

The Sense in the Snail Sense Feminism: A Study of Ifeoma Okoye's "A Strange Disease" and "From Wife to Concubine"

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Abstract

Most African societies seem to be culture oriented. Despite Western civilization and influence, the impact of traditional beliefs, myths and religion, according to a significant number of researches, are prevailing. The rights, positions, and experiences of female gender in most African countries have remained a major concern of most scholars, who have in many ways highlighted the hostile nature of some cultural structures as they affect the females in patriarchal societies. The study attempts to lend support to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Snail Sense. Using content analysis approach of qualitative research method and the theory of snail sense feminism, the study examines Ifeoma Okoye's "The Strange Disease" and "From Wife to Concubine" to capture the challenges and adversities of the female characters, to buttress the need for snail sense in patriarchal societies. The findings revealed that based on traditional practices and beliefs, female characters, especially widows, are subjected to marginalization and intimidation. The main characters, in line with Snail Sense feminism, advocate diplomacy and successfully overcome their impediments. Snail sense should be encouraged amongst women as a survival strategy in male dominated societies.

Keywords: Culture, Women, Patriarchy, Snail sense, Feminism.

Introduction

The society customarily assigns matrimonial roles to the women and the more domineering roles of the bread winner and family head to the men. In Africa, some women's duty is just to bear children, tend the home and assist the husband (239). Budua, in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, puts it, women "marry a man, tend a farm and be happy to see her peppers and her onions grow. A woman should bear children, many children, so she can afford to have one or two die" (21).

These roles are assigned by culture and inculcated early. Chidinma Daniel-Inim adds that in a patriarchal system:

The man wields the power and the authority that organizes the social structure. He is the authorizing force behind the social, political, economic and religious decisions in the society. Thus, while the man from childhood is indoctrinated with a superiority complex, the woman is merely treated as inferior to the man while the male child is taught to aspire for great professionalism, the female child is indoctrinated with the idea that she could never survive outside the kitchen. At home, she is made to do most of the household chores while the boy plays ball in the field. Decisions that bother on her happiness are considered only after the boy's comfort. (224)

According to Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe, the dynamics of the relationship between gender and the role, have often been employed as the defining factor for the status of the male and female. One's anatomy ultimately determines one's social status (686). Justina Okoye asserts that gender is a culturally shaped group of attributes and behaviours allotted to male and female beings (6). In African literature, girls are often portrayed as quiet, ladylike, pretty, polite, weak, emotional, and passive. These qualities often translate into roles such as teachers, nurses, clerical officers which reinforce the idea that girls are traditionally responsible for the domestic chores. Emphasis is laid more, for the girls on good behaviour, cleanliness, obedience and hard work which aims at creating harmony in future homes (Apena 282). The female is always reminded of her natural roles as a wife and a mother. These roles saddle her with the responsibilities of producing, nurturing children, and taking care of the home.

Right from childhood, she is constantly reminded of these duties; so that by the time she reaches adulthood, she comes to accept them as her reason for living.

She may be:

denied property rights because she is unfortunate to be born a woman. She is made to observe the levirate tradition if she has the misfortune of losing her husband. She could be made to marry to provide funds for the sustenance of the male siblings in the family and bears the burden of giving birth and 'backing' the child... while fetching water or firewood. Meanwhile, the man can relax at a palm wine joint to await his food. (Chiluwa III)

A woman should perform her traditional roles efficiently; she is expected to love her husband, respect him with all due submission and devotion, whether he loved or ill-treated her. When

children come, part of this devotion would be transferred to their nurture and upbringing. If food is not enough for everyone in the house, she would ensure that others eat while she gladly goes hungry. Women are judged by their physical features rather than by their achievements, ability or skills. A man's appearance could be an advantage, but never a hindrance; the attributes that matter most in judging a man are intelligence, skill and financial standing.

In most patriarchal societies, it is men who control or determine the way women should look. If men prefer fat women in a particular culture, every woman in that culture would aspire to be fat. If thinness is preferred, the mania would swing to thin. In the traditional past, many Nigerian communities preferred their women plump, robust and strong. In some parts of Eastern Nigeria for instance, young women were isolated in "fattening rooms", where they did no work except to eat. At the end of the puberty rites, they become plump, soft skinned, and ready to be married off. It is assumed that in this condition, they will please their husbands and bear numerous children. There has been a change however, in ideas about beauty and femininity, within the last decade. Most men prefer their women slender. Fatness is regarded as a disadvantage probably because of its health problems. Thinness for the females has become fashionable and most women are keen weight-watchers (Adimora-Ezeigbo 8-10).

