

**Snail-Sense Feminist Application  
for Women Empowerment in  
Selected Works of  
Ogochukwu and Adichie**

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**Abstract**

In an attempt to analyse the challenges encountered by women in Nigerian literary context, Akachi Ezeigbo came up with Snail-sense feminism as a viable option to tackle women's problems and to fill the gaps of non-consideration of western education and self-identity to promote women empowerment. The aim of this study is to deploy the Snail-sense feminist model, derived from the habit of the snail and which advocates dialogue, negotiation, good education and individual empowerment, to advocate for women emancipation and empowerment in Ogochukwu Promise's *In The Middle of The Night* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The objectives of the study include locating the challenges encountered by women in the selected novels, projecting the need for effective dialogue, western education and self-identity in pursuit of success as strategies for women emancipation and empowerment. The qualitative research methodology is used to analyse the non-numerical data represented in the selected novels. The findings of the study include; (i) lack of sound western education limits the attainment of greater heights for women

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(ii) lack of effective dialogue and conciliatory approach are contributory factors to the inability of women's emancipation and empowerment as portrayed in the novels. This study concluded that the application of indigenous Snail-sense strategies can complement other feminist strategies to achieve the desired women emancipation and empowerment. This study thus recommended Snail-sense feminist theory as suitable for literary analysis in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

**Keywords:** Feminist Strategies, Indigenous, Women empowerment

## **Introduction**

Snail-sense feminism is a model of indigenous feminist theory that has common features with the other variants of African feminist theories, such as 'womanism' (Ogunyemi, 1995), 'femalism' (Opara, 2004), 'motherism' (Acholonu, 1995), 'stiwanism' (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994), 'nego-feminism' (Nnaemeka, 2004) etc. What distinguishes Snail-sense feminism from others is the pursuit of individual success and development. Ezeigbo (p. 12) reasons that “the individual must empower herself first before she can empower others”.

This study examines Ogochukwu Promise's *In The Middle of The Night* (sic) and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* using Akachi Ezeigbo's Snail-sense feminism as a viable model for tackling women's problems orchestrated by patriarchy. Ogochukwu Promise and Chimamanda Adichie are two prolific and successful contemporary female creative writers in Nigeria and their works are worthy to be

considered for feminist appraisal.

### **Feminist Strategies**

The Snail-sense feminism liberating model is indigenously generated by Ezeigbo from the Igbo adage that says, “Ire oma ka ejule ji aga n'ogwu” – meaning, “The snail crawls over thorns with a fine and well-lubricated tongue” (p. 27). The theory was first presented at a Roundtable discussion on Feminism in Africa at the International Conference “Versions and Subversions in African Literature,” which took place in Berlin, Germany, in May 2003, (Ezeigbo, 12). Ezeigbo is assured of the viability of the application of certain qualities of the snail to issues and obstacles encountered by Nigerian women:

My investigation into the working of Snail-sense feminism- a veritable variant of the indigenous feminisms advocated by Nigerian theorists- compelled me to study the Nigerian woman from the pre-colonial and colonial periods to the present. From my findings, one thing is clear: the strategy was applied by our foremothers in their interactions with people in their communities. Therefore, if women of the past adopted the strategy of the snail to survive, today's Nigerian women should do no less as she negotiates and renegotiates her way in her dealings with the men and the society at large (p. 31)

The three prominent strategies derived from Ezeigbo's Snail-sense feminism among others are: effective dialogue and negotiation, individualism and good education. In Ezeigbo's view, the snail's ability

of negotiation, tact and conciliatory attitude are useful survival strategies which Nigerian women must learn to surmount the enormous obstacles they encounter in order to attain emancipation and empowerment in a harsh patriarchal Nigerian society. The individualistic tendency is observable in the snail which does not move in a group or in the company of its young as a hen or a duck does however, it can exist close to other snails in an individualistic manner. The woman should not just accommodate others, but should ensure that she achieves recognition for herself. Self-preservation and self-actualization are crucial to a woman's success in life. However, the snail's individualistic manner of existing close to other snails is a sign of sisterhood, female bonding and group consciousness which symbolises the strength of Snail-sense feminism. In addition, self-preservation is not for the exclusive reserve of the human instinct. It is “also a reflex that the snail adopts by withdrawing its 'horns' into its hard shell when threatened” (p. 39). This by no means should be seen as a sign of weakness, but rather a life preservation measure which by no means indicate strength.

