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**ORARA AS A SYMBOL OF FEMININE BEAUTY AND
MEEKNESS IN SELECT NOVELS OF IGBO FEMALE WRITERS**

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Abstract

The similitude that exists in the depiction of the major characters of pioneer Nigerian female writers (who are, incidentally, Igbo) tasks the mind as it reflects on a possible cause of this semblance. This paper located a double pronged characteristic that is shared by all the major characters in the works under study – one of beauty and gentle spirit. These features have a symbolic significance (*Orara*) in an Igbo sub-culture (Mbaise). *Orara*, a snake, is one of the symbols in *Mbari* representing feminine beauty and meekness in repressed strength – traits that womanism upholds. Text analysis, oral tradition and interviews provide points that aid the study of the relationship between these concepts – female characters, *Orara* and womanism. It is deduced that the identical characterization in the works of Igbo female writers - Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*; Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Bride Price*; and Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere* - has its root in the writers' re-creation of the real experiences of the ordinary woman in the Igbo society whose natural reactions to her plight gravitates more to the womanist than the feminist angle, producing traits that are similar to those of *Orara*. And while womanism is not new in relation to the study of the works of Igbo female writers, it has not been studied against a significant symbol in the Igbo tradition. *Orara* is, thus, seen as the ideological locus for womanism and may be put under further scrutiny to establish it as the muse of Igbo female writers.

Key Words: Womanism, Characters, Beauty, Meekness, Symbol, *Orara*, Igbo.

Introduction

Ogundipe's (1994) criticism of African female writers for dissociating themselves from feminism takes the shape of half a bean seed (or so it seems) whereby one compliments the other to make a perfect whole. The vacuum created by the female writer's seeming repudiation of feminism is filled by the female critic's vehement disapproval of that choice. Ogundipe is appalled that, "...many of the African female writers like to declare that they are not feminists as if it were a crime to be feminist" (Ogundipe, 1994, p. 64). The support of some other credible

female critics consolidates her claims. Arndt (2002) is worried that, “many African women...distance themselves from feminism” (Arndt, 2002, p. 33); Ezeigbo (1996) is “taken aback at the pronouncements or speeches made by some prominent women writers or professionals in repudiation of feminism” (Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 2); Ogunyemi (2004) agrees, contextually, that “Nwapa and Emecheta consistently deny a feminist ideological bent...” (Ogunyemi, 2004, p. 115). This perceived rejection of feminism may be understood from the explanation given by some of the writers. Nwapa (2007) and Emecheta (1995) note respectively:

In my first two novels, I tried to recreate the experiences of women in the traditional African society - their social and economic activities and above all their pre-occupation with the problems of recreation, infertility, and child-bearing. (Nwapa, 2007, p. 528)

I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small ‘f’. (Emecheta, 1995, p. 553)

The female writer’s inclination to recast the ordinary experiences of the ordinary woman in the society produces women whose traits are alike. This is because, the realities of the women who are represented by these writers are identical. The conditioning of these characters, by similar forces, to react in the same ways is not overlooked by the writers, either. Each author’s independent recreation of a female character who turns out to have common attributes as the lead characters of the other writers, solidifies the Igbo female author’s claim of allegiance to the realities of the Igbo woman in a patriarchal society. An outstanding mannerism that permeates these characters is the two-in-one characteristic of beauty and meekness; added to this is the trait of assertiveness, the inclination to put up a fight when they can no longer withstand the assault to their humanity. These features are found in all the major characters of the foremost novels of the female writers of Igbo origin and they relate to the tenets of womanism – loving beauty, gentle approach to the struggle for female emancipation, and assertiveness.

Against this backdrop, most probably, Ogunyemi (2004) observes that the female writers do not become feminists simply because they write about women. She infers that they are womanists since their works are basically focused on “opposing oppression, especially (but not exclusively) its manifestation as wo/man wahala or palava” (Ogunyemi, 2004, p. 124). This, according to her, is the central focus of womanism.

