

Oral Literature and Femininity: The Igbo Example

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Abstract

Several works have been done on one type of African literature or another. This paper is another attempt to look into literature, with emphasis on the place of women in literature, especially Igbo literature. It will look at the oral-traditional aspect. 'Oral' and 'traditional' here, mean vocal nature of its performance and its transmission and dissemination by word of mouth from one generation to another. The traditional oral genres as carried out here are musical styles, which are part of the cultural tradition. It could be with religious origin, domestic function or institutional association. Since they are part of the cultural lives of the people, they are preserved, so that the younger generations may learn the culture and ethics of their people.

Introduction

Oral literature is one that is performed orally. Anasiudu (1997:7) termed it oral culture; a term used to describe the original condition of orality that prevailed in most Black Africa before writing system came. Some aspects of oral literature form the basis for most contemporary literature, and many contemporary Igbo musicians have their music party or wholly based, on the traditional literature. This shows that the past is being carried into the present, and that is to say that, culture is a continuum. Despite some modifications in some of our present day Igbo music styles, there are always some shades of traditional music incorporated in them. Most of these were taken from women-composed songs. Women have been part and parcel of literature in the traditional setting in various forms.

They involve in literature first, by themselves traditional, through the production and presentation of their oral performances and secondly, by men's incorporation of women, into their works of arts, via characterization.

In Igbo cultural setting, 'when lizards were few in number, when the grounds were so soft for the chameleon to thread on', so to say, women were chief players in oral performance like lyrics, satire, less rigorous dances, elegy and so on. Men as the 'stronger sex, perform rigorous and acrobatic dances and also monologues, during funerals (like funeral of a brave man or a warrior). This paper discusses in two related parts, the impact of women in African literature and with particular attention to the Igbo literary genres, which more or less were birthed from the oral aspect. Part one discusses Igbo oral literature, while part two discusses male works and femininity

Igbo oral literature

We start this discussion by first looking at literature in general. It may not be so easy finding a suitable definition of literature, which will accommodate the literature ideologies of all societies, at the same time. Literature can be defined, according to Igboanusi (1999) in relation to the society that owns it. This is because if we say that literature is "...all the genres of public communicated written matter of a society "which really describes literature as Chinweizu (1981)" says, it may not accommodate African literature, which much of it is oral, and Igbo literature is part of what comprises African literature.

When we define literature in relation to the society that owns it, then we can talk of Igbo literature (African), Roman literature, and so many others like that. In this light, taking from Ezejideaku's (1986) idea, we can say that Igbo literature is all works of art done in Igbo language. This could be done by any artist and for any interested audience. It could be oral or written works of art. Igbo traditional literature, because of its unwritten nature can also be called oral performance, (Finnegan, 1970:2).

Oral literature comprises all aspects of creative art communicated

orally. It includes traditional drama, stories (oral narratives), poem such as lyrics, satires, elegy, anecdotes, proverbs, riddles and so on. Oral literature, serves as the foundation for African creative art in language form, and also a point of departure, for modern literature.

All Igbo traditional poetic forms are oral, but not all forms orally presented are traditional. Why this is so is because, some oral performances by both male and female are western-influenced, although in some of them one can still find some elements of traditional poetry. Some music genres that fall into this category are 'highlife', Afro, Pop and so on. Nearly all of them are composed, written and rehearsed with modern-day studio works. A good number of female artists fall under this category, for example, Onyeka Onwenu, Stella Muonye and so on. Many of these female artists spice up their works with some bits of oral literature.

Oral texts which form the basis of all poetic performance, are traditional materials based on the experiences and observations of the life lived by successive generations. They reflect the people's cultural values, beliefs, and practices. They are a creation of the past. And because they state the rules and ethics of the society, they are 're-created and 'reenacted in musical idiom' Oluokoju (1978). They are meant to entertain, inform, instruct and guide the young generation. And on this rests the survival of the tradition. Interestingly, the greater part of these oral texts, are women compositions.

