

MOTHER-FIGURE AND FAMILY BONDING IN IGBO SOCIETY: A LINGUISTIC APPRAISAL

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Abstract:

Gender politics is one of the notable phenomena that have filtered into contemporary discourses in almost every discipline. However, it seems that greater percentage of such discussions focuses on the need for the restructuring of the socio-cultural architecture which is blamed to have assigned absolute privileges and power to the male gender. From different disciplinary orientations and approaches, this phenomenon has been examined in different societies. Contrarily, our paper examines the centrality of the mother-figure in the Igbo society South East Nigeria. The paper takes a deconstructive approach to argue that as much as other scholars may have focused on the pitiable but redeemable position in which the Igbo socio-culture places the woman, there are also areas that the same socio-culture strategically positions the woman as prime and inalienable. The paper adopts the ecolinguistic approach to establish how certain patterns of the Igbo language implicate the primacy of the mother-figure in family bonding and cohesion. The data for the paper were sourced through participant observation, and primary collection of such language patterns in the Igbo language society. Every society has unique patterns such as wise sayings, idioms, phrasal expressions, etc. which bear the thought pattern and consciousness of the people. The conclusion of the paper is that such language patterns as they exist in the Igbo language could be taken as a reflection of articulated patterns of thought and perception of members of the Igbo society about the woman. Thus so much as there are aspects every socio-culture which prove to be unjust to either of the genders, the positive aspects also need to be highlighted as a means of ensuring social cohesion and development.

Keywords: Mother-Figure, Family Bonding, Igbo Society, Language

Introduction

Gender issue is one of the prominent concepts in contemporary discussions, whether as academic exercise, socio-political appraisal of nations and their policy frameworks, economic determination of opportunities, appraisal of roles and opportunities within religious bodies and so on. It is one area that interrogates the very foundation of a

society and its architecture. Depending on the orientation and inclination of those involved, such discussions address issues that bother on relationship between the male and the female against the background of their socio-culturally assigned privileges and opportunities of survival within the ecology of existence. Gender in such discussions is differentiated from sex which is a biologically and physiologically assigned status of being a male or female. On the other hand, gender is perceived and discussed from the view point of socio-culturally accepted roles and privileges which the male and female have access to.

Predicated on this, several movements and associations with different orientations and objectives have been formed, and several theories have also been advanced to discuss the situation, the most prominent, especially within the literary circle, being feminism. However, as Ohaeto once noted with particular reference to female characters and how they are presented in creative writings, “the nature of feminism itself compounds the problem of a female writer creating with female consciousness. The brand of feminism which Emecheta dwells upon is not the feminism of the self-seeking radical proposed by Aidoo and it is not the temperate feminism or womanism of Flora Nwapa”. Ohaeto’s argument here is that literature is a recreation and reflection of society, hence should contain a harmonized view and philosophy of any movement such as feminism. This critical stance is also found in Nnolim’s (1994, p.258) view that “if the female writers live in a house divided, their counterparts who are critics are much more united in single-minded effort to carry the fight to the court of the male writers who are their *bete-noir*, their enemy, the agent of their disparaged position, their oppressors”. However, no matter how divided these people might seem in focus, and how discordant their voices might seem, there is a common enemy, as Nutsukpo (2019, p.45) captured in a review of gendered social order in one of African novels thus: “the most significant challenge for the African woman is being destined to live, survive, and thrive in a social order polarized along gender lines, and steeped in inequalities, rendering her susceptible to

subjugation, discrimination, abuse, violence and forms of injustice, making her life a daily struggle to rise above the fallouts”.

The presupposition of gender politics, which is the anchor of feminism and other similar movements, is that equity lacks in the assignment, specially, of opportunities for growth, advancement, and survival in the society. Although each gender has holes to pick within the assigned privileges and opportunities, more eloquent have been the voices that advance the course of women against patriarchal subjugation. The common opinion of these voices is that the socio-cultural settings of most societies are so very stifling to the woman’s quest for growth and advancement. In some cases, the scene is so orgy that the woman is presented as second class human being.

It is unfortunate that since majority of the discourses centre on female subjugation, the man is sometimes almost demonized as ruthless and oppressive. The society on its part is usually branded patriarchal and chauvinistic as if there are no areas of male disadvantage, or that the woman is entirely condemned to suffering and non-recognition. This is one area that this paper seeks to deconstruct, essentially from the linguistic perspective.

