Igbo Women's August Meeting and Challenges

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Abstract

Feminism is the advocacy for equal rights for women. Women in Igbo land, women have always been a support group. They demonstrate that in Aba in 1929 in the Abia women's riots against the British colonial administration. In the present time they tried to replicate but now surpass what their men are doing by initiating the August Women's meeting, whereby, in communities across Igbo land, women set down whatever they are doing in their places of abode and head to their clans to attend the meetings. The degree of excitement when these women convene, is considerable. It is an expanded form of weekly gatherings of Igbo women in different parts of the world. They assemble to listen one another and execute plans for individual and community improvement. This paper examines this event, and notes that the idea has to be sustained. It echoes the need to consider issues that work against the dreams of women. One of these issues is summoning women from all over Nigeria or the world every year, something that is not possible with the present realities in Nigeria. The paper makes suggestion to the women. It is a type of feminist movement that should be encouraged by writers and various researchers.

Key Words: feminism, development, movement, community

Introduction

Women issues have been relegated universally for centuries. This led women to protest their socially-ascribed roles. It has taken the form of movements like the

Aba Women's Rally, different campaigns by women and the authorship of books by female writers championing women's causes. Issues like child custody, abortion rights, domestic violence, public roles, equal pay for work, sexual molestation, rape, sex trafficking, commercialization of the female body and various forms of discrimination. Female writers like Mary Wolstonecraft, Virgnia Wolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Flora Nwapa have been active in the different waves of feminism, spanning two decades. Nwapa treats women roles in Igbo society from very unique perspectives. Andrade discusses how, in Efuru, Flora Nwapa reveals conflicts women have to resolve in their lives. Andrade remarks thus,

> Although Efuru moves toward a celebration of the protagonist's independence, economic success, and goodness, the novel displays a constant undercurrent of doubt, ending on a note of profound ambivalence about the ability of any woman without children to be completely happy. In the Baktinian sense, Efuru's dialogism comprises the competing discourses of economic independence and maternal satisfaction, the latter of which, I have argued, is a result of displaced concern regarding male-female marital relations. Repeatedly the text offers advice on what a woman should do to conceive and how she should conduct herself during pregnancy, childbirth, and the upbringing of the child. In fact, Oladele Taiwo calls the narrative "almost a manual of mothercare" […]. But motherhood is the one condition that the otherwise perfect Efuru cannot satisfy. Except for this defining trait, she conforms in every way to the ubiquitous Mother Africa figure, signifier of tradition, which so dominates the discursive landscape of cultural nationalism. (62-63)

Andrade gives more insight, saying,

> Deploying tradition strategically, Nwapa creates a protagonist who conforms to certain aspects of tradition in the service of a modem literary subjectivity and genre. The ambivalence over motherhood resonates most audibly in the novel's closing lines, which have been read by several critics […] as key to understanding the text. Although Uhammiri appears to have everything she needs, the narrative suggests that motherhood is necessary to completely fulfil her and, by extension, her disciple Efuru: Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches.

> She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (63)

Andrade then compares the experiences in Efuru with those of the characters in Buchi Emecheta's writing. She remarks,

> while acknowledging her debt to Efuru through the similarity of the protagonists' stories, Emecheta revises and extends that novel and launches a biting critique of both indigenous patriarchy and colonialism. Emecheta derived her title from the quoted paragraph from Efuru. More important is The Joys of Motherhood's recognition of its precursor's ambivalence about the childless woman's possibilities for happiness. The later narrative gives its protagonist, Nnu Ego, Efuru's primary unfulfilled wish-many times over, to the point of misery. By (re)writing the phenomenon of Nnu Ego's "barrenness/ fecundity" to coincide with her change of husbands, Emecheta interrogates Efuru's "tragic flaw" by shifting responsibility for conception to the man. (64)

There are different types of feminism. They range from radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, environmental feminism, liberal feminism to cultural feminism. Be it Marxist feminism or liberal feminism, the question arises about who a feminist is. The concept has undergone transformation that it embraceseven males. Today, many males identify as feminists, as a feminist is now defined as anyone who is passionate about and advances the cause of feminism. It is a welcome development as it expands the field of feminist discourse. Many people come with innovative perspectives. They may not be fired by the emotions that may issue from a female based on her experience. Some women disagree. They contend that being biologically different, a man cannot feel what a woman feels. That, therefore, disqualifies him.

