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**Feminist Consciousness and Assertiveness in Ifeoma Okoye's
*Behind the Clouds and Chimere***

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Abstract

In recent years, African women writers, among them Ifeoma Okoye, have focused on representing the lives and experiences of women in the African society in their literary works. Okoye is an African feminist who advocates feminist consciousness as a concept through which women can be enlightened for consciousness-raising, empowerment and assertiveness in her novels, *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*, while emphasizing education, economic independence and sisterhood as avenues for feminist consciousness-raising and actualization. This paper will, therefore, adopt the feminist approach in analyzing these works with a view to evaluating the impact of feminist consciousness on the lives of Okoye's female characters and how effectively they utilize education, economic independence and sisterhood to strategize, redefine themselves, challenge the status quo and attain their goals.

Introduction

Ifeoma Okoye is a contemporary African woman writer who, through her works, paints a vivid picture of the African woman's life in contemporary society, and challenges the retrogressive patriarchal culture that stifles women and renders them powerless, voiceless and passive. Her works, *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere* are significant as

they reflect what I. J. Ogbazi visualizes as a woman-centred world with a tapestry of interactions and relationships (57). Ogbazi further notes that *Behind the Clouds*, in particular, is “a complex discourse with layers of meanings which highlight pertinent issues that especially border on gender relations...” (67) that are significant and meaningful.

In her evaluation of Okoye’s works, Helen Chukwuma identifies *Behind the Clouds* as a novel which highlights the significance of motherhood in the African society and the subsequent impact of childlessness on marriages, and goes further to reveal “...the other face of the coin, that women are not always culpable and that some men are infertile...” (“Women Writing” 48); Remy Asiegbu concurs with this notion by remarking that Okoye’s aim is to redeem “the African woman who has blamed herself, and has been blamed for the childlessness that pervades her home” (212), a common marriage-related problem in the African society which has been exposed by many other African women writers for correction. In *Chimere*, on the other hand, Okoye focuses on “instruct[ing] younger women on the intricacies of man-woman relationship” (Asiegbu 212), in addition to highlighting other pertinent themes such as singlehood, female illegitimacy and the quest for personal identity.

For Charles Nnolim, however, Okoye is a champion of accommodationism (what some refer to as African feminism) who advocates a complementary relationship between men and women, and unity, not separation, between wives and their husbands (“A House Divided” 257). He also notes that apart from being a moral tale, the storyline in *Behind the Clouds* is “conceived in irony, leading to the circular structure of the novel” (“The Writings” 31), a technique which, in addition to the simplicity of her language and sentence structure, enables her to “represent her cultural analysis of the childless woman in Africa” (Ogbazi 57).

Another scholar, G. I. Achufusi, in her examination of Okoye’s female protagonists, aptly concludes that they demonstrate the capability to make alternative choices which are apart from specifically sex-oriented ones...” (159), a reflection of Okoye’s feminist perspective and a deliberate effort by the writer to reveal the feminist consciousness of her female characters.

Evidently, Okoye’s desire in *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*, published in 1982 and 1992 respectively, is to create awareness in individuals, that gender inequalities abound and affect them personally and to proffer women avenues through which their lives and experiences can be explained, understood and improved. Other published works by Okoye include *Men Without Ears* (1984) and *The Fourth World* (2013) and several children’s stories. Okoye, has been described by Patrick Naagbaton as one of the “unsung” contemporary writers whose message is straightforward though often provocative (“Ifeoma Okoye”).

Ifeoma Okoye’s Feminist Ideology

Many feminists, among them radical feminists, advocate a revolutionary means of examining and eradicating the problems women face in society, be it historical, sociological, economical or psychological. They also recognize the urgent need for women to be very active and, through consciousness-raising processes, become aware of and utilize their individual and collective power to overthrow any system that subjugates them and negates their actualization. For these feminists, Hilary M. Lips further observes:

...society's institutions must be transformed fundamentally rather than simply made more open to women's participation...[because] the hierarchichal, competitive, and individualistic values that permeate most institutions are fundamentally opposed to designing a system that would stress equality among groups... (563).

Ifeoma Okoye, on the other hand, advocates African feminism which Rose Acholonu aptly defines as follows:

[African feminism] is positive and dynamic in its recognition of the symbiotic relationship between the genders as well as the appreciation of the women's potential for growth and development which has to be harnessed and fostered for the well-being of the family, and the society at large (9).