African traditional society has been conditioned to think of power as male, and that a powerful woman is an aberration. As a result, she is policed. People tend to ask – "Is she humble? Does she smile? Is she grateful enough? Does she have a domestic side?" (Adichie 4).

Some organizations like (FIDA) Federation Internacional De Abogadas (International Federation of Women Lawyers), (GEM) Gender Equality Movement, (NCWS) National Council of Women's Society, (WIN) the Women in Nigeria, and (FOMWAN) the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria under the aegis of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (Ezeigbo 71) aimed to promote equality, development and advancement of all persons especially women in Africa were formed to foster female emancipation and empowerment. This issue also attracts the attention of African female writers who have tried according to Nwankwo "to re-write the women back into positivity after the unwholesome portraiture they received at the hands of the early male writers" (172). These female writers needed to create a space whereby their voices could be heard and their desires made known to the world through their persuasive writing. However, according to Daniel –Inim: "Patriarchy has been a symbol of men's superiority complex over women. Superiority in the sense that, men's words and standards are the accepted societal norms" (224).

Teresa U. Njoku laments that woman's predicament has been manifesting from the lore of patriarchy (195). The effect of patriarchal lordship is silencing the woman, muffling or muting her voice or browbeating her to remain voiceless. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie claims that patriarchy

takes different and complex forms in different societies: it poses a common challenge to women, silencing them (15). Silence, however, represents “the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social organization in which males assume power and create for females an inferior status” (D’Almeida 1). Patriarchy favours men and subjugates women. One does not expect the contrary since according to Teresa U. Njoku, patriarchy is a social system controlled mainly by men. It results in sexism which attributes importance and superiority to the male and inferiority to the female. Men created this system and women have no hand in the management of patriarchal institutions, which results in their being marginalized (207).

The Theory of Snail Sense Feminism

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo formulated her theory in 2012 as a result of an in-depth investigation in the condition of Nigerian women, their reaction and response to socio-cultural and political forces that impacted and still impact on their lives. “Snail sense feminism is more realistic, practical and functional” (Adimora-Ezeigbo 26) than all other theories of feminism, and has undergone some modification involving the principles of shared values which encourage “one to be tolerant, to imbibe the virtues of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance” (Adimora-Ezeigbo 26). It is derived from the habit of snails. The snail crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with a well lubricated tongue that is not harmed by the harsh objects. Women are implored to adopt a conciliatory attitude towards men. The Igbo people say:

Ire ome ka ejula ji aga n’ogwu – meaning “The snail crawls over thorns with a fine and well lubricated tongue”. 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. This is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria’s harsh patriarchal culture. (27)

The snail may not be a strong creature physically and can be crushed easily, yet it mounts fences, climbs up and down rocks, thorny and spiky surface with ease. It does not confront objects but negotiates its way past any obstacle. Women may imitate this wise, sensitive, resilient and determined creature to be able to survive in a society that devalues women. This is because:

No matter how gifted a woman is, no matter her ingenuity and political exploits, she can only be recognized in the society as a good and caring mother. Any other ambitious image a woman portrays outside this stereotype model earns her derogatory names like iron lady, domineering lady, or even the Biblical notorious name –Jezebel. (Nwosu 2)

The women should learn survival strategies to be able to overcome some of the impediments before them. They should not see this as a weakness or cowardice but rather a way of strategizing to complement the man and join forces with him for the benefit of all. Adimora-Ezeigbo suggests that a good education will be an added advantage for women. If a woman is educated, the family in particular and the country in general are educated and empowered. Women cannot be empowered unless they have access to good education.

During the pre-colonial and colonial eras, some of the issues like childlessness, male child preference:

Our ancestors in Igbo land adopted the options of ‘female husband’ and male daughter to ease the pain and get around the ‘problem’ of not having a male child and solve the ‘problem’ of inheritance. In this way they were able to secure the family investment and properties (Adimora- Ezeigbo 31)

In contemporary society, Christianity frowns at such practices and condemns polygamy. Most Islamic feminists equally decry polygamy. What can be done to tackle the situation? Adoption or Vitro-fertilization? How do young working mothers negotiate with their husbands to share the burden of housekeeping and childcare? How does a young wife who is also a mother run her home and keep her job when child-minders or domestic helps are hard to come by? How can she cope? (Adimora-Ezeigbo 33). The woman has to negotiate with her husband, as negotiation, most times, is more effective in achieving success in human relations than confrontation. The ability of the snail to smoothen rough surfaces to enable it to make movement easy is what matters most.