In the topic under review, women strictly come together to strengthen other women and also contribute to the development of their communities.it is usually a friendly affair devoid of anger against their fellow women or accusation of anger against their fellow women or accusations of ill treatment from the male folk. Men of different ranks, like senators and governors are sometimes sponsors of events

and speakers at the meetings. The type of feminism observed in such circles is a blend of liberal, Marxist and cultural feminism. What is clear is that the philosophy guiding it is that, sometimes, issues relating to the male gender, where there have been infractions on personal rights, may be included in agendas. Obviously, some of the women leaders may be radical feminists in other gatherings; for, not a few of them surely are writers. Issues that may clash with the set goal of erecting of infrastructure and training women to acquire useful skills are entertained at the assemblies (Nzewi, Hope and Nkechi Ojiagu).

Andrade argues that there is disregard for women in the works of African writers, observing that

> I claimed of the established terrain, where the novel loomed large, that feminist readers have long noted that female characters are generally absent from-and are silent when they do appear in-this novel. Okonkwo's mother, whose lineage gives the novel's hero seven years of protection; his senior wife; and almost all of his daughters are unnamed.6 This was more than simple inattention to women, for the absent presence of women was necessary to the construction of the novel's nationalist ideology. Igbo women's social organizations and their "war-making" are effaced in orthodox nationalist history so that masculine anticolonial rebellion can avoid occupying a subordinate, feminized role. Achebe's novel is structured by erasures in a roughly analogous manner and attempts to avoid the representation of colonial relations in gendered terms by inscribing an excessively masculine Igbo man. Female characters are not represented in any significant numbers; anticolonial nationalist subjectivity operates in a gendered social space defined primarily by male bodies, namely, Okonkwo. (50)

She cites the example of the Aba riots, where the woman is omitted. She

> The war ended violently, however; approximately fifty women were killed, and another fifty were wounded by gunfire from the police and soldiers. According to Van Allen, […] "The lives taken were those of women only-no men, Igbo or British, were even seriously injured:' Significantly, the women had not believed that they would be hurt, so culturally appropriate were their actions. Of the archival (mis)representations of the Women's War as the Aha Riots, a name that limits its scope and de-politicizes its feminist impetus, Van

> Allen (1972, 6o-61) notes that the control of language means the control of history: (Andrade 48)

Igbo Women and Their Society

Igbo women have been comparatively vocal in their societies. Igbos have a culture whereby a woman can be a husband to another woman. A widow who is childless or who has only female children may marry a young lady of childbearing age to bear children on behalf of her late husband. She will then convince a man in her husband's kindred or village to impregnate the girl routinely. Some ladies may be required by her father, where there is no male child, to stay at home and beget children. It means that she will not have to marry. These are old practices (Nwoko 72-73).

But the women always have their own women groups. It runs parallel with the male associations. When necessary, the leaders of the groups of the two genders meet to resolve some issues. They also honor invitations by the other gender. The stamp of the Igbo women in their society was felt in 1929, when non-Igbo and Igbo women in the Igbo city of Aba rioted against the British colonial government, with casualties. Where the men fail, the women throw themselves fearlessly into the scene. Appearance of women publicly in civil disputes in Igbo land is observed to be sacred. Their appearance is usually perceived to be ominous.

Andrade recounts how

> [i]n November and December 1929, tens of thousands of Igbo and Ibibio women from the Calabar and Owerri provinces "made war on" the warrant chiefs, as well as on the British overlords. They originally mobilized around the issue of the taxation of women, but their demands soon included abolition of the native courts (or the inclusion of women on them) and the return of all white men to their own country. Information and money for the uprisinghad been conveyed through the elaborate system of women's market networks. (48)

Seneca Falls Convention

It was a women's conference that took place at Seneca Falls, USA, in which the participants advocated for women's rights and gender equality. Women were

relegated in American society. They were meant to support the men and not to be actively involved in public activities. There was also bias in educational policies. While the male child in a family was motivated and assisted to reach any height of social endeavor that good education bestowed on him, his sister was not. It was felt that the woman's role was to bring up children and to take care of domestic duties. The American colonies got independence, which was based on the emancipation of human beings. A war of independence was fought. The two wars were hinged on freedom. But the women could not exercise most of these freedoms (McMillen 5-6),

Many women and their sympathizers began to express their views through speeches and writings. Margaret Fuller, Sergeant Murray and Cady Staton wrote articles on women's rights. Abigail Adams, for instance, wrote a letter to her husband John Adams on the suppression of feminine voices. There were anonymous literatures like the one from Ouida. It all led to the meeting of women at Seneca Falls in 1848. The conference released a statement in which the conferees mimic the American Declaration of Independence (Kolodny 366-370).

