IGBO FEMALE IN IGBO LITERARY TEXTS AND IGBO FEMALE LITERARY WRITERS: THE ISSUE OF MARGINALIZATION.

ONUEGBU, MARTINA CHINELO (MRS)
DEPARTMENT OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES
ADEYEMI COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
ONDO STATE.

While the presence of men made itself concretely felt in Igbo Literature as far back as 1933. Igbo women would not publish a literary work until after four decades. This paper will trace the history of Igbo female writers and throw light on the sources of hindrances that Igbo female literary writers encounter. It will also examine the focus of the Igbo female literary artists and determine whether they have used their works to project the interest of the Igbo female or not. The problems that the Igbo female writers encounter will also be considered. Finally, suggestions on how they can improve their lot towards a better achievement for the Igbo female image and interest, and for a better democratic experience and greater developmental achievement in Igbo society and Nigeria, as a whole will be discussed.

Introduction

Igbo novel, which was the first Igbo written literature, started in 1933 with the work of Pita Nwana called Omenuko it was followed at the third decade in (1963) with a short story called Chioma, which was written by S.U Oruchalu later on in 1974 A.B Chukwuezi came up with the first Igbo drama text called Udo ka mma. A decade later, the first Igbo poetry appeared in the name of Akpa Uche by R.N. Ekechukwu in 1975. Of course, all the above-mentioned texts have male authors and are centred on Macho-affairs. According to Nwadike (2002:1-5) presently there is a great increase in the number of Igbo Literary texts. His record shows that there are forty-eight drama texts, thirty-nine poetry texts, sixty-eight novels and five short stories for Igbo literary studies. From this record too, there are about a hundred and fifty two male authors for all kinds of Igbo literary texts and about nine female authors for all kinds of Igbo literary texts.

It is necessary here for us to observe the low number of female authors as compared to the high number of male authors. This record as shown above implies that Igbo literary writing had been exclusively a masculine domain. Even when one considers the content of the texts, one will discover that greater number of Igbo literary texts are macho-centred. Women are mainly voiceless, docile, or are ill represented. This means that Igbo women are equally subjugated in literature. This paper therefore is interested in the answer to the following questions: why are there few Igbo female literary writers? Are Igbo women really awakening to face the task ahead of them as to contribute to Igbo

literature? Are they already awakening the consciousness of other women by writing and creating awareness to the Igbo women feminist pursuit? It is in order to find the answers to theses questions that this study emerges.

Igbo Women Literary Writers

From the data presented in Nwadike (2002: 1- 5), out of forty-eight drama texts, not up to five are written by women. Again, out of sixty-eight novels written in Igbo not up to five are written by women, and of about thirty-nine poetry texts written in Igbo not up to five are written by women.

However, a critical study of the literary works of Igbo women shows that the first female novelist wrote her work in 1979. Her name is Julie Onwuchekwa while her novel is Chinaagorom. She also wrote the first Igbo poetry written by a female in the same year 1979. The name of the poetry text is Akpaala Okwu. This is followed in 1985 by Abu Umu Praimari another poetry text written by female by name C.O. Acholonu. There is a gap of six years between the work of the first female writer and this. In 1989 at exactly a decade after Julie Onwuchekwa's publications, the works of the first female feminist writer in Igbo drama called Obioma Mogbogu appeared. Her work is called Adaaku. This work appeared in a gap of ten years from the first literary text of an Igbo female, a gap of four years from the second female Igbo literary writer and a gap of fifteen years from the first drama, which was written in 1974. She may not have had the intention of writing a feminist text when she wrote this text because feminism had not yet been introduced into Igbo literature then. Her book whether intentionally or not is a feminist text.

The 1990's could be termed the decade of re-awakenness of Igbo female literary writers. Within this decade, the following Igbo women wrote the following literary texts accordingly:

1991 - Nwaozuzu G.I -Ome Ihe Jide Ofo – a drama text.
1996 - Onuegbu, M.C & al Ekeneqwurugwu – a poetry text.
1997 - Okorji, I – Chukwukadibia – A novel.
1998 - Nwaozuzu G.I – Ajo-Obi – a drama text
2001 - Obakhena, Regina- Olisa Amaka – a poetry text.

(This data is subject to amendment if found wanting in any form. The researcher based her work on the available and authentic data on Igbo literary texts before her. It is natural that the researcher may not have known all the Igbo literary text written by Igbo females).