Many of them are on-the-spot compositions, while some took time to be composed. In the past, and presently in some parts of Igbo, women spend a considerable time, like a period of three to six months learning some folk songs and dances, with musical instruments accompaniment. Such types are usually presented to the whole town or village with pomp and pageantry. There is usually a special day for the outing of such a group. Many of such types abound. Their names vary from community to community. In some areas, they are known as "Ogoligbasia O kuru Nwa, Egwu Agala, Nkwa Umu Agbogho, Egwu Amala, O yiri Oga" and so on.

It is important to note that, young females do also have an organized group of their own that carry out oral-performance. In many occasions,

they are usually young females within a particular age-bracket. Mothers and older girls initiate and encourage these young girls, in this type of art. In such organized groups, there is always night after night of practice sessions.

Most of the times, an expert from another town or village, is hired to teach the women the songs, dancing steps and the beatings of the musical instrument. Women's aesthetic expressions largely center on music, song and dances, as well as story-telling. It is an art form dominated and controlled by females. Males are characteristically on-lookers, at the outer ring of the circle of women performers. The best singer among the group at times, leads to song. She would be singing and others will be responding with the chorus. Like in every other West African culture, 'the songs are varied and rich in text' Ottenberg (1983).

Women perform for example, during wedding ceremonies (both the traditional and the church weddings). During the church wedding ceremonies in many communities around Awka, like Umuawulu, Nise, Mbaukwu, and in some other towns like Uga, the women from the bridegroom's side usually perform in the reception hall, to receive the bride into their group. They would play, and the husband and wife will dance to their musical tune and well wishers would be spraying them with money. But in the traditional wedding ceremony, it is usually the females from the bride's side that would perform such. They would sing and dance with her, while welcoming the bridegroom and his entourage. After the traditional wedding, it is very common thing for the bride to follow the bridegroom and his kinsmen (Umunna) home, so that she could return the empty keg of wine with which they brought the wine, for the traditional marriage. On reaching home, other women who have been eagerly waiting for her would render many beautiful songs both to welcome her, and to remind the husband of his duties towards her. An example is: (1):

- (1) Meghelu ya uzo
Meghelu ya uzo
N'Onatago!
Zutalu ya akwa

Zutalu ya goolu
N'Onatago!
[Open the door for her/Open the door for her/She
has arrived/Buy clothes for her/Buy gold for her/
She has arrived.]

Example (a) is written in a dialect spoken around Awka, because that is the exact way it is rendered. It is an example of institutional-associated songs - marriage institution. Some can be of religious origin, like when women of a particular church group gather for a social function. They render various songs to reaffirm their faiths in their religious groups, as we see in example (2):

- (2) M choba ijenu uka o
Ka m jebe semaasi o
O semaasi o
Ndi otu anyi na-eme ife n' ofu
Fa yiri mu o ka anyi naa
O ka o si adi o
Iyoogoogoo!
[If I need a church to join/I should go to St. Mark's/
Our group St. Mark's/Are always in unity/May they
not isolate me.]

Apart from these, they also render songs with satirical notes. This type is rendered, when a fellow woman or even a man misbehaves. The purpose of such is to check and correct some of the ill-practices, in the early Igbo society. They prompt men and women to behave in the desired and acceptable ways of the society. This satirical song is called *ikpe* in the standard form of Igbo, and *Ogbe* in Nise dialect, a dialect spoken around Awka. No right thinking Igbo native in the past, would like to be satirized, and as such would conduct himself or herself in the society's accepted ways, thereby maintaining peace and tranquility in the society. One may ask, what are those behaviors that can attract *ikpe* (*Ogbe*)? Among such behaviors are (i) when a woman or a grown-up lady steals, (ii) when a woman wears men's attire. This had a very strong tendency of attracting

Ogbe in the past (iii) when a man constantly beats his wife, (iv) when a married woman becomes pregnant outside wedlock. (v) when a woman leaves her village to another village's market, for business transaction, on the announcement of the death of a fellow woman, in their community, (vi) when a woman refuses to do works and many other bad conducts. What attracts *Ogbe* varies from one community to another.