Furthermore, noteworthy is the fact that even where gender politics is a global phenomenon, each society remains unique in the manner and degrees of practice, and in the areas of its manifestation. No two societies can be the same in all spheres. Thus, this paper focuses on the place of the woman in the Igbo society, south east Nigeria, with reference to her prime, adorable and inalienable position as reflected in the language manners of the people.

Gender Role in Igbo Society

Although it is generally understood that the Igbo is traditionally patriarchal, yet the outstanding and influential roles of women can not be neglected. Generally, in Igbo traditional society, women are major stakeholders in the propergation of informal education. This is because they know that the upbringing of a child goes a long way in

determining what the child will be in future. Achebe in his novel, for instance, featured women as the main educators of children. They do these by telling them stories, telling them the ethics of socializing with other people and good behavior, especially to the girl child, thus: “ children sat around their mother’s cooking fire, telling stories” (*Things Fall Apart*, 1958, p. 29). Two things are significant in this excerpt. First, the children have confidence and trust in their mother hence they sat with her. Secondly, they sat around their mother’s cooking fire, which is a symbol of life sustenance. It doesn’t matter who provides the money. The important thing is that the mother symbolizes life and hope for the children hence they cluster around her.

Women, both in the past and present are involved in religious matters. They play the roles of priestess in Igbo society. Again, citing Achebe’s novel as an instance, we witness this case thus: “Chika is the former priestess of the oracle, during the time of *Unọka*, she is described as very respected and powerful. Chielo is the priestess of *Agbala*, the oracle of the hills and caves” (*Things Fall Apart*, 1958, p.39). In this excerpt, women are seen to have strong religious powers, as captured in their role as priestesses. Further in line with the spiritual position of the woman in the Igbo cosmology, *Ala*, the earth goddess is a woman, and the place of *Ala* in human existence in Igbo culture can not be neglected. In the same manner, *Ahịajọku/Ifejiọku*, the goddess of fertility is also a woman.

The influential and unquantifiable roles of women in Igbo society are further espoused through the activities of *Umụada/Umuọkpụ*. *Otu Umụada* (association of daughters) has remained a functional forum for women and a powerful socio-political forum for females. As Igbokwe (2012, p.15), explains:

Umụada are usually not allowed to get very angry in such a way that could warrant them to swear, render a curse, roll on the ground, hit their fist on the ground or roll their body on the ground. When umụada angrily urinate on one’s entrance door or dump different tree branches on one’s compound, the person must as a matter of urgency, placate the

umuada as well as perform cleansing ritual, else the consequence is better imagined than experienced.

Also, Achebe (2010) has asserted that the roles of *umuada* in Igbo society can be grouped under social, political and economic. Using the town of Ogidi, as a case, Achebe stated that politically, the action of Umuoḱpu Ogidi in 1914, during their market protest, and other similar protests, are part of their political relevance. He further admitted that Umuada also settle disputes at various levels.

Socially, *umuada* expose the evils in their communities, they also champion the course of their kinsmen, among other social functions. Economically, they engage in agriculture, trade, engage in cooperative societies through which they embark on some developmental projects, as well as lend supports to both men and women from the areas where they are found.

Presently, Women August Meeting has received prominent social, cultural and economic recognition in Igbo traditional community life. Osuji,(2009, p. 129) described Women August Meeting as “ ... an important agent of social transformation, economic development, social cohesion and community stability. Above all, it has become a vehicle to mobilize community women for any social transformation or dissemination and implementation of government grassroots policy” More to this citation is that, Women August Meeting has become an avenue to instill discipline in the growing youth, especially girls, as well as a check on women folks, who it has been used to protect against self imposed abuses or those brought about by oppressive social orders.

Governments in the Igbo speaking states have tacitly adopted Women August Meeting as a permanent feature in their yearly programmes, through the offices of their first ladies, who with their team of ladies, make efforts to visit as many communities as they can during the August meetings. Through this process, the first ladies and the wives of the Local Government Chairmen launch their pet projects and encourage the rural women in their projects at varying abilities, and to look inwards for the sanity of their families and the society at large.

From the brief review so far, it is evident that women play active roles in the ecology of existence of the Igbo people. This in no manner conclusively rules out some areas of disadvantages and neglect occasioned by socio-cultural imperatives. As much as the focus of this paper is not on determining which gender is more favoured than the other, the essence of the review is to give background to the fact that the Igbo society does not entirely relegate the woman to the background.

Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on the broad spectrum of ecolinguistics as its theoretical framework. But more specifically, it draws from the social ecology frame which focuses on the economic growth and social equity, and how they impact on the overall ecological existence; as opposed to linguistic ecology which major focus is on relationship of languages in terms of dominance and threat.

One dominant opinion in the social ecology frame of ecolinguistics is that discourses shape the way we think and treat the natural world. Stibbe (2015, p. 1) in justifying the relevance of ecolinguistics as a study of ecology and language stated that “a cursory explanation is that language influences how we think about the world”. The author further stated that “ecolinguistics can explore the more general patterns of language that influence how people both think about, and treat the world. It can investigate the stories that we live by –mental models that influence behaviour and lie at the heart of the ecological challenges we are facing” (pp.1-2). Narrowed to our current study, the researchers believe that since language influences our perception about our world, there is the possibility of significantly accessing how the Igbo think about their women by examining the language manners of the Igbo society. It is against this background that we shall evaluate the selected linguistic samples in the study.

Methodology

The paper is designed to investigate the place of the woman in the Igbo society using samples of language manners in the Igbo society. The method of data collection is participant observation. Samples of data are collected from direct interaction and

observation involving the use of the Igbo language. The method of analyzing the data is descriptive. The samples are presented in their original Igbo language forms and their English language translations. The samples have been profiled into groups of proper names given to women in the Igbo society, and local phrases that depict mother-figure prominence. The researchers are convinced that linguistic samples from these stocks could be a relevant guide into the thought pattern of the people, and their impression about mother-image.

Sample Analysis

Sample A: Some Female Proper Names Depicting Mother-figure Prominence

It is pertinent we appreciate that, in Igbo land, it is the father that gives a native name to a child. Thus, whichever name a father gives to his child is a reflection of his feeling about the child and the creator. As observed in Chukwu and Chinedu-oko, (2019, p.136) “in eco-cultural studies, naming is a significant process for both human beings and place naming”. They further argued that contrary to the popular question “what is in a name?”, names, especially in the Igbo society, often contain implicit references to circumstances of birth, configuration of wishes and expectations, days of birth, incarnation and so on. It is against this backdrop, that we can fully understand the symbolic attribute of women that are consequential in the following sample names.

NAME	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<i>Nnedimma</i>	mother is good, good mother
<i>Nneamaka</i>	mother is beautiful
<i>Nnenna</i>	father’s mother
<i>Nnenne</i>	mother’s mother
<i>Nnenna</i>	Father’s mother
<i>Nnediuto</i>	mother is sweet
<i>Nnekamma</i>	mother is best
<i>Nneoma</i>	good mother
<i>Nnebugwu</i>	mother is pride
<i>Agunanne</i>	relations are counted from same motherhood.
<i>Nneji</i>	<i>people of the same mother.</i>

Sample B: Some Local Phrases Depicting Mother-figure Prominence

There are also some Igbo phrases and expressions that go a long way in buttressing the contention of this paper. Some of them include:

1. *Umunne m na Umunna m* – (children of my mother and children of my father).

This expression is usually used as phraseology for “my brethren”. Our argument on the phrase relies on the principle of structural foregrounding or prominence in linguistic stylistics, which presupposes that the structural elements of an expression do not attract equal level of prominence, and the elements that appear at the initial position are usually foregrounded. A good example is in the stylistic difference between an expression in the active voice which foregrounds the subject as performing an action; and the same expression transformed into passive voice thereby foregrounding the structural object by bringing it to initial position in the structural arrangement. Eg.

Frank killed a goat.

A goat was killed by Frank.

In a similar vein, in **Sample B (1)**, both the female folk (*umunne m*) and the male folk (*umunna m*) are recognized as constituting the brethren of the speaker. However, the structural position of *umunne m* gives it greater prominence over *umunna m*. It will amount to structural oddity for one to say *umunna m na umunnem*. By implication, the structure of the expression recognizes that family bonding proceeds from the woman (*nne*) to the man (*nna*) and not the other way round.

2. *A guchaa ka nne ha jiri, a guo ka nna ha jiri* – (It is after counting relationship according to mother, that you count relationship according to father) .

Like in **Sample B (1)**, this statement also relies on the principle of structural prominence. Thus, it attaches more importance and recognition to relationship according to same mother, than according to same father. By implication, it is the mother that is key and at the core of family bonding in the Igbo society.

3. *Nwa enwe nneNwa enwenna* (motherless and fatherless child).