The theory lays much emphasis on individual success and development. The individual must empower herself before she can empower others. If a woman succeeds, the success of the family follows naturally. Many scholars, however, criticize that the snail in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s theory is a sluggish creature and therefore should not be a good symbol worthy of emulation in women’s struggles for emancipation. Some critics argue that African women need to be vocal and revolutionary in their demand for equity and justice in their society. They believe that it will be difficult to achieve emancipation without being confrontational. After all, there is always a trace of revolt and revolution in every struggle against oppression. In fights, for instance, there are elements of force applied and quarrels do not occur in undertones. Thus, the struggles against patriarchal oppression should be sweetened with a pinch of radical salt (Chiluwa 105).

Adimora-Ezeigbo assures that special attributes of snail-determination, effective skills and sensitivity have nothing to do with its speed of movement. With these qualities, the snail overcomes all its obstacles. In same manner, African women are implored “to be wise, sensitive and proactive in their quest for justice and self-actualization” (37). Emancipation should not be a fight for equality with men through the “dishing out of blows and slaps”. It cannot also be achieved through hatred of anything that has to do with men or throwing them out of their political offices and occupying their positions. “The ability to tolerate and incorporate differences, spells a step forward in the pursuit of equality, the dethroning of patriarchy and bringing about a cessation of the subjugation of females” (Chiluwa 107). Snail sense feminism advocates discretion and diplomacy by women in the pursuit of self-actualization.

Women in Patriarchal Societies

Justina Okoye, in her review of different types of gender violence and their impact on women, observes that patriarchy uses violence against women as a legal tool to subjugate women and uphold men’s dominance over them. She points out that female discrimination starts from birth and continues the rest of their lives. The second-class status allotted to the female gender, resigns them to the dictates of culture. Like some other scholars, Okoye supports that female subjugation has its source in religion and tradition. Des Obi Obioma and Boniface Ifesinachi Ogbenna also support that violence against women is tied to the history of tradition and religion. They also recommend economic empowerment of women through education, employment or skilled labour which will accord them more dignity. Florence Orabueze regrets that despite the provisions made by the United Nations, to protect women all over the world, the African woman is still subjected to discrimination. She is at the bottom of the scale and oppressed by virtually every member of her society. She therefore commends the African female writers who produce counter-hegemonic texts in pursuit of the freedom of the African woman. These writers use recurrent themes like motherhood, marriage, widowhood, polygamy, prostitution, child-trafficking, childlessness and widow inheritance to condemn the derogatory attitude towards the African woman. (29-72)

She also posits that women are truly subjugated and enslaved in the African cultural milieu. In offices, junior female workers are subjected to sexual harassment. They are sex objects who may offer their body to ensure they are not treated unfairly or discriminated against. In their matrimonial homes, the married women are degraded and oppressed, their husbands batter them and the precepts of Islamic religion, permit such punishment. The traditional structure in traditional African societies is very strong because, during the colonial period, British colonial authorities established a plural legal system in which British law operated alongside indigenous customary law and religious law in certain areas. African customary law or religious law governed issues such as marriage, divorce, custody, burial and inheritance and to date many African states have retained the structure of parallel legal system (Johanna 291). These among

other factors confirm why gender justice has not been fully achieved. Adimora-Ezeigbo in an interview quoted in Iwuchukwu, maintains that:

Our society is highly patriarchal, and for a woman to survive here, she really has to be hardworking, resilient, tolerant and accommodating, and that is the life of the snail. ... I believe that is what women in this country should be doing. We are trying to help build our society, our families, but we don't have to be confrontational. Any woman who thinks she can confront men will certainly fail. No one can do it alone. We need men just as they need us. The relationship is basically complementary. There is need for men and women to work together to achieve a better society, in the family, at work places, in politics, everywhere. Besides, our culture does not allow confrontation with men (Interview with Chucks Oluigbo. (284)

The desired change in favour of women could be achieved through negotiation and not physical combat or confrontation (Iwuchukwu) 283. Snail sense feminism is conceived to reflect her life and the lives of women around her. It is culture-oriented and differs from American, European, or Asian feminism. It is designed to help women actualize themselves through emancipation and empowerment (Iwuchukwu 283), in a society that permits widow inheritance, obnoxious widowhood rites, and female genital mutilation.

