

GLOBALIZATION AND EXPANSIVE STRUCTURES OF IDENTITY: THE POWER OF THE SILENCED WOMEN, AGENCY AND CONSCIENTIZATION IN THE IGBO CHURCH

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Abstract:

Igbo women have much to offer on the subject of their autonomy, self-definition, interpersonal relationships, national identity and patterns of change. Understanding the Igbo woman's strength, resilience and power in Nigeria not only offers us a more invigorating, encouraging, aspirational image of the African woman but it also forces us to acknowledge misrepresentations of Igbo women and the importance of replacing anachronistic models of African womanhood. This paper aims at correcting these entrenched accounts by revealing the positive vision of women in the works of Igbo female writers.

Key words: *predominantly, prosecution, collision, dominance.*

Women's independence was fostered by cultural traditions that placed a premium on female assertiveness and collectivity and did not define power as socially deviant. If men usually capitulated and were or seemed politically 'helpless' before the collective strength of women, it is not because they were passive or timid. It was more that they were *accustomed* to women *being* in positions of power and influence and had consequently developed respect for their administrative skill. The indigenous structures of governance publicly validated and reinforced women in ways that normalized their presence in the judicial, economic, and political spheres of life. Thus Igbo men could matter of factly accept the 'sitting on a man' mode of conflict expression together with its graphic imagery of 'being sat on', because *in their communities* women adjudicated cases, established and enforced rules and regulations, worked in concert with *Obi, ndichie, and ezeala* in the administration of the community. Since women's political identity is a fact of life, and in their eyes '*nwanyibuife*' (women are of significance), there could be no shame in acknowledging and abiding by women's regulations.

In Igbo political tradition, representation without sanctionary powers to back it up implied non representation, '*ewe onuokwu*' (not to have a say); its effect was social marginalization. Thus politically marginalized and reclassified as dependents under colonial rule, Igbo women, in the period between 1925 and 1935, incessantly organized protest rallies and picketed the offices and residences of colonial officials to wrest some form of representation.

In 1929 these protest movements culminated in '*Ogu Umunwany'i*' (the Women's War), in which they sought to modify the system to give them some form of representation similar to what they had in precolonial times. Appreciative of some of the benefits of colonialism such as better medical care and transportation networks, and aware of their educational handicap ('our eyes were not opened'), the women did not desire to overthrow the colonial rule as alleged. Specifically, they just wanted to be consulted on the selection of Native Affairs officials, and in the formulation of policies. They wanted the prosecution of all oppressive and corrupt chiefs and court clerks and offered to provide the necessary evidence to convict these officials. To introduce safeguards in the administrative system, they proposed that the post of warrant

chiefs be limited to three years of service, and that women must be consulted in the selection of officers for those posts. Most important of all, they wanted tax exemption for women.

The Women's War, which was fought to protest the imposition of taxation on women, began in Bende division of Owerri province and spread quickly throughout Owerri and Calabar provinces of eastern Nigeria. The 1929 financial crash had impacted negatively on women's produce trade, motivating them to seek assurances from the colonial government that they would not be taxed.¹⁹ Faced with bureaucratic stonewalling, the women resolved not to pay any taxes nor have their properties assessed. So when the Warrant Chief Okugo sent an assessor to compile the figures, NwanyeruwaOjim refused to permit an assessment of her property. An alarm brought other women to the scene who proceeded 'to sit' on Chief Okugo and the assessor, Mark Emeruwa. Messages were sent to women in other villages who, on learning of the crisis, joined the struggle. Although Chief Okugo was deposed to placate the women, the women refused to allow the dethronement to deflect them from their larger objective.

There appears to be a stark polarity of spheres in ethnological findings concerning Igbo¹ men and women. Whereas, men are given to the public spheres, women are given to the private and natural. This distinction determines the way in which the two sexes are *permitted to, enabled by, obligated to or restrained from* the public or the private. The findings motivate the questions: What explains the inequality of *enablement and restraint* occupied by both men and women in such a society? Since it seems intrinsic to womanhood in that society to be more restrained but less permitted, we are motivated to ask these questions: "What does it mean to be a woman and what is the experience of being woman in Igbo land?"

To begin with, some ethnologists have pointed out that biological differences between the sexes do not provide a universal basis for socially defining what it means to be "woman" or "man." They rather suggest that "woman," like its correlate structure, "man," is an empirical category and therefore investigable although in specific contexts of place, time, culture, for according to Moore the "*image, attributes, activities, and appropriate behavior* associated with women are always culturally and historically specific". The last question posed above is geared toward digging up such *images and representations* of women in Igbo land.

In continental critics of institutionalization, in Marxism, Frankfurt school critical theory, phenomenological existentialism, and most importantly in post-structuralism etc., substantial work has been done, offering a critique of institutions where discourses are characterized by an institutionalization of power. Part of this is an intense discrediting of the male-saturated discourses of feminism. Most importantly we also find in these modern theories a deconstruction of the meaning of women. In such cases, such as found in linguistic requirements for institutions, "action theory" and "the phenomenological theory of 'acts' espoused by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead," social agents are said to constitute "social reality through language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign". These claims are substantiated with the claims of feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir who has always held as a central theme the fact that "woman" always carries the burden of a historical meaning through the conventions of an institution, i.e., culture. Her statement "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" shows that what is called gender, with reference to the woman, is just "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanctions and taboos". It can be understood like Merleau-Ponty's reflection in the *Phenomenology of Perception* in which "the body is said to be 'an historical idea' rather than 'a natural species'". In brief, all these mean that the conception of the woman (gender) is a cultural interpretation of the natural fact of her sex (biology). In other words, these institutionally critical philosophical positions say that the term "woman" is a constructed social and cultural reality.

