

Reflections on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s ‘Snail-Sense Feminism’: A humanist perspective

Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto

Abstract

Snail-Sense Feminism is one of the Afro-centric feminist models that target the eradication of male domination and female subjugation in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. Among other contentions, this African indigenous model espouses that women should adopt snail-like patience and efficiency in negotiating their ways around and over “boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains” (Adimora-Ezeigbo 27) littered along their ways when dealing with men in the very hash patriarchal environment which they find themselves in. This study examined the feasibility of achieving fair and humanistic living for women if this model is adopted for the achievement of freedom from men’s domination and subjugation of women in Nigeria. It also examined the socio-political experiences of the time of our foremothers who Adimora-Ezeigbo claims were successful in the application of this model in their interactions with their communities. We further compared this exposition with the experiences of the contemporary woman. In a bid to explore the humanistic angle of this theory, some research questions were raised as guides to this work. The study concentrated on the Igbo cultural zone of Nigeria where the propounder of the Snail-Sense Feminism theory comes from. Reflections for this work are guided by the humanist theory.

Key words: *Snail-Sense Feminism, Afro-centric feminism models, Humanist theory*

Freedom and progress are not born from silence... only by making their voices heard, advocating their causes and expressing their opinions can women become full participants in society. (Hillary Clinton in Dorothy Etuk 296)

Introduction

Since the inception of the struggle for gender parity in Nigeria, many feminists have emerged. Their agitation came in various forms. Some were in literary (Prose) through which literary artists like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Promise Okekwe, Tessy Atta, Chika Unigwe, Unoma Azua, Eno Obong, Chimamanda Adichie, and others project the nasty experiences women go through in the patriarchal Nigerian society. Some academics also join in the struggle and through scholarly papers of various degrees, they lend their voices to the struggle. Yet others chose the part of theory propounding to enunciate their thoughts and ideas that would engender emancipation for Nigerian women from gender-based injustices.

As many as the Nigerian models of feminist theories may be, they share some principles in common which deviate, ideologically, from the Western models that are notably “combative” (Obioma Nnaemeka in Ezeigbo 13). Most of the Nigerian indigenous feminist theories intend “to articulate their own cultural and ideological agenda” (Adimora-Ezeigbo 25). They adopt the ideologies of compatibility and negotiation as the

acceptable approach to achieving their goals. The indigenous Nigerian theories include ‘Womanism’ (Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Modupe Kolawole), ‘Stiwanism’ (Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie), ‘Motherism’ (Catherine Acholonu), ‘Femalism’ (Chioma Opara), ‘Nego-feminism’ (Obioma Nnaemeka), and ‘Snail-Sense Feminism’ (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo). This paper, however, dwells on some peculiar ideologies which identify Snail-Sense feminism.

Snail-Sense feminism is a reaction and an additive to the preceding feminist theories. It hinges its principle on compatibility and negotiation like some of the other feminist theorists while adopting the metaphor of the snail as a model for achieving emancipation for Nigerian women. The theory recognises the oppressive conditions women have to deal with the Nigerian society; the difficult conditions which it aptly describes as “boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains...”(27). It strongly advocates that women should adopt a snail-like way of “conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men” as they negotiate their way through these very difficult conditions littered with harsh objects in the manner a snail crawls over the very harsh conditions or rough terrains:

... smoothly and efficiently with a well lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects. Moreover, the snail carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe (27).

The theory further alleges that “this is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria’s harsh patriarchal culture” (27) and that our fore-mothers adopted this approach and lived well in their society.

Reflections on the nature of snail in relation to women emancipation

Discourses on feminism, from different spheres of life in Nigeria have always been about freedom, about equity, about justice and about dignity for all persons, male and female inclusive. It is about being real human beings in a real world. The theory of Snail-Sense feminism is another attempt at humanising Nigerian women and providing them with another avenue of achieving freedom by adopting the nature of the snail behaviour handling difficulties and obstacles in its environment. This study ponders at the appropriateness, and the feasibility of such an approach leading to the desired emancipation for women. The feasibility and the outcome of the unending use of the ‘lubricated tongue’ in uprooting the deeply entrenched socio-cultural ‘boulders’, ‘thorns’, ‘craggs’ and ‘harsh terrains’ littered on the ways of the contemporary Nigerian woman becomes a question begging for answers. For how long would women continue to carry the weight of the socio-cultural hindrances they experience daily and expect to make some notable marks in life? What assurances are there that the men would let go of the age-long patriarchal structures if women continue to withdraw into their ‘shells’ when dangers loom in the face of these obstructions?