In Eastern Nigeria, there was the Aba Women's movement in the 1920s, ledbyone Margaret Ekpo. They spoke against the injustices of the colonial government, and even had confrontations with the colonial authorities. The women organized protests in which scores of women were killed. But the women got from the colonial government the right to vote, which preceded that of women in U.S., where the Seneca Falls Convention had taken place 90 years earlier. But it goes to show how active Igbo women can be in the affairs of their communities. It is for this reason that Igbos could boast of women's musical groups like Obi Wuru Out Dance Group of Ihiagwa, and Okwu Mara Dance Group by Emily Nwanyi Nkwere. Emily Nwanyi Nkwere was quite popular. The audacity and confidence in her songs had a grip on the people in the 1980s and early 1990s. Emily extolled her husband, Ehi of Nkwerre, with profound respect for him, but it elevated the singer and women to a great and enviable pedestal. It was clear that men and women somehow share the same feeling. It is a carryover of the events in the community, where women gathered the same way men did. The women can summon erring men to their assembly if the man's wife or children send a petition. In the same vein, In the same vein, the women referred to as ndi omi amu amucan

sit in judgment over family feuds that involve men and women in a family or kindred. The verdicts of the women are usually uncontested. (Iwu et al)

August Women Meeting

Igbos have a certain connection to their roots. Whenever they find themselves outside Igbo land, they think of where they come from. The average Igbo person wishes to be buried, at the conclusion of his or her time on earth, to be buried in the ancestral compound. The Igbo man endeavors to keep in contact with the home place, keeping abreast with events in the place. He is called home when certain decisions have to be taken. He makes effort to abandon business and … travel on very treacherous roads to attend burials, various ceremonies and other events. He is also a financial member of close to three unions, at the kindred level, at the wider kindred level and, at the village level. He knows that at Christmas, it is time to go home, since it is a period when people schedule meetings, weddings and burials (Nzewi and Ojiagu).

Somehow, the men have decided to meet on the 1st of October every year, which is when Nigeria's independence is celebrated and when there will inevitably be a national holiday. The women have their own meeting in August every year. Curiously, the women's event is by far the more popular one. As Anyaegbu and Iguh inform us,

> In Igbo communities, women have long had meetings of their own, and such congregations have been rightly emphasized as the base of women's political power in traditional Igboland […]. 1 These women's associations, which have pre-colonial and ancient roots, have given Igbo women strong and powerful political voices and symbolism […]. The formal leadership roles by which women became politically significant in Igbo traditional communities are at two inter-related levels: the Umuada and the Otu Alutaradi. The Umuadas are daughters of the community who have married into other villages but retain their ties with their community of birth. Otu Alutaradi are wives of the men of the village who have come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. (1)

Between June and July every year, women in various Igbo villages begin to trim the grasses along major paths, especially around primary or secondary schools,

churches and places where activities will take place in August. The women's discussions center on the progress made in preparations for the August women's meeting in their village. There is general clean up and arrangement of facilities at the designated venues. The women have prescribed costumes for the occasion.it does not matter if some of the women live in penury and as ia result cannot afford the event clothes. But this is an opportunity for the rich to display fashion. The apparels of the rich are quite expesnsive, from shoes to the clothes, bangles and head gears. The very rich women move around and arrive venues in their exotic cars. Their presence depicts elevated status, which leaves other women in awe. In the same vein, most people have to associate the financially accomplished women with these women's presence in the village, where everybody knows the other. For many people, this is a moment they had been waiting for to show in which crowds they move in. therefore, it can be depressing for many others (Nzewi and Ojiagu).