A note-worthy point here is that the rate of publication by Igbo female writers is on the increase. The gap between the publications is also reducing that by now it is expected that many more women would have more literary texts by now. No matter what, Igbo female writers are still being counted in tens

while the Igbo male writers are counted in hundreds. The difference in the number of female writers compared to the number of male writers is great.

With the above information, this study is carried out in order to find out why Igbo women are greatly marginalized in terms of Igbo literary text writing.

Secondly, this paper is aimed at discovering the effects of the delay of female literary authorship on Igbo women.

Reasons for Low Number of Igbo Female Literary *Text writers in Igbo Literature*

So many reasons abound for the few number of Igbo female literary text writers. Some of these reasons are discussed below:

Male Domination of Writing and Publishing:

One of the reasons for male domination of literary text writing and publications may be that opined by Frank (1984: 354) who stated that:

> African literary studies have been an almost exclusively masculine domain largely because the scholars and the critics who have mapped it out are nearly all men, whom have tended to ignore women related issues in African literature.

This is a fact because the first writers of Igbo literary texts are men. The publishers who published their texts are men and many of these publishers those days felt that women had nothing upstairs to offer in literature. This attitude is not peculiar to Igbo men alone but men in other African countries and even Western countries. For instance, the same reason leads Marian Evans to author her work Silas Marner under a masculine pseudonym of George Eliot. She had to author her book in a man's name to grant it acceptance into the Western society as a good book. Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847) was also published under a masculine pseudonym of Currer Bell just for the society and publishers to see it as a man's product and accept it without any negative bias. Publishers themselves were negatively biased about women's publication. They felt that women were not as intelligent as men as to write good texts that would appeal to the public. In an article by Bryce (1988:52) on women and literature in Nigeria, she noted with concern that:

> *The "serious" publishers led by Heinemann dictate what is seen as "excellence" and by omission, have contrived to suggest that it is not generally produced by women. There are 202 titles by male authors in the Heinemann. African writers series, as compared to the 12 by women a ratio of 9: 1 (p: 52.)*

With the assumption of many publishers as indicated above, many books written by Igbo women were turned down by publishers negatively and discouragingly criticized. As a result of this prejudice, men were mainly the

available writers such that we had many Igbo male literary text authors before the first Igbo female literary text author: *(See Nwadike (2002:1-5)*

The same unjust assumptions that men have greater capability than women in writing and in the other fields of life coupled with the general Igbo societal degradation of womanhood were depicted in the writing of these men. An example is the first Igbo novel Omenuko written in 1933 by Pita Nwana. In this novel, women's impact is not felt or pronounced. It is an all macho-related novel. It discusses Omenuko and his brothers, his porters and business boys, king Omemgboji other kings, the white men and Obiefuna the son of king Omemgboji the few occasions that mention is made of women is when it is said that Omenuko sent for his sisters to come and join him into exile. They are very voiceless in the story. In this novel, Omenuko is said to have many wives, the name of these wives are not mentioned. None of those wives of his brothers are mentioned. Omenuko, his brothers, and king Omemgboji have daughters but none of them is mentioned to have taken any active part in the story. This mannerism of Pita Nwana is typical of Igbo men who feel that women are not important and should not be heard rather they should be neglected as if they do not exist. This goes to buttress the assertions of Larson (1971:149), which states that: *"In many early West African novels, the female characters play almost no significant part, if they are present they are mere objects performing a function"*

Pita Nwana is not the only defaulter in this aspect there are so many other writers like that. Looking away from Igbo literary text per say, there are other renowned Igbo male writers writing in English Language who also display female characters in the same way. Consider most of the works of Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi. They are Igbo men and have depicted Igbo women in their works the way they feel about Igbo women as unimportant beings. On this point still, Chukwukere (2000:1) laments that:

> *In Igbo fictional writings, women are at their best, shallow minded, the property and inheritance of men, docile and complacent, and at their worst, vile, treacherous, an unnecessary impediment to a man's "legitimate" searches and endeavours towards higher values.*

Chukwukere's views above are correct because many Igbo literary texts depict, women negatively as: prostitutes (Aghirigha, Isi Akwu Dara N'ala, Ugomma, Okwe Agbaala etc). As weak and voiceless (Oguamalam, Obidiya Ojimba dgz), as gossips (Juo Obinna etc) There are so many other texts of this nature in Igbo literature. This could be deciphered from the assertions of Ohuegbu (2002:9) who adds that the earlier Igbo literary texts reveal women as: *"Empty, dependent, cantankerous, mermaid possessed, villainous blood thirsty, materialistic, naive, archaic, ultra modern, fake, shallow minded or prostitutes".*