Womanism, according to the three proponents - Alice Walker, Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems - has its roots in the African tradition. It advocates for the emancipation of women and peaceful co-existence of all peoples in justice and fairness. However, Ogunyemi’s version of womanism concentrates more on the family with women at the centre. It does not support the discrimination of women, neither does it uphold “a debilitating and devastating political struggle for women’s liberation, independence, and equality against men, to prove a feminist point” (Ogunyemi, 2004, p. 121). Womanism uses peace, subtlety and assertiveness as tools to bring about liberation, not just for women but for human race as a whole. According to Ogunyemi, a womanist is an *odozi ani* (rehabilitator).

The question of who or what supports this idea of *odozi ani* in the Igbo tradition brings us to the concept of *Orara* – a snake that shares these characteristics and is regarded as a feminine

symbol representing beauty and meekness. Thus, this work studies, against the tenets of womanism, the similarities between the features of *Orara* and the attributes of the major characters in the works of Igbo female writers. The criticism of the African female writers for their aversion to feminism is challenged here as the obscurity surrounding the Igbo female writer's reluctance to fully ally with feminism gets demystified with the unraveling of *Orara*. It is hoped that feminist discourse will tend towards harnessing the latent beauty inherent in women over and above the attack on female writers for their repudiation of feminism.

***Orara* as a Symbol**

The world of the traditional Igbo-speaking people of south-eastern Nigeria is remarkable for its wealth of ritual symbolism. There exists a rich variety of concepts as well as verbal, gestural, and material object forms. (Ejizu, 1992, p. 379)

Orara is one of the symbols in Mbari. Okparaocha (1976), in his book, *Mbari: Arts as Sacrifice*, notes: "This (*Orara*) is another object depicted on the Mbari house. Orira (sic) is a kind of snake. Because of its colourful skin, people call it *agwo-oma*, good snake" (Okparaocha, 1976, p. 29). Okparaocha emphasizes the positive connotation of this snake, against the popular conception of snakes as evil, and its symbolic significance – representing beauty and meekness.

The most popular notion of snake is as a gentle deceiver. The Garden of Eden story of the Serpent and Eve births and feeds this negative view of the snake. The Old Testament recalls that he (the serpent) was "more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made" (Gen. 3:1 NKJV). In the New Testament, Paul says: "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3 NKJV). In the book of Revelation, the snake of Eden is referred to as, "that serpent of old, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world (Rev. 12:9 NKJV).

However, by encouraging Christians to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves," (Matt. 10:16) Jesus negates the assumption that snake symbolizes evil, always. Also, Moses' serpent becomes a healing symbol for the Israelites, saving them from snake bite (Num. 21:8-9). The Apostle John recalls this serpent much later in the New Testament noting that Christ likens Himself to the snake lifted up by Moses, in the wilderness, for the salvation and healing of all those who believe (John 3:14). Describing the symbolic nature of snakes (serpent) Ferber (2007), in *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, writes:

All cultures that know them have found serpents fascinating. Indeed, serpents are said to "fascinate" the prey, cast a spell on them with a look: human cultures seem to have fallen under the sway. Snakes can be extremely dangerous, being both venomous and "subtle" or sneaky and in the legend at least some can fly, some swallow their own tails and some have a head at each end. The symbolic possibilities are rich and often ambiguous. (Ferber, 2007, p. 185)

Clearly, the symbolic varieties of snake are diverse and intriguing. Perhaps, this can be explained in the many types of snakes just as there cannot be one connotation for flower. Though, flower symbolizes beauty and maidenhood, generally, there are different connotations for different kinds of flowers. While Roses symbolize love and romance, violets stand for shyness, lilies represent beauty and temptation and chrysanthemums symbolize perfection. The same holds true, most likely, for snakes.

