of Esther comes from not recording divine intervention in the whole narrative. Such a line of reasoning has led many scholars to reject the canonical and theological values of the book. However, in Esther 4:15-17, there is an allusion to seeking divine help in fasting for three days and nights. Three days of aloneness and abstinence must have been a moment of self-analysis, organization and practice. The eventual success is a direct dividend of that special moment. Or what was this act of self-denial for, and to whom, if not to the known God of the Jews? (Refer to the same situation in Nehemiah 1:4 – *When I heard these things* (the pitiable situation of Jerusalem), *I sat down and wept. For days I mourned and fasted and prayed*

before the God of heaven). This is the same God of the Jews that Esther and Mordecai sought before she dared to defy a law of life and death. Indeed, this was the best preparation Esther needed before she undertook the impossible mission of her life. Her knowledge about the peculiarities of Persian procedures and proper way to act within that system is paradigmatic.

As a paradigm, Esther teaches women the value of preparation and strategic planning. It could mean excavating relevant historical documents, setting records straight, gathering facts and figures, getting firsthand information and admissible evidence as well as proper consultations and mobilization. It could require studying the processes and procedures of raising motions, sponsoring bills, market surveys, opinions sampling, personal observations, building human resources, writing petitions and applications, lobbying, grassroot sensitization, etc. as may be required by the situation. Call it spiritual preparation or something better, Queen Esther is a pattern of a woman who takes her time to plan and prepare before she launches her political activism within the system.

Esther Exhibited Maturity and Diplomacy in Presentation

Carey Moore, in his 1979 commentary on Esther, stated in his introduction that Mordecai "supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions. This position be accepted in part but cannot be sustained all through this narrative. Esther grew in the system and became independent in her reasoning. That Esther was raised by his older cousin, cared for and advised by a eunuch for a year, and then married to the most powerful king in the empire does not mean she was incapable of acting independently. As a woman in such androcentric space, there was nothing wrong in accepting superior political reasoning and lobbying from her sagacious cousin or caretaker. Moreover, when need arose, Esther 'instructed' Mordecai regarding what he should do before meeting the king. What is especially interesting about this part of the story is that Mordecai followed Esther's orders accurately (4v. 17).

Shemaryahu Talmon draws an obvious relationship between the book of Esther and Wisdom literature. In his analysis, Esther is an example of "applied wisdom," demonstrating by example that the path of wisdom is the one that leads to success. Esther then is someone who achieves' proverbial success' (of Proverbs 3, 4) in that she eventually out shone Mordecai and outsmarted the

adversary Haman in the art of crafty planning and successful execution (Schemaryahu, 1963:49). For Green, Esther's manipulation of gaining king's interest is a form of maintaining attention from the king to use to her advantage (Alexander, 2011:78). ... Her strategic ways is implemented in the series of banquet that she made as a way to solve the issue of annihilation. With Moderate language and expression, she won her case with ease. Esther's speaking ability is very eloquent and thoughtful. The sense of balance is depicted in her way to tactful expression as she conveys her concerns. While some writers hold that her courage failed in her first banquet and she needed to try again. Fox (2022) explains thus:

The best explanation for Esther delaying her real request until the second banquet is that she is unfolding a premeditated strategy, and doing so with careful thought and deftness. In the second banquet, in chapter 7, she builds up to the accusation with great care: softening her speech with deferential courtesies and demurrs that play to the king's ego, piquing his suspense, eliciting a promise to fulfill her wish (whatever it may be), withholding information that could put the king on the defensive (by making him face his own culpability), delaying other information (the identity of the offender) until she has given full momentum to the king's anger.

That Esther subdues Haman's acrimony through tactical schemes, rhetoric, manipulation, and ostensive flexibility is a proof of socio-political growth. Esther's speech to the king as "masterful on the grounds that she has used her own relationship to the king as leverage: "She is pleading for her own life but also implying, without being so tactless as to say it directly, that the king is about to lose the person dearest to him and most intimate with him."

Esther as Source of Empowerment for the Jews

As noted earlier, beauty and sexual innocence were the needed diplomas before one could be 'taken' to the palace for further beauty enhancement. Feminist writers who determinedly hold that Esther became queen through beauty and sex contest insist the portrayal fits all her manipulative activities throughout the narrative. This position explains that out of all the women in the harem the king chose Esther as his favourite based on her performance in bed (Sarojini, 2002:126). Moore avers the role that Esther occupies is passive. She is

the wife of the king, not a woman who wields political power herself (Carey, 1971:18).