Just as in most postmodern philosophies, especially their variants as found in Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, there is strong aversion to normative positions grounded in privileged ethical claims because for these the normative positions or privileged discourses can fool us into "conventional meanings and

modes of being". For instance, Lyotard defends the "incredulities toward metanarratives". In line with the question of the meaning of women posed above, most poststructuralists will claim that meaning and identity are rooted in language.⁴ This will make all meanings simply provisional and flexible. It is the society that will determine the regimes of meaning and truth by determining what is acceptable and what is not. Since it is discourse that produces the subjects and since it is language that reveals meaning, discourse will involve an analysis of power.

In our analysis of the meaning and experience of being woman in Igbo land, we shall see how via *constitutive rules* and *collective intentionality*, women are *assigned a function*. In this move *linguistic devices* will play an essential role in the construction of the institutional fact of being woman. Though, most of the intuition found in post-structuralism might be confirmed in our analysis (for instance that discourse produces the subjects and that language operates alongside power⁵ and social control), my motivation in this essay is *different*: it proposes that power inequality as evident in the depictions of women and their oppressive subordinating consequences therein are *not consciously intended* by all classes of agents while acting in accordance with normal rules and accepted practice; an aspect that is usually lacking in other accounts of the institutionalization of social realities where dominant discourse, collective intentionality etc., are usually emphasized. Besides it argues for the phenomenological account of passive synthesis as capable of responding to the problem of the origin of power inequality and the status function of *nwunye/nwanyi* (wife/woman).

To achieve this goal, the paper is divided into three main parts: The first part is dedicated to the search for a proper definition/experience of the institutional fact of woman in the specific context of a traditional Igbo society. This part will reveal a structure of power that restrains women (whether married or unmarried) from certain rights and control over their own lives. Far from just being a mere case of exclusion from public life and being bound to their domestic and reproductive roles, our analysis of the experience of being woman in Igbo land will expose how the woman is robbed of an individuality of her own from the patriarchal structures that *depict* her as *a property*, thus building up a culture which "damages, destroys, cripples and hinders one from being a human person". The second part is concerned with the idea of the institutionalization of power inequality because the woman is represented as the man's property which we shall understand as a case of *unintended consequence*. In the last part we shall argue that the *unintended images* of women can be explained by the phenomenological theory of passive synthesis. Note that by unintended, we mean that these images do not come under a conscious reflection in the active sense.

Historically, through socialization, men have been denied the power to experience the category that is seen as predominantly female. The reason is that if they do, they will be displaying a weakness associated with women. In the same way women were denied and discouraged to learn and to experience the category that is ascribed to maleness. This arises from the belief that will destroy their emotional capacity (Belenky 1986:7). This is the reason why women who are not meek and mild, who are well established and excel in what they do, are said to be "like men" or that they do things "as well as men do".

The history that is written is patriarchal in that the absence and presence of the woman within the historical account is dictated by sex, pleasure and care of the family. Marie RamosRosado specifically makes note of the patriarchal history of Puerto Rico stating "la invisibilidad a la que los relatos oficiales [...] han condenado [a la mujer negra] históricamente [es] tanto por negra como por mujer". The reduction of the woman's role within a historical account to a mere addition or mention in the story of the man introduces a "patriarchal literary authority" in what is being represented, told and given importance to (Rushdy, 1999, p. 15). The idea is created that only the man and his historical role are at the foundation of the creation of what Puerto Rico is today. However, overlooking the role and voice of the woman when looking at the history of a country, is the same as not knowing the history of Puerto Rico. Or as Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro stated, "no

conocen la historia de supaís [si] no conocen la historia de su familia”. The absencing of women and their contributions to history is the result of the oppression, subordination and subjectification that they had to suffer through.

The Puerto Rican women had to tolerate “the legacy of colonialism, political intolerance, educational deprivation, economic dependence[,] exploitation[,] racism, the division of classes, patriarchy, and the mythology of subordination implicit in the religious dogma of Catholicism” (Jimenez Wagenheim, 1981, p. 196). The roles of the women were thus filtered and reshaped by the historian to fit the dominating patriarchal perspective. The black women were represented in occasions but “siempre ha sido encarnando papeles sumisos y domesticados, nunca protagónicos y liberadores”⁵ (Ramos Rosado, 2012, p. 185). The identities and roles of women “were socially constructed, refashioned, and politicized by legislated patriarchal power” securing them in an “established gender order” where the men are superior and the women are inferior (McDBeckles, 1999, p. x).

The patriarchal history is prejudiced towards women, silencing and erasing them from history by telling a story of male dominance, superiority and success. Moreover, a historical account that is inherently patriarchal creates patriarchal roots within the foundation of the country that become part of the contemporary society securing the continuation of male chauvinistic tendencies towards women (Courtad IN Hidalgo de Jesús, 2012, p. 111).

High speed and power of the ongoing globalization processes have focused research interest towards positive and negative effects of these on individual psychological functioning. The main aspects of globalization in cultural, political and economic aspects have a significant effect on identity, self-confidence and self-esteem of humans and this has led to the emergence of psychology of globalization.

During the recent decades, intensity of relations between different cultures and different regions of the world has been increasing, due to the rapid development of telecommunications. The increasing economic and financial independence has its impact on the increasing opportunities for mobility and communications amongst different cultures. The development of the global market, the large volumes of production and exports enable the consumption of new, unfamiliar products. The economic aspects of the processes developing on a global scale are characterized by free movement of capital, search for new markets for goods and services, exported manufacturing facilities seeking cheaper labor markets, Collision between local producers and powerful international corporations. The economic processes encourage the development of a new global culture, the basis of it being standards such as consumption, consumer attitudes and ultimate individualism.

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