Orara, as a snake, is a feminine symbol denoting beauty and meekness. It does not represent the absence of strength but a deliberate repression of inherent power. Its placid and harmless nature, except when aggravated, qualifies it for this role. *Orara* is reputed to be a very beautiful snake; its beauty is said to be second only to that of *Osugwo*, another beautiful snake (R. Onyeoziri, Personal Communication, September 9, 2012).

Orara's beauty radiates inwards reflecting in its calmness and harmlessness until it is provoked. A woman's natural flair for showing off her beauty can be likened to *Orara*'s penchant in displaying its good looks by stretching its full length on a tree trunk or grasses. And this it does only when the sun is shining. There is a proverb among the Mbaïse clan of South-Eastern Nigeria that *Orara buru okpi y'apụọ n'anwu* (*Orara* crawls away from relaxing in the sun only when it is threatened with a stick). It is rarely seen, and there is the belief that it is a bad omen (*ehihi*) to see *Orara* when the sun is not shining. Okparocha (1976) noted:

To see it is also bad omen...It is believed that the person who is to die would transform himself into the snake...which is harmless and would either lie at the door of the relative to whom he wants to show his impending death, or the snake will lie on a path that the relative is expected to pass (p. 29).

Orara's popularity spreads across Igbo land (South-Eastern Nigeria), though there are slight variations in pronunciation and features. In Mbaïse, it is called *Orịra*, mostly, by the older generation, but the younger generation, generally, calls it *Orara*. In Ikeduru, it is also called *Orara* or *Orịra*. In some other Igbo localities like Anambra, Orlu and Oguta, *Orara* is recognized as a gentle snake. In Oguta, however, its calmness is further seen as imbecility so that someone who is referred to as *Orara* is seen as being gentle to a fault and is, therefore, regarded as an imbecile (S. Okorafor and I. Kamalu, Personal Communication, March 5, 2014). The characteristics of *Orara* as known by the Mbaïse people have been adopted for this analysis because of the deeper meaning which the Mbaïse community ascribes to *Orara*. Some Igbo communities, like Ikeduru, believe that *Orara* only bites to herald an unusual situation (I. Diala, Personal Communication, March 13, 2014). But, the Mbaïse people acknowledge that *Orara* becomes aggressive when it is substantially provoked or detects a hostile spirit in a person or thing. This gives birth to the proverb, *onwere onye Orara n'ahu arakisi anya* (*Orara* becomes violent at the sight of a certain person). This also means that where others find success and favour, a particular person meets with obstacle and hard luck.

This is true of the case of a lady from Ogbor, a village in Mbaïse, called Oraranma, who is still alive till this day. It is amazing how her name, clearly, manifests in her life. Some years ago, different religious vocations came to this village to recruit young ladies who would become Reverend Sisters later. My sister, Chidinma, and Oraranma were among the girls flown overseas for this purpose, at different points in time. My sister and the other ladies succeeded in the purpose for which they travelled abroad - they became Reverend Sisters. But, Oraranma returned after a couple of years bringing her novitiate to a halt. She could not stay long enough to become a Reverend Sister because she was said to be allergic to the weather over there. Why was it only Oraranma among the other ladies that reacted to the weather? She is very fair, beautiful and fragile, no doubt, but my sister is too, likewise few others. What then could have singled her out and redirected her purpose? People concluded that it was the action of *Orara*. Oraranma has, thus, lived her own name. That her destiny lies in the family and not in the convent is decipherable in her marriage after a while of her return.

Be that as it may, the preoccupation of this paper is not on the variety of meanings ascribed to *Orara*, by the Mbaïse people, but, on the characteristics of *Orara* as a feminine symbol denoting a beautiful and gentle woman, and its relationship to womanism and the works under study.