When it is claimed that Esther was compelled by her situation to use her body, looks and sex charm to manipulate the King, it begs the question if Esther was just a palace prostitute or a crowned queen with valid rights to use whatever legitimate means at her disposal to win her husband's heart. And did the king not have free access to her sexuality as his wife? It is duplicitous to condemn Esther for being manipulative with her beauty and sexual charisma. Esther must have had other great capabilities *ab initio* though the counselors chose to focus on external particulars of beauty, youthfulness and sexual innocence. Although Michael Fox views Mordecai as the more exemplary character, he notes that it is Esther alone whom the author portrays as dynamic. For him, 'The distinctive feature in the portrayal of Esther is change. Esther alone undergoes growth and surprises the reader by unpredictable developments'. Accordingly, Esther went through a three-part growth process namely, from passivity to activity, from activity to authority. Esther's process of growth, as well as the absence of miracles in the story, places the emphasis in the narrative on "human resources—intellectual as well as spiritual—even of people not naturally leaders. Esther's days of **passivity** could be from her days in the house of Mordecai to when she was 'taken' to the king's palace, into the care of Hegai, down to Esther 2:20. She became **active** from the moment she accepted to confront Haman's genocidal threat, issued instructions to Mordecai to organize a fast. Her moment of **authority** becomes prominent from the narrative in Esther.8.

Whereas feminist writers do not doubt Esther's influence from early passivity, they are disappointed that Esther did nothing to create power equality and escape the confines of patriarchy or demolish gender norms within the empire. Wyler (2020:132) asserts that:

Queen Esther remains bound to the decrees of men, written in the script and language of her own husband the king (1.22). She has no influence to bring to bear on this state of affairs for herself or for other women, due to her blindness about her situation as a woman; at the single moment when power is concentrated in her feminine hand (8.1), she hands it all over to Mordecai (8.2).

Haman's properties were handed over to Queen Esther who immediately transferred control of it to Mordecai (8:1-2). Contrary to the position of Wyler above, this little incident somehow reversed roles in Esther- Mordecai relationship and raises Esther's status. Esther becomes the source and agent of wealth and empowerment for Mordecai (who himself had earlier saved the life of the king - 2:21-23). By the empowerment of one, the Jews in every city were empowered to gather together and protect their lives, and annihilate all forces of any people that would assault them (Esther 8:7-11). She was content with exercising authority from the inside, and delegating same to another whom she found worthy of such duties, especially to Mordecai who sought the good of his people and spoke peace to all his countrymen (10:3).

As a paradigm for women today, Esther grew from the passivity as a wife to authority such that she could make decree (Esther 9:32). The issue is not to what extent Esther used her influence to fight Gender imbalance or defend feminist ideologies, the issue is that she used her resources (human and mental) to avert major crisis in the land of Susa, empowered her people and influenced policies designed to better the lot of the people. Our women are trying to be a great to an extend to display their talents in public offices which they are dependable and acceptable as well as "do or die affair" (Sibani and Oko, 2013:38). Socio-political intervention programmes must touch the lives of the people – the real people in their slums and ghettos, not restricted to the Mordecais in our cities. For Costas (1988:67) who saw the value of Esther in Theology of Liberation, avows that:

The story of Esther offers a paradigm of liberating theological reflection. Its central episode represents a radical questioning of the status quo. It does not accept a negative event as fate or an accident of history. Rather, it identifies it as a wicked historical deed and challenges it in the name of justice. It sees history as open to change for the better because it is led by a providential and liberating God who stands behind the powerless and oppressed.

This emphasizes Esther's story as a model of **liberating theological reflection**, where injustice is confronted and history is seen as open to transformation through divine providence. This perspective creates a logical bridge to a **Comparative Framework Connecting Esther's Narrative with**

Nigerian examples, as both contexts reveal how oppressed individuals or communities—empowered by faith and strategic action—challenge injustice and seek societal transformation.