As a result of this attitude towards women in literature, Acholonu (1994:38) asserts that "*while the male image prospers in our novels, the female image deteriorates!*" The reason behind the negative presentation of the female by these authors is answered by Ezeigbo (1994:55) who calls them "Phallic authors" that take the concept of male superiority and female inferiority for granted because the inferiority position of women have been affirmed by traditional, Christian and Islamic myths which these men are groomed in to have been ordained by God the creator. Even the Igbo female themselves are indoctrinated from childhood to believe that the second-class citizenship placed on them by the Igbo patriarchal society is from God and so should not be challenged. They are blind to see the version of the Bible, which says that women are created to be helpers to men and not slaves to men. They forget that God himself never likes those who enslave others.

Lack of high quality education

In the olden days, Igbo parents preferred to send their male children to school more than the female because according to Onuegbu (2003:325) and Onuegbu (2004:17) they believe that women education ends in the kitchen so there is no need to send female children to school or if at all she should not be allowed to exceed the secondary school level. To them a female child belongs to another man's family because she will eventually be married out of the family one day. Their other reason is that they believed that sending female children to school especially to higher institutions would expose them to prostitution and series of abortions of the foetus which will eventually make them barren in future as they would have destroyed the eggs in their wombs in immoral sexual relationship with their male colleagues in school due to the consequent abortions that follows any unwanted pregnancy. Adebayo (1996:37), Kolawole (1997: 48), Azikiwe (1999:48) are of the opinion that there is an unequal access to education between men and women. In any family financial crises that necessitate dropping any of the children from school, parents would prefer to discontinue the education of the female child to that of the male child because they believe that the male child would ever remain their family's possession while the female child would later become another man's property whether educated or not.

An interesting development has arisen now in Igbo land. There are several newspaper publications on the dwindling number of Igbo males that go to school, it is said that many Igbo boys now prefer to go into business rather than to go to school. There are more females in schools now than males especially in Anambra and Abia States of Eastern Nigerian. What the future holds for the Igbo female as a result of this sudden change of attitude is yet unfolded.

Excessive domestic responsibility

Traditionally, Igbo women's share of domestic work in the family is highly excessive compared to those of men. Igbo women both traditional and modern are overloaded with great family responsibilities. They are better described like Kiki (a young heroine) in What the Future Holds written by Mkhomza (1988:6-7) as follows.

> *On their heads they carry heavy burdens of firewood and clay pots.*
> *On their backs they carry babies,*
> *on their front they carry the load of man in procreation.*
> *Their heart is heavy with burdens of sorrow.*

Commenting in the nature of the heavy responsibilities that are traditionally assigned to Igbo women, Onuegbu (2004:1 – 5) adds that Igbo women,

> *"Bear children, cook for the family, clean and sweep the home, compound, even market arena, and Village Square. They wash for their husbands, children and themselves, they nurse their husbands, and children, participate in farm work, some add white-collar job and other jobs to these functions.*

The above functions of women explain why they are unable to write literary texts. Writing is not an easy job, it needs concentration of the mind and enough leisure hours to enable one think to be able to organize her thoughts into writing. With the numerous duties Igbo women perform, they lack the time, concentration and the energy to put down their thoughts in a literary form. Sofola (1986) in an interview cited in Adebayo (1996:37) concluded this issue by his assertions that: *"In ...traditional set-up of Nigeria and Africa in general... Women are more burdened with humdrum of daily life than men. And therefore, it takes extra efforts on the part of the female to write".*

Patriarchal Domination of Men

Igbo men dominate their wives in various ways, which are discussed under the following sub-headings.

Financial Domination:

Traditionally the Igbo say that *"Aku nwaanyi bu nke di ya"* meaning that a woman's wealth belongs to her husband. In Igbo society, a married woman, her wealth and all her life possessions, belong to her husband because he bought her with a price. As a result, the Igbo see a married women as a possession *"onye aka nwe"* (somebody's possession) *"aku di ya"* (her husband's wealth) see Onuegbu (2003:326). As a possession, a working class, woman should surrender all her salaries to her husband. From her hard earned

salary, her husband either gives her some maintenance allowance or not depending on his nature. Due to this practice, many women who are interested in writing are in one way or the other discouraged by their husbands. Their husbands may not have been as educated as to know the need for publications and authorship of texts. They may not agree to sponsor such ventures. Some out of jealousy that their wives will now be more popular than they are may even discourage their wives from authoring any text. Some think of the other uses they could make out of their wives money and discourage their wives from writing by not supplying the fund for publication.