It is fascinating to note that many an Igbo woman shares these traits of beauty and strength in subtlety (and beauty, here, does not only refer to pulchritude, but, also, the inner comeliness of resilience, kindness, self-control and other feminine virtues). In his latest book, Achebe (2012) captures this dual nature of the Igbo woman. He says of his mother, “When I think about my mother the first thing that comes to my mind is how clearly the description ‘the strong, silent type’ fit her” (Achebe, 2012, p. 9). In a discussion with Onyemaechi Udumukwu, he recalls how very beautiful his mother was when they were growing up under her. And with this attractiveness comes a quiet and gentle demeanour. But, Udumukwu insists that they dare not cross his mother’s path because her anger could spell doom for the offending child (O. Udumukwu, Personal Communication, October 5, 2013). In like manner, this researcher recalls her mother to be a significantly tall and comely woman, full of elegance. She is very spiritual, naturally quiet, very kind and gentle. But when she is provoked, her eyes take on the sparkling golden colour of *Orara* and she literally emits venom, verbally. And should the offender be within reach, the obvious marks of her long fingers on his or her face would reveal the magnitude of her anger. These attributes that are, incidentally, very natural to *Orara*, are reflected in the major characters of Fora Nwapa’s *Idu* and *Efuru*, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* and *Joys of Motherhood*, and Ifeoma Okoye’s *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*.

Beauty and Meekness in Efuru and Idu

The constant discussion, by some members of the community, regarding Efuru’s pulchritude, betrays her great charm and rare charisma. She is said to be “so beautiful you would think that the woman of the lake is her mother.” And the listener concurs that, “After seeing this type of woman, one hisses when one sees one’s wife” (p. 12).

Efuru’s comeliness transcends the physical; she is a woman to be reckoned with, the bedrock of her husband’s existence as a character. When Adizua, her first husband, leaves Efuru, he ceases to exist in the novel. Only mere mention of his name reminds the reader of his character. Efuru’s uniqueness is decipherable in the supernatural aura about her and in her quiet demeanour. Moreover, she is hardworking, kind, and tolerant, yet firm. Her amiable and modest nature is readily overtaken by assertiveness when situations call for it, just as the harmless *Orara* strikes when provoked. She refuses to go to the farm with her husband: “If you like,” she said to her husband, “go to the farm. I am not cut out for farm work. I am going to trade” (p. 10). When her second husband, Gilbert, wants to take her on a very long journey to buy groundnut, Efuru disagrees: “I am tired of paddling and nothing will make me go farther” (p. 140). When Adizua fails to return after his elopement with another woman, Efuru’s meekness gives way to a drastic action that saw her leaving his house. She soliloquizes: “Our ancestors forbid that I should wait for a man to drive me out of his house. This is done to women who cannot stand by themselves, women who have no good homes, and not to me the daughter of Nwashike Ogene. And besides, my face is not burnt, I am still a beautiful woman” (p. 64). This is a reflection of the assertiveness that characterizes womanists.

Efuru’s inner beauty comes to the fore in her management of the difficult period in her life when her husband abandons her for another woman. She is careful and concerned about her image in the society. Her lingering in Adizua’s house, after his embarrassing elopement with another woman, does not translate to weakness or hopelessness. But, she tries to strike a balance between the society’s expectations of her, to endure and wait patiently for her husband, and her personal desire to disentangle herself from such a shameful situation. This is a typical womanist’s effort at accommodating African tradition to the point where her freedom, as an individual, commences. This qualifies Nwapa in the words of Coolidge (2017) as “an African

feminist to the core,” (Coolidge, 2017, p. 14) which put in another way, refers to her womanist propensity.

Discussing *Efuru* as a womanist novel, Sonkamble (2011) noted:

Efuru the protagonist is witnessed as content in her life in spite of a couple of mishaps. She remains composed instead of making any uncertain moves leading to societal disruption. Per contra, she continues her life of a woman of identity. (Sonkamble, 2011, p. 1)

In *Idu*, the beautiful and gentle major character, Idu, is a reflection of *Orara*. Her beauty and allure causes her husband to proclaim, “...what man will marry another woman after marrying you. You know you are different” (91). He proudly says to his age-mates when they visit him one night:

Is my wife awake? Come, my dear wife. I am satisfied with you. When I see you my stomach is filled. I am hungry no more. My age-group sit down. Come tell me, have you got a wife like my wife...? Don't you know who she is? She is my wife, Idu my wife. After marrying her you wouldn't want to marry any other woman! (pp. 160, 161).