Snail Sense Feminism as the Alleviation

In "A Strange Disease", Enu is being pestered by Onumba, her brother-in-law, to become his third wife. Enu is a young widow, who may be lonely at times and needs companionship. She may desire financial help and assistance in her farm, but a number of factors put her off Onumba. He is presented as "an insidious man who didn't take kindly to any word or actions he felt were humiliating to him and he would harm her and her two teenage sons if she refused his proposal. (27). His attitude and the consequences of the proposal is summed in by Ebube:

Why is Onumba in your house every evening these days? ... This handshake is passing the elbow and is beginning to look like kidnapping. Does he want to marry you? Yes, Enu said quietly. Marry him if you want to be in hell fire for the rest of your life" Ebube said. Marry him if you want to lose your sons' share of family land to him. That is all I want to say for now. You don't tell a clever child to come out of the hot sun. (30)

Ebube is portrayed as a seventy-five years old neighbour, who knows the custom as well as the people in their community. She understands very well that their culture welcomes widow inheritance as well as polygamy (7) but the prospective suitor is depicted as "selfish, high handed and un-trustworthy man who beats his wives for the flimsiest of reasons" (31). Apart from battering, just like her late husband, Enu also considers the rivalry with other wives. The first wife has warned her to leave Onumba alone, "Marry him and I'll make you miserable" (31). She also worries about the possibility of becoming a widow again and going through the grief, the horrible mourning rites.

In Igbo traditional society, women are not permitted to be custodians of family land. If Enu marries Onumba, he would automatically be the overseer of her late husband's share of the family land until her children come of age. With his type of personality and ambition, he may appropriate the land or change the boundaries to his own advantage. Land in Igbo land, is a very important asset. Some part could be sold to raise capital for her sons' business or used as collateral for a loan to start a business (31). Once she consents to marry Onumba, that means that Onumba owns her as well as all she has including her sons' share of family land. How will Enu resolve the long-standing dilemma? How can a defenceless widow reject such a proposal from a dangerous man without being confrontational? This is where snail sense makes sense. She has tried many tricks to stop him from coming to eat dinner in her house every evening. One evening she deliberately over salted the soup and on another evening, she added so much pepper in the soup yet Onumba on each occasion, ate the meal without complaining and continued his late evening visits (28). He is a diehard and can intimidate Enu.

Catherine Acholonu is of the opinion that a rich and educated woman who is outspoken, hardworking and fearless can hardly be oppressed by a member of society (111). It is obvious that the population of the group described by Acholonu, who no longer carry foo foo to men discussing important matters (Nnolim, quoted in Angela Fubara 245), is very small, and as such might not influence much change in female marginalization. A woman, like Enu is a widow, who prepares "*onugbu* soup as a treat to herself for working hard all day in her cassava farm (26), can easily be intimidated and oppressed by any member of her society. Moreover, the children are not of age to protect her from the oppressive structures of the "tyrannical custom that allows a man the liberty" (Orabueze 114) to do what he likes.

Onumba is not moved. He does not care how a helpless widow provides what he comes every evening to eat. In the conventional belief that *Nwoke adi njo* (a man is rarely terrible), he expresses lack of decorum and courteousness in a house where he does not provide anything, as he queries Enu. "I hope there's enough dry fish in that soup... The foo foo is taking you ages to cook ... I hope you have enough of it to fill these valleys in my body?" (28).

When Enu said that dry fish is very expensive and that she doesn't have money to buy, his response is "if you agree to be my wife, I'll overwhelm you with fish" (28). In disapproval Enu murmured to herself, "How much do you give to your wives? (29). This implies that his greed, selfish desires, and his unwillingness to part with money has no bounds.