African feminism advocates positive and progressive traditional values as well as commitment and understanding between men and women. The issues presented by Okoye through her characters in *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*, and the actions and reactions of these characters fall within the framework of African feminism. Evidently, Okoye's goal is to ensure that the well-being and positive growth of women in the African society is not impeded by structures established and enforced by a patriarchy. Her vision, therefore, finds substance in the following definition of feminism by bell hooks:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives..." ("Feminism" 26).

With the issue of subjugation central to her themes, Okoye analyzes and reveals issues revolving around gender relations in the Nigerian society and how these affect the lives of women as a whole. Inevitably, her feminist ideology influences her perception of these issues as she reveals in an interview published by T. Akachi Ezeigbo:

I am inspired by the things I see wrong in the society and I find that writing is a way of pointing out these evils and expressing them. Take, for example, my novel *Behind the Clouds*, I have relations and other women I have met who

suffered a lot of injustices because of being childless...[although] the woman is not always at fault when there is childlessness in marriage (108).

Feminist Consciousness and Okoye's Female Characters

Ifeoma Okoye is from the traditional Igbo culture of Nigeria, and a Christian background. The Igbo culture is patriarchal and upholds the importance of the family, and allots the role of leadership to men as heads of the family. This is closely aligned with the Christian faith which believes that like Christ is the head of the Church, the husband is the head of the home and the wife. As an African feminist and a Christian, Okoye concedes the leadership role in the family to men but stresses the importance of unity between men and women.

Although some extremely patriarchal African societies and cultures severely hamper the actualization of women in different spheres, Okoye's society and culture, despite its patriarchal nature, is more flexible in the creation of opportunities for women in the educational, economic, social and, even the political arena which is largely the preserve of men. Emphasis is therefore on the promotion of institutions that enhance the positive growth and development of women and the destruction of those that retard their growth. It is, therefore, inevitable that Okoye's peculiar response to feminism would find substance in the lives, experiences, attitudes, responses and actions of her female characters.

Francis Weffert opines that "the awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to the expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation" (qtd. in Freire 16). The import of this assertion for feminism is that, it underscores the need to view feminist consciousness-raising in the light of women's experiences in the patriarchal African society. As Kate Millet observes, one of the significant characteristics of patriarchy is its "very invisibility, its ability to masquerade as the "natural" and inevitable form of social organization... [so that] to become aware of the effects of male domination, women [have] to undergo a process of education, or reconceptualization known as consciousness-raising" (qtd. in Eisenstein 35). Thus, consciousness-raising highlights sexism and emphasizes women's consciousness of themselves as persons and also as members of an oppressed group. Gerda Lerner defines feminist consciousness thus:

[It is] the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs...the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural...but societally determined, ...the development of a sense of sisterhood...the autonomous definition of women of their goals and strategies for changing their conditions, [and] the development of an alternative vision of the future (232).

It is the awareness above points and consequent knowledge that Okoye seeks to instil in her readers and African women in particular. She successfully does this through the experiences of her female characters, who exhibit these traits of feminist consciousness, as is evident in the actions and reactions of Ije, Beatrice, Ugo Ushie, Virginia, Emily, and Patience in *Behind the Clouds*, and Chimere, Fidelia, Stella, and Kachi in *Chimere* respectively. These characters, through their feminist consciousness, are able to shape new ideals even within their role expectations, broaden their conception of the roles they play in society, and assert themselves as individuals and as women collectively.

Feminist consciousness embodies self-awareness, a better perception of one's identity, a recognition of one's potentials, which leads to a better understanding of self and the issues that affect one's life physically and psychologically. This creates an avenue for the development of an inner strength that enables the woman to assert and define herself in relation to the patriarchal system. For the African woman, self-awareness is the key to viewing her choices objectively, which, inevitably, leads to her physical, social and emotional development.

In recognition of the significant role feminist consciousness-raising plays in the emancipation of women, Okoye arms her contemporary female characters with tools of consciousness-raising such as education, economic independence and sisterhood, as well as qualities such as courage and resilience to enable them break from the mould and excel. These tools and qualities transform their consciousness and enable them to redefine their sense of individuality and worth, a heightened awareness which equips them to appropriate self-assertion, a freer expression of self, to shape their own ideals, values and destinies, and to also recognize what Hester Eisenstein refers to as "the previously invisible effects of patriarchy...[and become] attuned to the evidence of male domination to which previously one paid little attention, or ignored altogether" (35), and deal with it critically.

In the following segments, individual female characters who stand out as being feminist conscious and assertive in both works shall be discussed.