Comparative Framework Connecting Esther's Narrative with Nigerian Examples

Esther's story resonates deeply with various instances of Nigerian women's socio-political activism, forming a bridge between biblical inspiration and real-life advocacy. Like Esther, many Nigerian women have had to operate within male-dominated systems while tactfully navigating socio-cultural constraints. A striking parallel can be drawn with women leaders during the Aba Women's Riots of 1929, who, though excluded from colonial governance, organized protests that disrupted colonial administrative processes and led to reforms (Ohaeri and Oko, 2021:163). These women, like Esther, leveraged collective action and strategic planning to confront oppressive systems. Similarly, Esther's diplomatic approach and her use of positional influence can be compared to the political and advocacy efforts of modern Nigerian female leaders such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Obiageli Ezekwesili, Senator Natasha Uduanga and Aisha Yesufu. These women have used their platforms to champion social justice, economic reform, and human rights, mirroring Esther's resolve to speak truth to power despite potential risks.

Grassroots movements like Bring Back Our Girls and #EndSARS have also featured Nigerian women playing leading roles, mobilizing national and international attention to demand accountability and reform. These movements reflect Esther's ability to galvanize her community and appeal to authority for collective survival. The underlying themes of courage, strategic intervention, advocacy, and community mobilization evident in Esther's narrative find modern expression in these Nigerian examples, illustrating the timeless relevance of her model for women's activism. By drawing these comparisons, this framework highlights the shared strategies, values, and aspirations that link Esther's ancient intervention with contemporary Nigerian activism. It affirms that despite differing historical and cultural contexts, the essence of effective female leadership—rooted in courage, wisdom, and commitment to justice—remains consistent and transformative. Nigerian women are considered as critical

partners in social and political development of Nigeria. Nigeria's history is replete with sufficient evidence of women's active role in development. For decades women have manifested their ingenuity by organizing themselves into various groups to pursue issues bothering on women's welfare. For example,

- Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was a political activist, teacher, political campaigner and founder of Nigerian Women's union. She encouraged women to drive just like their men counterparts.
- Margaret Ekpo was a political activist who helped women insert themselves into the government of the first republic.
- Sandra Aguebor is credited with empowering sexually abused and underprivileged women with her non-profit organization.
- Women History in Nigeria recalls with pride all the women that participated in the Aba women Riot and what it brought about. Accentuating the valiant role of Ikwuano women's in their gallant protest to claim their right against household taxation by the British colonial rule through the warrant chiefs. This historical examination shows that the 1929 so called "Aba women Riot" was an Igbo women's traditional demonstration that allow women to express disapproval of any policy that infringes their human right at all that time (Ohaeri and Oko, 2021)

Apart from women who acted outside the sphere of marriage, first ladyship in Nigeria clearly replicates the situation of Esther. Ojo traces the origin of first ladyship to the United States of America in 1849 when President Zachary Taylor called Dolley Madison "First Lady". It has become a popular label used all over the world today to designate the wife of President or Head of State. In Nigeria, apart from using it to designate the president's wife, it is also used for wives of governors and those of Local Government Chairmen (Ogo, 2013:23). Whereas the constitution does not recognize the office of the first lady in any tier of government, the office still functions nonetheless, with wives of Presidents and State Governors initiating philanthropic programmes commonly referred to as "State Pet Projects". Olufisoye notes that the first ladyship office system started during the General Ibrahim Babangida's military administration, when his wife, Late Maryam Babangida officially launched her pet project; "Better Life Programme for Rural Women" on September 18th 1987 (Olufisoye,

2022). Becoming a first lady is almost synonymous with pet projects focused on issues concerning children, youth and women. Specific programmes target widowhood, orphanage, disabilities, and child/girl education, empowerment and health campaigns, vocational skills acquisition, political empowerment, social welfare and social justice for women.

In Akwa Ibom state, every first lady is accredited with a pet project right from military era to the present democratic dispensation, namely:

	First Lady	Pet project	Year
1	Mrs. Tunde Ogbeha	Played a key role in mobilizing, recognizing and giving full recognition to the activities of rural women.	1987
2	First Lady Obonganwan Imo Isemin –initiated	Uforo Community Bank, Door-Step Health Programme, Uforo Farms, Nka Uforo Iban Investment Limited.	1992
3	Mrs. Aisha Yakubu Bako –	Promoted social welfare services for motherless babies including worm infestation.	1995
4	Dr. (Mrs.) Iyabode Adewusi	Promoted maternal and child health services, immunization services, Agro-processing and cooperative societies.	1997
5	Mrs. Patience Abbe	Established micro enterprises.	1998
6	Nenyin Halison Attah	Initiated Child Development Trust (CDI).	2005
7	Mrs. Ekaette Unoma Akpabio	Family Life Enhancement Programme (FLEI) Focus: Development of families as the primary unit for achieving the	2007

		Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Beneficiaries of FLEI are girls, women, persons with disabilities, children, widows and the poorest of the poor.	
8	Dr. (Mrs.) Martha Udom	<p>Family Empowerment and Youth Re-orientation Path Initiative (FEYReP).</p> <p>Focus:</p> <p>Sexual health and family planning, shelter to the homeless (Shelter of Hope), fight against child abandonment, Multi-Purpose Cooperative Society Soft Loans for Women, promotion of moral values and provision of support to government effort towards sustainable development</p>	2015

Ndaeyo and Tolabi in separate findings have reported that 'First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State have canvassed for their women to be given opportunities to contribute to the development of the nation and this has yielded results through the high proportion of women in political offices in the present government'. Again, 'First Ladies in Akwa Ibom State have contributed tremendously to women political empowerment through ensuring that more women are appointed into political offices' (Nkpoyen, Mbat and Eteng, 2015:36). Like Queen Esther, First ladies use the influence of their office (government machineries) and partnership with donor agencies to access funds to implement developmental projects and achieve set goals. Across the 36 states, pet projects focus on empowerment for political participation and socio economic wellbeing, empowerment programme on health care services, Social welfare services for

women, Promotion of cooperative societies, welfare of the vulnerable, youth and the girl child.

Apart from the apparent poor coordination of the pet projects of First Ladies in Nigeria, there is the greater problem of discontinuation of these projects upon leaving the office. At the expiration of tenure, new faces walk into the government house and initiate entirely new programmes which may be counterproductive, resulting in abandonments of previous projects and confusion. Aside fund raising, an instance of state government illegally funding the office of the first lady was reported in 2017 that the Muritala Nyako-led Adamawa State government released N41.5 million for the offices of his four first ladies (Emeka, 2017).

This also proves that those pet projects are sponsored by the government and expire as soon as the government comes to an end. Genuine interest to help, to contribute and empowerment should be sustained in programmes that outlast tenured public offices. With access to donor agencies and credible managers, pet projects can be sustained and built upon by successive first ladies. As a paradigm, Esther need to lobby and empower Mordecai not with clothes and gold accessories, but with an office of responsibility, for there might arise another Xerxes who knew not Esther and all she represented.

Conclusion

In spite of very negative assessment of Esther, some scholars have viewed Esther as a political actor who takes an active role. According to this view, she stands out as a paradigm of an exceptional woman who, against all odds, defies gender stereotypes by playing a role in public affairs. One reason for this view of her is tied directly to her portrayal in the biblical text as a woman who is politically effective through the persuasiveness of her words: Esther 7:3–4 records Queen Esther's speech to King Ahasuerus in which she pleads for her own life and the life of her people (Hancock, 2015). Again, as Esther's life example has never been more pertinent or applicable for the people of God than it is in this moment in time. Her people are spared, empowered and respected in the end. It took courageous woman as well as behaved wife, a strategist, a diplomatic communicator and empathetic representative to defeat Haman, rescind his horrible decree, empower Mordechai and preserve the dignity of her

people- the Jews. The story of Esther teaches that every opportunity calls forth responsibility, every influence reminds us of commitments and every office invite expectations and who knows if we are where we are for a time like this. A leader should take responsibility for his action as well as those of his subjects not minding the situation. This concept of responsibility is universal and is found throughout the human history which is prominent in the thinking of every tribe, village or nation that has ever existed. Responsibility is pervasive, all-encompassing aspect of our lives (Oko, 2017:53)

Recommendations: The paper recommends as followings:

1. It is highly recommended that women should prepare themselves in advance for opportunities and platforms of influence. Such preparation include but not limited to mental, social, physical, economic, intellectual, and even spiritual preparation.
2. When women assume position of power and influence, it is not a platform for personal aggrandizement, grandiose, showmanship, or creating new enemies. It is a privilege to pursue social good. Leaving behind a glowing legacy. No one lasts eternally in power.
3. Like Esther, it is ideal to sustain communication, maintain useful relationships and allow access to those we represent.
4. Women in power should understand that not every social problem require distribution of food and cloths. A change of clothing for Mordecai would have solved the problem of just one person (Esther 4:1-4). Some social problems require active political intercession and lobbying for deep and lasting impact. This is how Esther saved all the Jews not just Mordecai.
5. Where it is possible to have direct access to the masses, their credible representative like Mordecai would suffice.
6. One Esther can do a lot, many Esther can achieve much more. If women from various backgrounds come together to achieve set goals, the only known resistance would be themselves not men.
7. There is wisdom in investing in other women and empowering others for the unknown future while we have resource- human and material.
8. Female celebrities and female religious leaders in Nigeria rather than engage in useless media fight and competitions should use their fame

and wide following to influence public policies and government actions in an effort to restoring the dignity and enhancing female relevance in all sectors.