This expression is used in the same paradigm with orphan (*nwambi*). However, in the Igbo discourse, it evokes greater emotive quality than *nwambi*. *Nwambi* often evokes a feeling of economic lack arising from the absence of parents. But when someone is described as *nwa enwe nne nwa enwe nna*, the connotative values, the emotional correspondence extend beyond economic lack to other pitiable conditions such as neglect, deprivation, absence of help, abandoned. Again, looking at the structure of the expression shows that the mother (*nne*) takes precedence over the father (*nna*).

Sample C: Expressions Depicting Mother as Symbolic

4. *Umune*- (sanctity of kinship relations) .

The concept of *umune* is a serious phenomenon in Igbo cosmology. *Umune* is a compound word from *umu* (children) and *ne* (contracted form of *nne*, mother) that is children of one mother. It is represented in the form of an effigy symbolizing the bond that holds together, people who share biological relationship. Spiritually, it forbids anyone in the bond to think or engage in any form of evil against someone that shares the same *umune* with him or her. It is notable that *umune* bond is not entered into voluntarily. It is not optional, but rather, one is born into it.

The power of *umune* goes a long way in shaping the attitudes of people in the community, hence the proverb: “*ewii turu onu n’umune, a na-akpachapu anya ma e gwuwe ya*” (great caution is applied why digging the hole of a rabbit in *umune*). Thus, if this very sensitive Igbo phenomenon is presented in feminine representation, then no doubt that women are highly revered in the Igbo society.

5. *N’ime afọ nne gi...* (from your mother’s womb).

This phrase is often used when emphasising closer relationship in the Igbo society. The Igbo society is known for communalism, so much so that kinship takes a broader perspective than in most other societies. However, expression such as **Sample C (5)** is used to refer to nuclear relationship. It is therefore noteworthy that *nne* (mother) is the symbol of bonding in every nuclear home.

6. Umere nne/ Ibe nne (maternal home).

The place of maternal home in Igbo culture is very significant. A lot of values are attached to this relationship both in life and death. Every male in the Igbo society owes strategic allegiance to the family and community where the mother comes from. In most Igbo communities, a male child receives greater respect and recognition in his maternal home (*ibenne*) than in his own home (*umunna*). Impliedly, *nne* bequeaths greater value and respect to a male child than *nna*. Admittedly, the male child traditionally inherits patrilineally, but in terms of value and respect, the maternal home provides a greater rate.

7. Nwanne, Nwanne di na mba (son of a mother, son of a mother in diaspora)

This is usually an expression in the Igbo life to show the level of cooperation that exists between people of same mother. To underscore its symbolism, it is sometimes given as revered title to a stranger who has exhibited significant cooperation and or great assistance to a community. The fact that this title bears the mother (*nne*), and not the other way round, shows the regal place of womanhood in the Igbo traditional life. Again, referring to someone as *nwanne* symbolizes same mother even where the people do not share parenthood or biological relationship.

8. O nwere onye nri nne ya siri adighi atọ uto? (Is there any one that does not enjoy his or her mother's food)

This is an Igbo proverb that places the womenfolk at the level of excellence in the Igbo cultural life. Food in the context of this proverb is connotative. It embraces anything done by someone's mother. By implication, there is no limit acceptable in someone loving his or her mother. It means that one is expected to appreciate one's mother in totality.

It should be noted that the excerpts used as samples in this paper are stock phrases. Like idioms, they maintain structures that cannot be rephrased. For instance, one cannot say *O nwere onye nri nna ya siri adighi atọ uto?, oru*

umunna m na umunne m, or *nwa enwe nna nwa enwe nne*, or *nwa nna di na mba*. The expressions have fixed structures, and rephrasing them would amount to not only structural absurdity but also a violation of their semantic implications. It is as well suggestive of linguistic and cultural incompetence on the part of the user.

Summary and Conclusion

So far, the paper has illustrated that the woman occupies a pride of place in the cosmology and traditional life of the Igbo society. The paper has done this by examining some of the language forms in the Igbo society, and how they implicate the place of the woman in the perception mode of the Igbo people. This is against the background that in linguistics studies, there is a close connection between a people's thought pattern and the way they structure their expressions.

The paper, therefore, contends that contrary to the near absolute conclusion that the woman is close to a second class human being in the Igbo society, the ecology of existence as implicated in the language pattern of the people is such that reveres the woman as the core of family bonding and existence. The mother-image is central in the psychology and worldview about the family among the Igbo people.

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