Ije

In the African setting, the family is regarded as the mainstay of society. This is because the value system of the society is preserved through the institution of marriage and the family. The patriarchal perception of marriage finds voice in Simone de Beauvoir's definition of marriage as "the destiny traditionally offered to women by society... [to enable her get] some share of the world as her own" (475). Marriage, in this sense, implies an honourable career which validates women's existence and lends them dignity. In *Behind the Clouds*, Catherine Acholonu's insight into the wifely role of the African woman becomes evident: "The woman is the one that must synthesize the

opposing qualities of height and depth, largeness and smallness, strength and weakness (tenderness) and she begins with this task when she assumes her role as a wife in her husband's home" (25-26).

Ije is able to combine the qualities above in her marriage to Dozie. Backed by her intellect and qualities such as simplicity, modesty, and good naturedness, she displays a strong sense of feminist consciousness in the performance of her duties as a wife - she supports her husband in school and maintains this support until he establishes his business and, subsequently, becomes the inspiring force and brain behind his success even as a businessman. It could be argued that although Ije totally embraces her traditional roles as a wife, she displays an awareness of self and strength which manifests in her conscious engagement in a role-reversal with her husband; this enables her to exert her power and influence in her role as a wife and ensures her husband's physical, emotional and psychological well-being through the positive contributions she makes to the home. Dozie, her husband openly acknowledges Ije's role in his success: "I owe my success in my business ventures to her. I don't know what I would have done without her" (37; ch. 4). Ije, therefore, proves to be an indispensable partner to her husband, all thanks to her resourcefulness, resilience and assertiveness as a feminist conscious woman.

Faced with childlessness, Ije chooses to remain in her marriage despite the intrusion of Virginia, the new wife, with the promise of a child. This reaction would enable her to follow the prescribed course of her own fulfilment and self-realization. However, when this actualization is threatened by Dozie's faithlessness and lack of trust, Ije further reacts by establishing a fresh identity for herself outside her marriage through separation. This step is necessitated by the need to affirm her individuality which, inevitably, leads to her exoneration and actualization.

Intriguingly, Ije's feminist consciousness, manifests in the realization that her fulfilment and self-realization lie within her successful performance of her role as a wife. It is for this reason that her internal concept of self does not diminish even in the face of criticism. Her self-image is only threatened when she is faced with childlessness and the threat of her husband taking a second wife. This is because, as Drucilla Cornell rightly observes, if the woman is symbolical reduced to the maternal function which makes her social worth inseparable from the fulfilment of her duty as a mother, childlessness would automatically result in the loss of this status (299). Unwilling to allow childlessness to define her, she demonstrates her feminist consciousness through the decisions and choices she makes.

Through Ije's predicament, Okoye projects the notion that an awareness of one's situation could result in a reaction through which one could be liberated, as does happen in Ije's case. Dozie, her husband, is forced to discover the real truth behind their childlessness and to apologize for having subjected her to all kinds of unpleasant and

dangerous treatments on the premise that she was culpable, when all along, the fault had been his. Ije's reaction, therefore, proves to be the catalyst that eventually leads to her reconciliation with her husband and subsequent fulfilment.

Beatrice

Beatrice, another character, faces a similar predicament as Ije - childlessness in her marriage. She reveals: "My husband is worried to death...His parents, his relations, his friends, all keep telling him to get himself another wife to bear him an heir. I am sure that one of these days he'll heed their advice. He's getting fed up with me... (4; ch. 1). Like Ije, Beatrice reacts to this predicament through the choices she makes. Her level of awareness, however, manifests in her shrewd analysis and questioning of a situation where women are always blamed for a couple's inability to conceive a child.

Beatrice's reaction to this predicament is to strive for actualization by resorting to infidelity with Apostle Joseph, and passing off the resultant pregnancy as her husband's in order to save her marriage and safeguard her future. Although Beatrice's decision, while seeking her fulfilment, leads to her debasement, it also achieves her goal: the preservation of her husband's pride and dignity and the preservation of her place in her husband's home.

Ugo Ushie

Ugo Ushie is a character who is not only confident, but also very assertive as an individual. Okoye describes her thus:

[She] is an outspoken woman who would not let anyone bully her or disparage her and get away with it... Nothing ever seemed to disturb the underlying calm of her life for she had a tranquility, a perfect grip on herself that everybody admired... she did not care about what people said about her, always dismissing such gossip by saying that her self-esteem did not depend on the opinion of other people (31; ch. 4, 61; ch. 7).