In the past, women that refuse to do farm work were satirized with *Ogbe* songs. *Ogbe* is so strong that a victim of it either changes automatically, or leaves the village to another place, because shame may not allow such a one to continue residing in that community, especially when there is no positive change:

- (3) Gwa m ndi ogbali alukomkom
Nwume Ogbalu alukomkom
Ililo adiri adili n'ubi
O ya-alu alu
Kedi ndi kwa ututu kwa fai fai
Nwume kwa ututu kwa fai fai
Olu adili n'ubi
O ya-alu alu!
[Tell me the high-heel wearers/Nwume the high-heel
wearers/Weeds are in the farm/Will she weed/Who
cooks delicacies every morning/Nwume cooks
delicacies every morning/Works are in the farm/
Will she work.]

Nwume in the above text is a victim of such satire. She does not like to work in the farm, but enjoys delicacies every morning. 'Fai fai' as used in the texts, stands for both the aroma and the sound of her stew, each time she fries and cooks in her kitchen. Such are mostly on-the-spot composition prompted by the state of the mind of the composer.

During funerals, for example, a bereaved woman; could produce spontaneous elegies and lamentations to mourn her husband; for example:

- (4) Umeadi onye Igbaria abiagolu ya e e!
Nwankwo onye Aguleri abiagolu ya e e!
O wee siebe na Akwuoba ga-anuebe Akwuoba o
O di ye di izizi di egwu e e e

Umeadi onye Igbaria bia nuru ude onwu e e
O di ye di izizi di egwu e e e
Nwankwo onye Aguleri bia nuru ude onwu e e!
O di ye di izizi di egwu e e e

Umunne ya si ya buru Aguleri ka
O koru ogbii
Odii ye izizi di egwu e e e

O sitegoru mgbe o jere oku izizi mkpanye ogbii
E wee techaa azu kiiri ya mmiri ofe (owbe)
O wee rie nni o wee siebe na
Ihe (iwbe) nnwa ga-akariebe Akwuoba o
O di ye di izizi di egwu e e e

In example d, the bereaved woman in stanza 1, listed the names of suitors who asked for her hand in marriage as Umeadi and Nwankwo, before she finally married the late husband. She lamented that, she married him because they were name-sakes and called these men to come and behold her state of mourning. In stanza 2, her relatives advised her to marry the man from Igbaria so that she could be free from poverty and lack. She also recounts her experiences in the very first visit she made to the late husband's house. Despite the plenty fish in the soup, she was given watery soup to eat with. There and then she knew that it would be a difficult task for her.

In the genre of Igbo narrative, it appears that men have been in the fore. The reason for this could possibly be the traditional role women play in the home. Women in almost every culture had their primary role or traditional role as home keepers in the past, before any other thing. This primary role of home keeping has more, often than not limited women, in what they can do vis-à-vis socio-political, economical and writing of

novels not exempted. In the traditional Igbo society, women were solely dependent on men (their husbands), perhaps, since they were busy with the house works, their men then wrote down for them those stories they tell their children as folktales which most often border on morality, justice, chastity, solidarity and other virtues, that would help them to grow into good and useful adults. It is believed that since women stay close to their children, they are likely to influence them positively or negatively. This notion probably could be the reason they say that:

- (5) Nwa di mma o buru nke nna ya
Mana nwa di njo, o buru nke nne ya.
[When a child does well he/she becomes the father's child, but when he/she does not, he/she becomes the mother's.]

It is in the light of this that women, especially in Igbo society, tell folktales to their children, (both biological and non biological ones). They believe that once a child is born, he or she is no longer owned by the mother alone, but by all the women in the community. That is why, a woman will see another woman's child misbehaving and goes on to correct that child. At times, she can punish if the occasion demands. There are a lot of stories that fall under this category; example:

- (6) Akuko gbasara ihe usu ejighi buru anu elu nke o ji buru anu ala.
[Story on why the bat does not belong to neither the group of animals that live on the land, or those that perch on the trees.]

This story teaches the children to always identify with their kinsmen, promote and support them always. They should not be like 'usu' the bat in the story, who only identifies with the winning faction, only to turn away from them as soon as they start losing. In this way, the children learn to be good and responsible citizens, who would always perform their civic rights in the society. This oral narrative, though mostly told by mothers, can be found in some male-authored works like *Mbe Di Ogu - Ogbalu F.C* (1971).