Interestingly, Adizua gives almost the same reason for not marrying another wife when Efuru's childbearing is delayed: “...you know I will be the last person to hurt you, my wife. You know I cannot exchange you with a wife who will give me twenty sons” (*Efuru*, p. 26). Ironically, he hurts Efuru deeply by running off with another woman instead of marrying the lady. Likewise, Adiewere goes on to marry another wife. The spirit of peaceful co-existence and resignation to fate displayed by both Efuru and Idu in the face of their husbands' 'betrayal' is reflective of *Orara*'s meek nature. Idu tolerates the 'small wife' and meekly accepts her as a rival until she (the small wife) accuses Adiewere of impotence and runs off to another man (*Idu* p. 56). Reflecting on her husband's elopement with a harlot, Efuru intoned:

...Perhaps he wants to marry this woman. What is wrong in his marrying a second wife? I don't object to his marrying a second wife, but I do object to being relegated to the background. I want to keep my position as the first wife for it is my right. (*Efuru* p. 53)

Idu's great grief and subsequent demise after the death of her husband further reveals her inward beauty reflected in her great love and faithfulness to her husband. Her rejection of Ishiodu, in spite of the society's expectation of her to marry him, showcases her inherent will power and assertiveness which she leaves latent until when the need arises. She rejects Ishiodu, not out of disrespect for tradition but, because he is a nonentity, a foolish never-do-well brother-in-law. She rejects him for a reasonable man, albeit dead. By asserting herself thus, Idu displays the nature of *Orara*, for her meekness is not weakness but a conscious repression of inherent power. In rejecting Ishiodu “Idu refuses to be cast into a common mould thereby sharing the marked distinction of powerful women whose distinction lies in the moral courage to reject certain societal constraints imposed on their gender, humanness, dignity and sense of worth” (Acholonu, 1999, p. 11). Thus, Idu, like Efuru, is a beautiful, elegant, and self-assertive woman with the supernatural aura of *Orara*, traits that womanism champions.

Features of *Orara* in *Nnu Ego* and *Akunna*

Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* parades another character whose traits are not far removed from those of *Orara*. The story centres around Akunna, a naive city girl who, suddenly, finds herself in the village after her father's demise. The new culture and tradition she is

uncomfortable with pushes her into the willing hands of her teacher, Chike. But, unfortunately, he is labeled a slave. Tradition prohibits her to have anything to do with a slave and, instead, forces her to marry a man she despises. She keeps running from that tradition by eloping with her heartthrob, Chike, the slave. Her elopement represents the assertiveness which womanism upholds and reflects *Orara's* aggression when provoked.

Akunna's lack of outward comeliness is balanced by her inner attractiveness which lies in her innate ability to absorb emotional shocks, meekly, without complaining. Her sudden burst of emotions, in class, for no obvious reason, reveals this. The pent-up emotions from a confusing tradition and an uncaring mother and brother, make her burst out in tears when she is asked a question. Emecheta's womanist disposition causes her to dwell on the effect of such custom on women. She highlights the pathetic lot of the girl-child who is fully aware of her insignificance in a world dominated by men. While her mother is too busy attracting the attention of her new husband, Okonkwo, her little brother is feeling too important as 'the man' to take notice of her melting world (p. 91). Also, tradition demands her to welcome male visitors and submit to their rough play with her body even while she is going through menstrual pains. Akunna endures all these and when she gripes, it is a weak cry: "Mother," Akunna begged. "Please don't say anything. Okobshi was hurting me, he was... mother, look at my new blouse. He has torn it, he was so rough. He was wicked – oh, mother, please listen..." (p. 125).