Of course, accountability is a problem in public office in Nigeria. These women contribute money and pay their obligatory dues. Cash flow is substantial. Projects have to be executed by the executive arm of the union. There is spike in corruption in Nigeria, which means that even the female gender sometimes needs some cleaning up to do in terms of expenditures. Here, a lot of resources are required to run offices. Budgets for the trips of officials may raise some questions if made public. This is a period of adversity in the country. Official business does not consider adverse times. When contracts are awarded, when projects are executed, some people are favored (Nzewi and Ojiagu).

Dangers of the Time

Travelling on Nigerian roads these days is very challenging. There are armed gangs attacking people on the highways. The armed gangs kill at will and kidnap passengers. Busloads of people are taken into the bushes, where the victims are tortured and ransoms paid for their release. Nigerian roads rank among the worst in the world, as they are generally in bad shape. Fatalities om the roads are quite high and frequent. There are no ambulance services on the roads. Evacuating of accident victims is complicated. In addition, the hospitals are ill equipped. Blood banks and blood transfusion are rare. Without insurance covers, people are helpless, compounding the situation. Making millions of women and dependants

to undertake these journeys, some of which might take days, should be … The conferences can be shifted to the Christmas period, since this is the time when most Igbo people go home. The reason is because most of these women still go home at the end of the year (Adelekan). Ugwuoke et al inform us that "[t]ravelling on Nigerian highways also puts travelers and their loved ones under extreme anxieties until such travelers safely arrive at their destinations (2-5)"

Ostentatious displays cannot be avoided. Sometimes, it is unintentional. However, in Igbo land, the wealthy new cannot resist savoring actions that make them stand out. It is those people at the receiving end, those whose fortunes have spun around and those who have never tasted good fortunes who might be depressed by the events.

Advantages of August Meeting

The August Meeting surely bring s together women who are married into various Igbo communities. It makes them to become even more familiar with their husbands' roots as well as the people in the community. They come in contact with the range of biologically relationships among the people, something that is important for their sons and daughters; specifically with regard to when their children will choose life partners. The atmosphere creates a friendly feeling around them. New friendships are made while old ones are strengthened. That is why many women look forward to it. A very important thing that makes a community prosper is for the women to identify with the community. Neglect of a community can be disastrous.

Learning Skills

The August Meeting association assigns experts in various fields to cater to the needs of various women. People are taught various skills, from computer skills, baking, embroidery, fashion and designing and painting. Rich women in the association donate sewing machines, gas stoves, cookers and fridges. These are meant to support those who acquire the various skills. There are also workshops on trading in different fields. Speaker after speaker mounts the stage to talk to the women. In this manner, a lot of women are motivated to plan to aspire to be achievers. A lot of women have not only excelled in life through their links with the August Meeting. Many women observe how educated and confident these

speech makers are (Onuoha and Onwuanghalo 382-385). The women association also builds stalls and rent out to poor women in the village. A woman in the village might be made a land lady of some shops for a period of one year after which it becomes the turn of another woman.

Conclusion

The activities of the women's groups have become necessary because of the absence of government in the villages. There has been rural to urban migration in recent times. In the villages, school buildings are in ruins. There are hardly health centers. These are no industries or institutions that can provide employment for the local people. The local people are poorly educated. They are too poor to open shops to retail goods. It is for this reason that these women take a lot of risks to come together every year. However, they are further encouraging the governments to ignore the rural areas. When governments carry out projects, the projects are concentrated in the cities. Since the women have the numbers, on their side, they would have been agents of change. They can compel governments to introduce policies that will benefit the local people. Where a government is stubborn and is mischievous, these women can help to vote out that government. They only have to agree among themselves to work against. Besides, the women have to consider if most women go back to their destinations more enriched than when they set out for the journey. Sending an army of women every August month of the year all over Nigeria on dangerous roads should make the organizers to consider other methods of congregation. The distances covered by a lot of women should make them reconsider the fixed period of August. The Christmas atmosphere can provide any set of people in Igbo land the opportunity to meet over issues like the ones discussed at the August meetings. Rigid policies like making attendance compulsory should be reconsidered. In fact, the high energy prices have dealt a blow to the August Meeting. This is not desired. It is not desired because the August Women's Meeting has added meaning to life as an Igbo woman. Igbo women have been making enormous contributions to their various villages as a result of this practice.

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