Male works and femininity

A lot of early male writers have presented much of their female characters, in misunderstood and misinterpreted states of helplessness and relegation. These are the male chauvinists. This negative portrayal of their female characters nevertheless, has contributed to women's studies. A lot of research works have been carried out on the female characterization; in so many works of art, thereby helping to bring women's studies to popularity. Many early male-authors down-played the role of women in their works; Achebe for instance, classifies any weak character in his novel as having feminine quality, and a brave one as having manly quality. Following this, it appears that all women are generally weak and incapable of achieving a feat, and it is not true. Fashina (2000:66) says,

Achebe's characterization of Unoka in *Things Fall Apart* contrasts sharply with his depiction of Okonkwo ... Although the two characters are male, development in cultural theories and psychoanalysis yield a meaning whereby the physically weak... character ... is a feminine personality. On the other hand, the vigorous, energetic, fierce and rash characteristic of Okonkwo is of masculine personality.

Some male writers present female characters as subservient subjects. In Onyekonwu's *Nwata Rie Awo*, the position of Obioma (Aworo's first wife) is such a helpless one that nobody could save the situation for her. She was driven out of her matrimonial home simply, because she bore a baby girl as her first child. The husband should have blamed himself for failing to produce the Y chromosomes that could have given him a male child. At the peak of the drama, the man (Aworo) married his own daughter, the very child which made him to drive his wife. The position of Aworo here, should be such that has the capacity of generating much sympathy for him, and not any reason the women in his life.

Aworo's male chauvinistic attitude destroyed him. Although he was a hero at the beginning of the drama (a renowned wrestler), he did not die any less better than a coward. The existence of male and female

characters, even in texts should be complementary, as they exist in symbiotic and determinate relations to each other. The feminine ideology that would emerge from the cultural interpretation of African literary texts is that femininity, becomes an ideal anchor point for co-sexual existence, peace and harmony in the society. Femininity is describable as composing the elemental, social, psychological and cultural forces of morality, virtue, peace, patience, faithfulness, which any of them can be found in a male or female character.

Gladstone quoted in Fashina (above) says, "if there be a subject in the whole compass of human life and experiences that is sacred, beyond all other subjects, it is the character and position of women." This shows the importance of women as a gender with both asymmetric relationships with men.

However, in some African novels feminist image or female personality is built on overt positive depiction of women as spiritual forces, mother-figures, counselors, and powers of reproductive principle. In Onwuchekwa's *Chinagorom*, this positive image of femininity is seen. Dr. Chijioko and his wife complemented each other in the narrative. Chijioko's wife (Chinagorom) is even shown as a heroine. The way she handled those bad rumors about her 'pregnancy outside wedlock' and how she managed to retain her husband, in the midst of other women, who wanted to have him, and at the end, went for her doctorate degree is plausible and commendable.

In the contemporary Igbo literature, there seems to be a deliberate discontinuation of the ancient ideas and thoughts, which form the bulk of traditional literature. Modernity is applied to writings marked by a strong and conscious break from traditional forms and techniques of expression. Oral literature appears to be fading away. The few remaining ones have been more or less modernized to the western style. Satirical poems women used to affect positive changes in the lives of erring members of the society are not performed orally again (bits of it could be found in some published texts). The reason for this could be linked to the recognition of human rights, which have come to be in our contemporary society. The modern life style has to a great extent created no room for traditional

oral literature.

Soloist elegies by the bereaved are not common again. Written funeral orations like poems and recitations, seems to have replaced that. Home narration of folktales has been overtaken by television programmes and home videos. By way of preservation, many writers have converted them as written text.

Conclusion

Oral literature is part of the cultural life of a people, as a result, it is preserved, and made manifest in different forms especially through music, so that the younger generation may learn the culture and ethnics of their people. In this particular aspect, women are in the fore. Also, some male writers portray women characteristics as being weak, incapacitated and helpless, thereby linking femininity with powerlessness.

But following Gladstone quoted in Fashina (2006:66), "if there be a subject in the whole compass of human life and experience that is sacred, beyond all other subjects, it is the character and position of women". This shows the importance of women as a gender with both asymmetric and symmetric relationship with men.

Moreover, in some African novels feminist image or female personality is built on overt positive depiction of women as spiritual-forces, mother-figures, counselors, and powers of reproductive principle, and this is how it is supposed to be.

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