However, when she is duly provoked, Akunna, like *Orara*, strikes against everything that stands on her way. After she is kidnapped and is about to be raped by Okoboshi, Akunna spits venom; the same evil tradition that reduces her to less than human becomes Akunna's saving grace, she uses the weapon of that same tradition to cleverly save herself from being raped by Okoboshi:

"Look at you," she sneered, laughing mockingly all the time. "Look at you and shame on you." Okoboshi the son of Obidi! You say your father is a chief - dog chief that is what he is, if the best he can manage to steal for his son is a girl who has been taught what men taste like by a slave...

Even if you do sleep with me tonight, how are you even going to be sure that the child I might bear would be your own? I may already be expecting his child and then you would have to father a slave child. What a come-down for the great and mighty Obidi family! For I should never stop telling my son whose child he was" (p. 145)

Thus, Akunna has a beautiful demeanour and a gentle spirit of the womanist. And when situations seem to enslave and suffocate her, she, like *Orara*, fights her way through.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's gentleness and the spirit of long suffering hold the beauty of *Orara*. Nnu Ego is the love child of Ona and Agbadi whose conception remotely caused the death of Agbadi's first wife. The maid who is buried with her promises to come back and, thus, she reincarnates in Nnu Ego. Marie Umeh observes that, "It is Nnu Ego, Chief Nwokocha Agbadi's only daughter, the daughter of Ona, who spends a lifetime, over forty years, paying for the callousness of her father" (Umeh, 1996, p. 187).

Nnu Ego's pursuit of the joy of motherhood pushes her to the limits. Her deep desire to have children for Amatokwu reflects the womanist's quest for family love and peaceful co-existence among everyone. Her resilience, even in the face of a power much bigger than her, is worthy of admiration. This power, her *chi*, is central to her suffering as she (her *chi*, the slave girl who was buried alive with Nnu Ego's step mother) is bent on revenging her merciless killing by Nnu Ego's father. Nnu Ego's *chi* deprives her of the man she loves, Amatokwu, and forces her into the arms of a very ugly man, Nnaife, who conjugates their marriage in a cruel manner. And having reduced her to a slave (for her husband is a servant to the Whiteman), her *chi* grants her

a child and cruelly takes him away from her. Nnu Ego in meekness and resilience, endures this man she hates very much, just so she could have children. Nnaife knows about this hatred which prompts him to exclaim upon hearing about the death of their baby boy, “Oh, my God! Poor woman. She endures me only because of this child, you know. She thinks I’m ugly. She hates me, she has always hated me” (p. 71).

However, unlike *Orara*, Nnu Ego lacks the strong will to strike out in retaliation when provoked. At the death of her first child whom she begot after many years of childlessness; she could not do much but attempt to take her own life. She explains to those who try to stop her, “But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother any more. The child is there, dead on the mat. My *chi* has taken him away from me. I only want to go there and meet her...” (p. 62).

Nnu Ego’s quest is later met in the birth of many children. But they are not there to take care of her so that her “old age will be sweet” (80). She finds herself alone; her husband is in prison; her children are either married or abroad and her husband’s people reject her. The only way she could fight back is to give in to stress and, therefore, suffer mental derangement and, subsequently, dies (p. 224).

Nnu Ego’s version of meekness reminds one of the natures of *Orara* as understood by the Oguta people, earlier mentioned. She is quiet to a fault which gears towards imbecility. Nnu Ego, herself, is not comfortable with her extreme submissive nature. She once laments: “Oh, I wish I had the type of pride they say my mother had,” she cried in anguish. (33). One wonders at Nnu Ego’s words. Why is she not as proud and elegant as her mother, Ona? Agbadi, her father, is also a dignified man full of pride. Why then is a product of such parentage timid and docile? This may be explained on the reincarnation, the timidity and docility that characterize slaves are reproduced in Nnu Ego.