Satisfaction of Selfish Desires

Writing requires that the writer should be away from the family environment where children, husbands, visitors and in-laws will not interfere with the period of writing. Some Igbo men do not want their wives to stay away for a long time from their presence. They want their wives to prepare their food serve same to them. Such men create unnecessary trouble for their wives when they see their wives paying more attention to academic work than to them and the other family matters. Wives married to such men find it difficult to carve out time for writing though they may be very intelligent and may be willing to write. It was for such husbands that Adebayo (1996:37) comments that: *"Every African woman who writes must have killed "the angel in the House" several times over as well as overcome many prejudices in a society where the woman is supposed to be seen and not be heard"*.

There is little or no room for a married Igbo woman to exercise her own individuality, her own feelings for they are entwined to those of her husband and his people. To remain a good wife, she has to ever remain submissive to the dictates of her husband and his family members who would often intrude in the couple's life affairs.

Marriage

According to Adebayo (1996:46)

> *Marriage traditional or modern, is a veil of submission and deception, limiting the sense of perception of the women.*
> *It amounts to pure obscuration of the women's self-identity....*

Marriage is the key source of women marginalization either in literature or in other fields of labour. A full examination of the problems that debar women from publication as discussed above mainly hinge on marriage. Like Adebayo above stated. Marriage with its involvement: child bearing, and rearing is a major obstruction. It is difficult for a nursing mother or mother with growing children to have enough time for writing. In most cases, research has shown that many female writers, write after child bearing, or are divorced. A woman

fully involved in child bearing and who plays her role, as an Igbo wife perfectly, will never have time to write.

Marriage relationship in Igbo society is quite exploitative on the side of the women. It degrades the female to the level of a prisoner and presents her as a caged bird. Marriage in the Igbo societal tradition depicts the male and the female relationship in a form of a victim-victimizer relationship. Where as the male Igbo husbands are as free as air from their fellow men and the societal patriarchal norms and traditions, the female is as caged as a prisoner from the Igbo males and the societal norms and traditions that she has little or no freedom to discover herself not only in academics but also in other fields of life.

The nature of the expectative burdens of Igbo women is numerous and renders them unable to be self-fulfilled except for few women whose husbands are tolerating and understanding. This problem of the Igbo women is similar to the situation in the life of Zimbabwean women. Tsitsi Dangaremgba in her work Nervous conditions recognizes the suffering of Zimbabwean women and uses Tambu's mother to speak their minds:

> *This business of womanhood is a heavy burden. How could it not be?*
> *Aren't we ones that bear children?*
> *When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this,*
> *Tomorrow I want to do that... when there are sacrifices to be made ...(P.16)*

This is a typical situation of the Igbo married woman. You cannot just take decisions of your own and go about them in your own way by your own choice. You have your children, husband and members of the extended family to attend to. The situation is worsened when the woman's children are not yet grown up.

Tensions In A Married Woman's Life

A married Igbo woman has a lot of expectations from her by members of her marital home, her husband and the member of her environment. She is expected to bear children amongst all; she must bear even if it is a male child for the family. No body cares what scientific research has discovered about whose responsibility it is for the production of male children. The situation of the women is worsened if she is barren. Her husband and many people around her will create some psychological trauma in her life In their bid to remind her of her failure to achieve procreation like other women. She would be filled with worries over what her marriage situation will be: is her husband going to send her packing? Is he going to remarry another wife? How will she get a male child for herself?

On the other hand, there may be other tensions posed to the woman by her-in-laws: mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister or brother in-law and even members of the extended family who may have one stone or the other to grind with the woman. All such tensions do not allow the woman plan favourably towards high academic achievement of this nature.

Female writers and their works/suggestion

A great problem facing the female image in literature today lie on the inability of authors to present a positive image of the woman. Apart from few literary texts that their portrayal of the female are on the positive side either fully or partially like Uru Nwa by J.C Maduekwe, Ihunanya by Odinaka Azubuike, Ezinne by Chika Anyasodo Obidiya by Enyinna Akoma, Adeze by I.U Nwadike and very few others that are not recorded here, many other Igbo literary texts portray the female in very negative forms.