The sluggish nature of the snail renders it incapable of acting timely to conditions that are life-threatening. It lacks any sense of time as it crawls slowly to its destination leaving its track uncovered to predators. Its instinctive retraction into its fragile

shell which it carries along naturally slows it down, exposes it to more danger and portrays it as a coward intimidated by the environment in which it lives. Thus, instead of frontally facing its problems and solving them, would rather retract and hide into a shell that gives it minimal protection from its environment. Ironically therefore, it hides in its shell while waiting and hoping for a fair weather that hardly comes. Indeed, the snail may get crushed to death while hiding in its shell that barely provides it with the desired protection from hostile environment. Should the snail even decide to sneak out of its shell and flee, it still encounters the dreaded dangers. Either way, its existence remains threatened.

Moreover, the slimy nature of the snail suggests vileness and despicability in character. Its loathsomeness makes it unattractive to some who come in contact with it. The snail may exude gentleness and appear harmless to the ordinary eyes, however, it is in actual sense, unsuspectingly destructive and deceptive. The soft and lubricated tongue deceives people from seeing its inherent tendency to destroy vegetables.

While agreeing with Adimora-Ezeigbo on some positive snail attributes that help it to *negotiate* or *dialogue* with its harsh environment such as its sensibility to its environment and individualistic tendency, this paper is of the view that the snail's negative attributes far outweighs the positive side. These numerous negative qualities of it, to a very great extent, inform why many people are hesitant towards its adoption as a suitable metaphor that could inform a workable feminist theory. Adoption of this model would mean that Nigerian women should adopt the characters of snail which would translate to the continuous tolerance and adoption or conciliation with men's inhuman subjugation and domination over them. It means that

women's survival in such a situation, entails negotiating male oppression, subjugation and dominance in such a careful but deceptive manner ensuring that the males would not get hurt in the process. They should continue to go about the demeaning situations without complaint or taking any drastic and positive yielding action. They are expected to gently and in the snail-like manner, move around quietly and unnoticed and be careful not to stir up any controversy around and about themselves. If in the course of that, they encounter any inhibiting, intimidating or life-threatening situation, they should quietly recline inside themselves without speaking up or taking any action to save themselves from the obvious danger. They, rather, should remain in such a retracted and humiliating mode until the situation improves itself, time and effect of the situation on their person, health, progress, in fact, their general being notwithstanding. This, to say the least, is repugnant, demeaning, inhuman and unjust.

The theory should be reconsidered and reconstructed. Reconsideration and reconstruction of the theory have become necessary because it completely contradicts and departs drastically from the fundamental stand points of humanism. Feminism, as a socio-political and ideological movement however, targets a total eradication of male dominance and female subjugation including all manners of stereotyping, not playing 'hide and peep' as the snail does. Feminism also targets at enthroning gender-neutral language.

This paper stands on the Igbo philosophy of "*agbaghi uzo owere mgba, o dighi echi*" if drastic measures are not taken to close up a back house track, it will never close. That does not call for throwing of missiles or planting explosives or land mines by the person whose back house was turned to a public walk way. It

also does not entail hiding inside one's room bemoaning the situation and expecting the intruders to retrace their steps. It rather requires carefully constructed systematic measures that will make the intruders see, first-hand, the damages they are causing. It requires asserting constructive, active and positive result-yielding approaches. "*Ile oma*", politeness, should be part of it, especially, at the initial stage. If the problem persists, one may adopt a polite imbued assertion accompanied with decisive actions. In the same manner, difficult obstacles such as boulders, rocks, crags and harsh terrains are never handled by an application of "lubricated tongue". They are uprooted and smoothed with very strong equipment that can effectively handle the situation. Generally speaking, running away from problems does not yield positive results neither does continuous carrying of heavy burdens as symbolised by the snail carrying its house just like the ant, *danda*, and pretending that all is well does not solve any problem. It rather complicates matters. Women should rather learn to speak out and assert themselves, otherwise men are not ready to willingly relinquish the benefits of patriarchy which they have, for ages, been enjoying and systematically reserved for their gender alone.