Resilience and Long Suffering in the Major Characters of Ifeoma Okoye’s Novels

In Ifeoma Okoye’s novels, *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*, Ije and Chimere embody the traits of *Orara*.

Orara’s symbol of feminine meekness and gentleness are reflected in *Behind the Clouds* through the pretty and gentle major character, Ije. Ije, in spite of her struggle with childlessness, is very loving to both her husband and servants and tolerates Mama, her mother-in-law, and Virginia, her rival, to a great extent. Notice that Ije is very kind to her servants even when she is in a bad mood. When she comes back from the hospital disappointed, she is still gentle and courteous with James, her man-servant (20-21). Ije does not relent in her pleasant attitude towards her maid even when Patience, her nosy friend, brings up the issue of maids usurping their madam’s position (p. 26).

The agonizing and heartbreaking experiences Ije passed through in her childlessness do not mar her meekness and resilience. Her mother in-law makes life unbearable for her as she aches and longs for grandchildren. Achufusi observes that Ije’s predicament is heightened by the activities of Dozie’s extended family members, “Dozie’s mother seems, however, the most vocal of all of them” (p. 164). Ije’s respect for Mama, in spite of her antagonism, her longsuffering and steadfastness in her relationship with Dozie, further intensifies her pleasantness. Her beauty, further, radiates in her love and faithfulness to her spouse. She is so dutiful to her marital responsibilities that her friends mock her but she is not deterred (34). Her virtue speaks so loudly that one of Dozie’s friend observed:

“Aren’t you lucky, Dozie, to have such a wife as Ije?”
 “Don’t flatter me now, David,” Ije protested, smiling.

“I mean what I’ve said.” David affirmed. “And I don’t mind saying it in your presence. You’re a big asset and Dozie knows it. Don’t you, Dozie?”

“Too well,” Dozie said. “I owe my success in my business venture to her. I don’t know what I would have done without her” (p. 37)

At the peak of her quest for a child, her friend, Beatrice, introduces her to a fake prophet who suggests she sleeps with him in order to get pregnant (55). She walks out in vehement refusal not withstanding that Beatrice, who suffered a similar fate with her, got pregnant through the same means. She values her fidelity to her husband over and above her desperate desire to beget a child for him. Reflecting on Ije’s rejection of Apostle Joseph’s ‘miraculous’ option, Nwanyawu (2019) noted:

Ije’s decision which was the outcome of the incontrovertible proof contained in Apostle Joseph’s word is essentially what destroyed Ije’s marriage and forced her to desert her matrimonial home because Virginia had capitalized on Dozie and Mama’s desperation for a child and grandchild to foist a false pregnancy on Dozie, Ije’s husband (p. 26)

However, Ije’s self-ejection from her husband’s house, rather than be an outcome of her rejection of the ‘atrocious’ suggestion by Apostle Joseph, is a reflection of the *Orara* trait in her. She got to a point where she could not take it anymore and she fought back by leaving Dozie thereby ending all the wonderful attention and assistance that she granted him.

Thus, Ije’s gentleness and tolerance have a limit just as *Orara*’s harmlessness has a yielding point. When she could no longer take the ill treatment meted out to her by Mama, Virginia and Dozie, she packs out of her matrimonial home and would not come back until the truth is revealed and Dozie comes begging. This is her own way of fighting for her dignity and self-worth.

In her second novel, *Chimere*, Okoye creates a female character whose life portrays the agony of illegitimate children (ones often referred to as bastards) and the challenges women face while looking for paid jobs. The main character, Chimere, is a pretty young woman, reserved, gentle and agreeable – qualities similar to the attributes of *Orara*. Before her break up with her boyfriend, Jide, (over her illegitimacy), she fuels his car irrespective of the fact that she barely has enough to sustain herself in school. She is not comfortable with Jide asking her for money to top up his fuel tank, but in her meekness, she keeps mute and allows him to have his way. Chimere silently endures Jide’s bad attitudes until their final brake-up.