Another great problem is that the present female authors are not concerned with the uplifting of the Igbo female in writing. They write their works based on contemporary issues in Igbo society, for instance Ijeoma Okorji wrote on a male protagonist Chukwukadibia . Onuegbu, M.C and Obakhena, Regina wrote on poetry that are not female centered Ekenegwuruqwu and Olisa Amaka respectively. Nwaozuzu G.I. wrote on contemporary issues though she portrays inter-gender conflict and its consequences in her Ome Ife Jide Ofo.

The Igbo literary female writers who portray the captivity and oppressions against the women folk in Igbo society are: Julie Onwuchekwa who in her work Chinnagorom depicts the bondage and voicelessness of women in marriage, the wickedness of in-laws and the society over women and the value of the male and his dominating power over the Igbo societal norms and tradition.

On the other hand, is the work of Obioma Mogbogu whom Onuegbu (2003:328) describe as a good feminist writer and whose work (Adaaku) depicts the Igbo women's position, roles and reactions to parental and social forces around them.

Just as we appreciate the efforts put up by the writers mentioned above it is good that we make them aware that the Shackles of bondage, subjugation and oppressions against Igbo women are so much. Igbo women need the help of their fellow educated women for their liberation from patriarchal subjugation's and Igbo culture as a whole. There is a call for educated Igbo women to wake up from their slumber, pick up their biros, push every obstruction, off their way as they use their weapon (biros) to achieve emancipation to the favour of all women in Igbo land, Nigeria, and all African nations. After all, culture is man-made, it is dynamic so can be influenced and changed. It is no surprise today that chieftaincy tittles can be given to women in Igbo land. It was a great

abomination those days. Today it is part of Igbo culture. Chief Igwe Nnaji conferred chieftaincy tittles on fifty women at Enugu State last year 2004 in order to satisfy the cry of feminists that Igbo women should be given equal opportunities with men.

Moreover most of what women all over the world are enjoying today as their achievement both political, socially, educationally, economically and so on started as a feminist warfare in writing through the works of: earlier feminist like Mary Wallstonecraft Godwin who wrote Vindication of the rights of women. Alice Walker who wrote several texts including: In search of our mother's garden: Womanist prose, The Color Purple and others.

Here in Nigeria, women must recognize the efforts of Helen Chukwuma, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Omolara Ogundipe–Leslie, Juliet Okonkwo, Buchi Emecheta, Rose Acholonu and all others not mentioned here who had been pushing the feminist pursuit to a high successful peak through their writings and criticisms. It is good to observe that most of the works of the above Nigerian writers and critics mentioned here are Igbo females. The unfortunate thing is that their works are mainly on English medium based texts. This paper advises them to look inwards because charity begins at home. They should leers with fellow Igbo females who are feminist literary critics and writers in Igbo literature like Onuegbu, Chinelo (The writer of this paper) and the few others who are coming up in this area of study to help the Igbo female out of their patriarchal imposed cages through the gift of the pen.

By writing it is expected that Igbo women will demystify and subvert Igbo barbaric and oppressive societal expectations on them. Besides, it is vital that Igbo women unveil Igbo women's experiences and as they do so, they will help conscientize Igbo public, and the Nigerian society as a whole; creating new visions, informing the world that Igbo women need self-identity by defining themselves on their own terms. They should write and tell the world the need for Igbo women to shake off all customary stereotyped roles designed by the Igbo forefathers to permanently enslave Igbo women both as girls, wives, mothers and mistress. Above all, the world should know that Igbo women are also human and desire to love and be loved and not the love-hate oppressive, cheating and deceptive relationship, which obtains presently in Igbo marriage. They should also let the world know that they need to be understood and that equal opportunities should be given them. Igbo women! The long established silence about what we are, what we want and what we do not want has to be broken now with our pens. Wake up and ride on. Let the sky be our limit. Don't focus on any other thing else except women and women related issues.

Conclusion

This paper establishes the fact that there are fewer female Igbo literary writers than the male. Highlighted in this paper also are the reasons why Igbo female literary authors are so few. Mention is made of Igbo females in English language literary writing and criticisms, the general weakness and achievement of the Igbo female literary text writers.

Finally, there is a call for educated Igbo women to help the feminist pursuit through writing.

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