Asserting themselves entails creating a "destiny of their own" (Dorothy Etuk 295) by systematically and consistently insisting on total freedom from male subjugation which should be geared towards recreating the false images of them created by men. Women should reject the aspect of culture that socialises the female as a weaker gender who should remain passive when important issues, even those that concern their lives are discussed. To this point, Emecheta insists that "acceptance of passivity as a woman's nature is a lie" (Etuk 295). Etuk further points out that "even though a woman's nature is complicated, she must escape,

liberate herself, shape her own future and deny the myths that continue to confine her” (295). This she cannot achieve by running back into her ‘shell’.

Most indigenous theories of feminism advocate complementarity of the genders which is good in itself. However, the concept works well when Nigerian men’s perception of the females becomes that equal partners whose full potentials should be recognised, nurtured, explored and harnessed in real terms. Filomena Steady is of the opinion that “African feminism is a humanistic feminism founded upon the principles of traditional African value that views gender role as complementary, parallel, asymmetrical and autonomously linked to the continuity of African Life” (Adimora Ezeigbo 13). This claim of complementarity agitates some minds given that in most cases, especially in contemporary Africa, it is more theoretical than practical. In practical terms, complementarity of the genders should reflect Ike Harris Odimegwu’s explication of it. Odimegwu insists that “in this framework of understanding, power relations will dictate that for me to establish myself, I will establish the other. I will work for the establishment of the other because the destruction of the other will mean the removal of the ground of my being” (113).

This takes us to the Adimora-Ezeigbo’s allusion to our fore-mothers who she states adopted the model of Snail-Sense in their dealings with their society. Our fore-mothers were uneducated in the Western sense, and thus unexposed rural women. Their unquestioned acceptance of the prevalent male domination and subjugation of their women was not surprising. Their socio-cultural setting is far different from that of the conventional women who are more educated and better exposed. Our fore-mothers lived in a completely different world from the

conventional women who cannot be expected to be as passive and as blindly tolerant of male subjugation as their fore-mothers. This calls to mind Helen Chukwuma's assertion that "the rural, back house timid, sub-servient, lack luster woman has been replaced by the modern counterpart, a full rounder human being, rational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own" (13). This means that, if this model of feminist theory worked for our fore-mothers, it cannot work for the present generation of women who may be operating from, though the same ethnic background, but a completely different society. Majority of Igbo women of our fore-mothers' generation lived in a traditional society but the contemporary woman lives in urban, semi urban cities, and in metropolitan cities. Some still live in rural areas but their lives have been modified by influences of technology.

From the humanist perspective, Snail-Sense feminism tends to ignore the ability of humans, this time, women, to "think consciously and rationally, to control their potential and be responsible for their lives and actions and have freedom and will to change their attitudes and behavior" (web) since they must negotiate their harsh conditions, in conciliatory manner, with men and recline into themselves if the men happen to frown at their attempts to assert their freedom as fellow humans.

Conclusion

In all, the effort of this paper is to point out some unacceptable issues relating to the adoption of the Snail-Sense feminism ideology as an effective metaphor in the on-going struggle for women's emancipation and empowerment. It does not mean that Snail-Sense feminism as a theory is completely negative. No. Many of its principles are positive: Adopting the spirit of

doggedness in mounting difficult boulders by the snail is worth emulating. The need for individualism against communal living, especially in the modern “family, in the urban and rural settings” (36) is epitomised by the snail way of living which fosters independence. Given the individualistic tendency of the snail which does not lose sight of other snails living close by in an individualistic manner, Snail-Sense feminism draws strength in its principle of readiness to negotiate and cooperate with others. According to the propounder, “...the strength of Snail-Sense feminism lies in its uniqueness in interrogating existing ideas about sisterhood, female bonding and group consciousness. In the end, it is the individual that constitutes the group” (36)

Nevertheless, this study believes that there could be other metaphors which may or may not also be animals that could adequately portray and capture the ideals of an indigenous feminist model better than the snail. Such metaphor should not depict cowardliness, sluggishness, deceptively destructive or be intimidated by its environment. It should rather be a bold but consistently assertive one that will provide the women with an enabling environment to take charge of everything about their lives in a non-combative and dignifying manner. It should embody the principles of the humanistic theory to consider it an appropriate acceptable model for the feminists’ struggle for women emancipation and empowerment.

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Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto is a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.