The death of a husband creates a big vacuum. Due to lack of emotional/financial support, appropriate monitoring and absence of the man of the house, intruders may begin to encroach. Enu has a number of problems since her husband died. "Two of her husband's relations including Onumba had encroached on her husband's farmland" (29). Onumba has never expressed a word of affirmation, sent a gift or service to show love or genuine intentions. Enu is not a kid, and cannot be deceived, but her greatest problem is fear. How does she bell the cat? In line with snail sense feminism, she becomes protective and carefully rejects the proposal without

being confrontational. Enu uses correction fluid, her niece, who is studying at a university, has left in her house and put patches on her belly and pubic area. She quietly says to Onumba, “I cannot be your wife, even if I want to ... It’s for your own good, Onumba, that I don’t become your wife” (33). The tact in the snail sense is accented in the following dialogue:

What do you mean by “for my own good?” I have a disease and I don’t want to pass it on you, Enu whispered as if someone else could hear her. What disease is that? ... Enu lowered her voice. I don’t know what it is called ... The doctor called it a strange disease or something like that. I didn’t quite understand him. Is this a joke, Enu? It’s not a joke. I’m dead serious. ... Come. Follow me. Onumba followed her into the house. See, Enu said, removing her wrapper and standing stark naked in front of Onumba. Raising the lamp in her hand up to her middle, she said, see the white patches all over me here. She touched her pubic area. The doctor says that any man who touches me gets the disease. And he said the disease is worse for men. Onumba quickly stepped backwards away from Enu. Did the doctor say you can get the disease by eating food cooked by the person suffering from it?... I didn’t ask the doctor whether you could or not. Onumba hurried out of the house without saying goodnight. (34)

What could have sent Onumba away from Enu’s life if not the special attributes of snail? How else could she have rejected the proposal politely and seriously? Which strategy could have saved her from the wrath of Onumba?

Enu’s attitude recapitulates the impeccable role of the symbolic *eneke nti oba* in Achebe’s work (Iniobong Uko 85), who has devised a survival strategy of flying without perching since men have learnt to shoot without missing. Unlike other feminist theories, the use of tolerance and discretion as advocated by Snail Sense feminism is more realistic in their struggle against patriarchal subjugation.

In same manner, Arit also recovers her marriage certificate and her block of flats from Paul, her brother-in-law in “From Wife to Concubine”. The author exemplifies what becomes of a woman who loses her husband prematurely, especially in a society that detests inter-tribal marriage. The agony of such a woman becomes unbearable when she is deprived of what rightfully belongs to her. Who will fight her battle? The people that opposed her marriage to Paul because she is from another ethnic group? One asked Fred, to her hearing “Fred, I wouldn’t have minded that much if you had gone all that way to get yourself a beautiful wife instead of one as ugly as a chimpanzee. If you have made up your mind to eat an animal as ugly as a toad, why not eat a fat one to compensate for the toad’s ugliness?” (68). Like every other widow, she was subjected to dehumanizing widowhood rites and was not allowed to express any opinion about the burial of her husband, even when she provided the money needed (68).

Paul, his brother-in-law is like Onumba who according to the author, confronting him is “as foolhardy as deliberately walking into the path of a lion” (66). He lives with his third wife, his

first two wives had left him one after the other, leaving all their children behind (69). Paul bluntly declared to Arit,

As for the block of flats at Onitsha, you have no claim to it whatsoever. You are not married to Fred. You can't inherit his property, neither can your children. You were just his concubine and concubines don't inherit properties under our customary law. Maybe you want the customary court to tell you that before you believe it. It will be in your best interest not to contest this. Save whatever money you have for your children. (70)

With the disappearance of her marriage certificate and other important documents, she is left with no weapon to fight her course. Realizing that Paul can easily crush her, she decides to give up believing that a rat cannot do anything to an iron pot. She suddenly resorts to the wise habits of a snail to overcome her challenges. She claims she knows all about Samuel's death, about his accidentally shooting himself. This disarms Paul and he leaves the living room. After a few weeks, Arit receives her marriage certificate by post. She lives in her flat and collects rent for the other three flats. Paul has ceased to raise issues about acquiring the block of flats.

Conclusion

Tradition, in most patriarchal societies, permit widow inheritance, polygamy and some other spiteful and obnoxious rituals that debase female persona. The belief and acceptance of these cultural values are so strong that the law is almost rendered helpless. Enu and Arit may represent the majority of the women who are not rich, educated, opinionated or fearless as described by Acholonu, and therefore could be subjugated and oppressed by any member of their society. Enu and Arit are widows whose children are still very young. They are vulnerable and may not be able to hold their possession or fight for their rights. They could be crushed easily like a snail, that is not a strong creature, yet they are able to negotiate their obstacles diplomatically. The study recommends tolerance and principles derived from the habit of snails for the survival of women in a male-dominated society.

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