References

Alexander, G. (2011). Power, deception and comedy: *The Politics of Exile in the Book of Esther*. Jerusalem center for Public Affairs.Vol.23, No.1/2.

Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books.

Barton, J.& Muddiman, J. (2007). *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. NewYork: Oxford University Press.

Beal, T. (1997).*Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther*. London: Routledge.

Coogan, M. D. (2009). *A brief introduction to the Old Testament: the Hebrew Bible in context* New York: Oxford University Press.

Costas, O.E. (1988). "The Subversiveness of Faith: Esther as a Paradigm for Liberating Theology," *Ecumenical Review* 40.

Chazan, N. (1989) "African Women in Politics" (Focus on the South). Ibadan: NP Press.

Drozd, M. (2015). Political Activism: Concept, Factors and Forms in *European Political and Law Discourse*. Volume 2, issue 4, Mechnikov National University, Ukraine.

Davidson, A. D; Ekanem, J.B; & Oko, A. E.(2024). *ESCAE Journal of Management and Security Studies* (EJMSS). Vol. 4 (2): 184-194.

Esther' in [insight.org/resources/bible/the-historical books/Esther](https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/bible/the-historical-books/esther). Retrieved February 22, 2024.

Fox, M. V. (2022). The Women in Esther - TheTorah.com.html. Published February 24, 2015| Last Updated February 16, 2022

Fuchs, E. (1999). "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach. New York: Routledge.

Gendler, M. (1976) "The Restoration of Vashti," in *The Jewish Woman*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun. New York: Schocken.

Goldman, S. (1980). "Esther," *The Five Megilloth* . ed. A. Cohen; London: Soncino.

Hancock, R. (2015). *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation: Public and Private Spaces and the Royal Figure of the Female Royal Counselor*. Fortress Press.

Moore, C. A. (1971). *Esther*, Anchor Bible 7B. New York: Doubleday.

Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Nkpoyen, F; Margaret, D. M. & Bassey, G. E. (2015). Empowerment Programmes and Socio Economic Wellbeing of Rural Women: A Study of "First Ladies" Projects in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria in *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 20, Issue 7, Ver. V (July 2015), PP 35-44 e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845. www.iosrjournals.org.*

Olanrewaju, D. (2015) Challenging the role of religion on women development in Nigeria using Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach in women In *Development, Essays In Memory Of Prof Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde*. eds. S. Ademola and J. Kehinde Ayantayo. John archers: Ibadan.

Olufisoye, A. (2022). Office of the first lady: Sustaining pet projects thereafter edited by Muzha Kucha. Radio Nigeria.<https://radionigeria.gov.ng/2022/01/07/office-of-the-first-lady-sustaining-pet-projects-thereafter/>

Ohaeri, N.N. & Oko, A. E. (2021). Ikwuano Women in 1929 Women's Protest: A Recipe from Women War in Accient Israel (Judges 4:4-24) *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 22 (2): 164-187.

Oko, A. E. (2017). Leadership Responsibility, Justice and Integrity in Public Life: A Panacea for Sustainable National Development. *Contemporary Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Vol. 3 (2): 83-93.

Lewis, P. B. (1908). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, International Critical Commentary Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Pierce, R. W. (1992) "The Politics of Esther and Mordecai: Courage or Compromise?" *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 2.

Political Activism. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activism>. Retrieved February 22, 2025.

Reuter,J. (2022). *The Book of Esther: its Canonization, Historicity, and Relevance*, <https://owlcation.com/humanities>. Feb. 27, 2020

Sibani, C. M. & Oko, A.E.(2013). Politics of Gender and Power in Nigeria: The Christian Analysis. *JOTRAC Journal of Theology, Religious and Cultural Studies*. Vol.1 (28-44).

Shemaryahu, T. (1963). 'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13.

Weekly Trust, September 22, 2017 (see also Sunday Trust, July 26, 2009. 'Petting first ladies with billions of Naira'.)

White, S. A. (1989). "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed). Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress.

Wyler, B. (1995) "The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.