Ugo Ushie is, thus, empowered to speak against all forms of oppression and domination. Recognizing the significance of others' perceptions and opinions in shaping one's psyche and development and, equipped with confidence which manifests through this consciousness, she makes a conscious effort not to create room for others' negative perceptions to impact her life or shape her destiny. Although married, Ugo Ushie's confidence in her power as a woman and an individual shine through in her relationship with others and her reactions to the situations she encounters in her daily life.

Chimere

In Okoye's *Chimere*, we encounter the protagonist, Chimere, who battles against the stigma of illegitimacy and the conception that an illegitimate child, especially a

daughter, is the product of a wayward mother, headed for the same fate as her mother. By virtue of the double standards in society, the illegitimate female child, unlike the male child, is stigmatized and ridiculed, a situation which prompts Chimere to question her mother about her parentage and to resolve to find a solution to her predicament by tracing her father. This decision is predicated on an awareness of the need to carve a personal identity for herself, failing which she would forever remain a social reject in a society and culture which places high premium on legitimacy. According to Ronald L. Taylor, “identity represents an evolving articulation of personal capacities, value identifications and...plans, ideals, expectations and opportunities” (202).

Chimere’s search for her father is, therefore, equated with the search for her personal identity which would inevitably create new avenues for her fulfilment. Her self-awareness and determination enable her to acquire new ideals separate from those of her mother, a reaction which leads to a series of personal, occupational and ideological commitments. She asserts herself by defying her mother’s order not to embark on the search for her father, gets herself a job in order to become financially independent and, finally, takes a bold step to introduce Weluche, her boyfriend, to her mother who, due to her personal experiences, has become wary of men.

Chimere’s quest for personal identity proves to be successful; her father is forced to acknowledge her in the following words: “You are the only being that I have who really belongs to me...my daughter” (172-173; ch. 27). This acceptance enables Chimere to attain the personal identity and the actualization she sets out to achieve. She grows into a confident, independent and assertive young woman who does not allow the circumstances of her birth and her mother’s subsequent misgivings about the failures of her father, to determine her fate.

Kachi

Kachi, a character who appears in Okoye’s *Chimere* and, a close friend to the protagonist, has an outlook on life which is very similar to that of Ugo Ushie. Indeed, she exhibits a similar consciousness as is evident in her attitude to life. In a conversation with Chimere, she asserts:

The way I live my life is nobody’s business but mine. You know I don’t bother about what people think about my way of life as long as I do what I think is right. Let me warn you. If you go about bothering...about what people think of you, you’ll be very unhappy in life. (27; ch. 5)

For Kachi (as well as Ugo Ushie), the choice of being true to oneself emanates from an awareness of who one is and what one wants to achieve in life without the undue influence of others. Okoye thus proffers Kachi (and Ugo Ushie) as positive models of sisterhood for Chimere and Ije respectively.

Okoye's female characters are clearly women who are aware of their position as women in the African context and the way society perceives them and the roles they play. They are also determined to carve their own identity and, as feminist conscious women, are unafraid of confronting the realities and challenges they meet in their everyday lives. Characters such as Ije, Ugo Ushie, Beatrice, Patience and Emily, all presented as feminist conscious are married while those who are not, among them Chimere and Kachi, look forward to the attainment of this status in the future. Interestingly, however, the roles they play in their marriages are positively influenced by their level of feminist consciousness.

Avenues of Feminist Consciousness-Raising and Assertiveness

One of the significant themes in Okoye's works is the necessity for feminist consciousness-raising among women to equip them with the tools required for assertiveness. T. Akachi Ezeigbo observes that "this is the time for women to diversify their interests and venture into areas they had shied away from in the past...and carve a niche for themselves... [with] determination, discipline and a willingness to work...twice as hard as a man to prove her mettle in our male-oriented society" (53). Okoye, therefore, advocates education, economic independence and sisterhood as powerful consciousness-raising tools through which women can come to understand, realize and utilize their assertive strengths.

Education

As noted by Wendy Hollway, formal education is one of the most powerful avenues of consciousness-raising, for "women's formal qualifications are the strongest counter-weapon at their disposal (hence the importance of training)" (266). Education gives women the tool to expand their opportunities. In *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*, female characters such as Ije, Beatrice, Emily, Patience, Ugo Ushie, and Chimere are able to prove their worth as crucial members of society who contribute their knowledge and skills in professions such as accounting, teaching, and business, to upgrade themselves, their homes and society. Education equips the woman to strategically adopt "a positivistic view in crisis...think, plan, execute and concretize ...[and] through this maze of self-assertion... [reveal herself] as a person capable of taking and effecting decisions" (Chukwuma, "Positivism" 4). It is based on this perception that Beatrice, armed with knowledge, is able to contradict the traditional view about children being a reward for women's virtue by pointing out that "not all virtuous people are lucky" (5; ch. 1), and to take concrete action to better her lot.