Chimere’s father, Mr. Enuma Eze, who abandons her and her mother even before her birth, rejects her, cruelly, the second time, after she spends a lot of time and money in locating him:

“...Your mother has given you wrong information. I am not your father”

“...Just let me call you “Father”,’ she said. “Just let me tell my friends that my father is at Enugu working with the Railways. That’s all I want from you...” (p. 159).

“...My wife will leave me immediately she knows that I have a daughter by another woman,” he said. “And she will not stop at that. She is well connected, and she will make sure that she destroys what is left of me.” (pp. 157 - 160)

Chimere in her gentle disposition, understands and forgives him when he comes back much later to apologize (p. 175).

Though meek, Chimere has the strength of will and character that distinguish all but one of the characters under study. When she goes out to look for job, she refuses for Azuka, the female secretary to the manager she wants to see, to stand in her way (pp. 76-77). Even when Mr. Etem

tries to take advantage of her in exchange for the job she, desperately, needs, she vehemently refuses (p. 67). And when Weluche, the handsome and well-mannered engineer falls in love with her, she is obstinate in her refusal before she realizes that Weluche is different from Jide and the likes of her father. Thus, like Idu, Efuru, Akunna and Ije, Chimere possesses the beauty, calmness and assertiveness that describe womanism and characterize *Orara*. Rose Acholonu quips that, “Chimere, the eponymous heroine effectively challenges the problems associated with her status of illegitimacy, in order to realize herself” (Acholonu, 2004, p. 62).

Conclusion

The Igbo female authors’ creation of characters with similar personalities and experiences is not intentional or imitational, neither is it a conscious gravitation towards feminism. Their unedited presentation of the typical Igbo woman and her plight in a typical patriarchal society, gives rise to the reproduction of identical characters with common fittles. This is decipherable in the characteristics and struggles ascribed to and experienced by Nwapa’s Efuru and Idu; Emecheta’s Akunna and Nnu Ego; and Ifeoma Okoye’s Ije and Chimere. The exceptional, almost supernatural beauty, either physically, morally or both, of these characters; their terrible suffering and pain under certain traditional practices and beliefs (most of which are alike), and the trait of gentle spirit that runs through all of them, are the pillars upon which the above point is built. It is noted that the meekness general to these female characters does not translate to weakness; they all, except Nnu Ego, reach a yielding point where they turn against the cultural practices that limit them, and fight for their rights. Nnu Ego’s docility is explained against her reincarnation; the slavish, lily-livered nature of the slave girl, her *chi*, is, most probably, reproduced in her.

These similar features of the major characters of the foremost female writers of Igbo extraction have been found to have a symbolic significance in an Igbo subculture. *Orara*, a snake which symbolizes beauty and meekness, parades these qualities. *Orara* is harmless, but strikes out when provoked and this happens, quite, rarely. These traits of *Orara* find expression in the meek, yet assertive attributes of the characters mentioned above. Though, this snake and its significance are not particular to the Mbaise community, it is found that the Mbaise people relate more to the snake and its features than any other sub-community of the Igbo.

The obvious similarities in the features of *Orara* and the tenets of womanism (rooted in the African tradition, feminine in nature, loving beauty, preferring a gentle approach to the struggle for women liberation, yet assertive) identifies it, perhaps, as the ideological basis for womanism. Hence, as womanism makes feminism more inclusive to the African woman’s struggle, *Orara* makes womanism much more inclusive to the plight of the Igbo woman. Therefore, the Igbo female author’s repudiation of feminism stems from her natural, though unconscious, allegiance to *Orara* and by extension, to womanism. It is, thus, recommended that more study be done on *Orara* to establish it as the unnamed and unsung muse of the Igbo female authors.

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