Chimere's mother, Fidelia Ato also reacts against the stigma of single motherhood and poverty by striving to ensure that her daughter is educated, a reflection of her recognition of the important role education plays in women's upliftment. Chimere acknowledges and supports her mother's efforts by working hard in school in order to graduate in flying colours. Education also enables her to come to the realization that

she is the only one that can truly define her personal identity and this prompts her to become assertive in the quest for a solution to her predicament.

Evidently, for Okoye, education is a consciousness-raising tool which serves as a gateway to other opportunities and choices open to the woman to assert herself positively in the African society.

Economic Independence

Economic independence is an indispensable tool in female assertiveness. It is in this regard that Achufusi opines that “when a woman is resourceful and self-reliant, independent of the man financially, she can boldly exercise the right to choose between alternatives” (160). It is on this basis that Ije is able to support herself financially when she is forced to move out of her matrimonial home for a while.

Another character in *Behind the Clouds* who asserts her economic independence in her marriage is Emily whose reaction to the financial limitations in her family is to engage in business which eventually leads to her actualization. In *Chimere*, Chimere also battles the stigma of her illegitimacy by arming herself through economic independence which gives her the freedom to redefine her identity and readjust her sense of self.

Evidently, Okoye values economic independence as a tool through which women can confront and reject all obstacles that stand between them and their positive affirmation.

Sisterhood

Sisterhood is another significant consciousness-raising avenue in Okoye’s works. Bell hooks reveals the following intriguing aspects of sisterhood:

[it] is the outcome of continued growth and change...a process of becoming... [which] begins with action... the refusal to accept... myths, stereotypes and assumptions that deny the shared commonness of [a woman’s] human experience; that deny her capacity to experience the unity of all life; that deny her capacity to bridge gaps created by racism, sexism, or classism; that deny her ability to change. (Aint I A Woman 157)

Okoye strongly advocates sisterhood as an avenue through which women can share and benefit from their experiences. It manifests in the awareness of, and the consequent freedom of choice. A good number of Okoye’s female characters (Ije/Ugo Ushie; Ije/Beatrice; Chimere/Kachi) constitute a sisterhood which recognizes the problems of each individual, offers positive advice and help, and gives encouragement where needed. Ezeigbo notes that sisterhood should be “sustained by love, kindness, and respect that encourage mutual appreciation of each other...and [foster] genuine and positive “bonding” (59, 60). It is in this spirit of sisterhood that Ugo Ushie advises Ije during the troubled times in her marriage: “...get ready to put up a good fight for your

rights just in case what the woman [Virginia] says is true” (76; ch. 9). Ugo Ushie encourages Ije to realize that assertiveness, not passivity, is required to turn her situation around. Her words exhort Ije and challenge her to fight for her rights in her marital home and Ugo Ushie stands by her until the problem is resolved.

Through positive sisterhood, women can avoid being isolated, support each other through collective action, aware of the fact that their assertiveness can be negated if energy is solely focused on individual change efforts, thus contributing “to the continued powerlessness of women” (Crawford 85). However, Mrs. Okoh’s women’s club in *Behind the Clouds* is not recommended by either Ije or Ugo Ushie as a positive sisterhood because of their lack of purpose and focus on the frivolous.

To counter socialized stereotypes and passivity of women in society, individual and collective assertiveness is required on the part of women, and positive sisterhoods are channels through which women can be empowered to fearlessly challenge and witness to the injustices in the society.

Conclusion

Feminist consciousness breeds positive attributes such as raised-consciousness, self-awareness, determination and assertiveness - powerful tools through which women can confront and unravel assumptions about themselves individually or collectively in the African society. It is pertinent to note that in *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*, Okoye successfully explores the theme of feminist consciousness and female assertiveness as avenues through which women can rise above their limitations in an oppressive system and change the way in which their gender is perceived. With these qualities, they can also infiltrate spheres reserved for men and prove that they are indeed capable of playing integral roles in the transformation and development of themselves and society. Through her themes and characters, Okoye has proved to be a worthy and successful champion of this new woman in her works.

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