The third strategy incorporated into Snail-sense feminism, even though it is not directly a characteristic of the snail, is the acquisition of good western education. This strategy is emphasised by Ezeigbo while proposing the Snail-sense feminism. In her opinion, a woman who has all the snail's attributes of wisdom, resilience, patience, sensitivity, doggedness and hard work but has no western education is at a great disadvantage. Ezeigbo also reasons that, “good education is the key to open the door of opportunities for Nigerian women, for when a woman is educated, the family in particular and the country in general are

educated and empowered” (p. 29). For instance, in politics, women who are well-educated stand a better chance of voting, seeking for political positions and being voted for than illiterate women who most likely will lack the confidence of engaging in politics.

However, despite its viability, this study identifies a few deficiency in the Snail–sense feminist theory. The first is the inadequacy of its strategies to solve certain female challenges such as rape, child abuse, child marriage/early pregnancy, female genital mutilation and a few related others. In these instances, the deed and harm would have been done and as such, snail sense strategies of 'snail sensitivity', doggedness, determination, tenacity, negotiation, dialogue, individuality or good education will not only seem inadequate but it will be irrelevant.

Another deficiency is its nomenclature in relation to the slow movement of the snail. Slow movement is seen as a negative attribute and as such, any person identified with slow movement is usually likened to a snail thereby we have the simile: “as slow as a snail”. The argument is that the snail metaphor would do the African woman no good and that the snail should not be advocated as a symbol worthy of emulation in women's struggles for emancipation and empowerment.

The use of the word 'individualism' instead of 'self-identity' is also a deficiency. Individualism gives a wrong notion and impression of Akachi's intent of the theory. It connotes abhorrence of collaborative efforts towards women emancipation and empowerment and this is alien to Nigerian culture and mentality. There is no doubt that self-identity which is deduced from Akachi's explanation of the individualism Snail-sense strategy is crucial to attainment of success

and self-actualization, therefore it should not be misunderstood.

Furthermore, emphasis should be on literacy for the woman and not particularly on good education advocated by the Snail-sense feminism. There are instances in the literary context where a woman does not have access to good education and should therefore not be excluded from being empowered. However, ability to read and write is an advantage not only to the urban women but the rural as well irrespective of choice of the vocation or career. Literate women stand a better chance than illiterate ones.

No feminism model is however devoid of any weakness. They all have their strengths and weaknesses just as indicated in Snail-sense feminism which has common features with the other variants of feminism.

### **Synopsis of *in the Middle of the Night***

*In The Middle of The Night* (2004) is a six hundred page novel which begins with a prologue, consists of one hundred and twenty short chapters and ends with an epilogue. Set predominantly in the city of Bana, Nigeria, the novel is a story of different relationships that are connected to Elena and Nuru, her loving husband and artist.

Elena is a High Court Judge, chosen by her country's President to head a probe panel to investigate corrupt practices and human rights infringement by government officials, but as the story unfolds, she is discovered to be guilty of moral bankruptcy herself for she is involved in a secret love affair with no other person than her own husband's brother, Kim.

There are other characters in the novel that are morally worse

than Elena. Except for a few, most of the characters in *In the Middle of the Night* are tainted with one immoral act or the other. The President who sets up the probe panel is morally corrupt as it is discovered that he sets up the panel as part of his strategic plans for winning the next elections and not for genuine intentions as he feigns (p. 106). He is also involved in malevolent spirituality and homosexuality which saddens his wife, Memuna (pp. 411-413). Other government officials in the novel like Captain Grey, Governor Tolu and private individuals like Seye Falase, Kelvin Korie are also products of materialism, corruption, infidelity and other vices.

The situation is not completely hopeless, however, in this novel as there still exists a few characters like Elena's unassuming husband, Nuru Peters, whose love for her is so deep and he shows it not just to her but also to people around them. There are also characters like Governor Oni Silva, a responsible, humane and diligent politician, Chuks Oko, a dynamic and fearless reporter, Prophet Jeremiah, a daring, blunt and modest prophet and Madam Nene Obinna, the founder of The Family Leading Foundation, known for her integrity, high sense of responsibility, philanthropic gestures and passion for building successful and good families.

### **Snail-Sense Feminists Strategies in *In The Middle of The Night***

This study identifies the Snail-sense strategy of good western education in Elena, a high court judge who is appointed by the President to head a panel "that will investigate corrupt practices and abuse of human rights" (p. 26). She could not have attained this position if she did not have a good education. Elena's husband is so proud of her successful

career which she achieved through hard work, dedication and sacrifice that while proposing a toast at a celebration party that he organised for her, he enthused "to my wife, Elena for her consistency in pursuit of excellence" (p. 18). Elena also personifies the individualism trait traceable to the snail, given her resilience and determination in facing the challenges of heading the probe panel. Her reputation and popularity as an intelligent, thorough and dynamic judge is demonstrated in the novel by the attendance of the President and other distinguished government officials at the party her husband organised for her. This indicates that there is no limit to the extent of achievement and recognition of a woman with good western education.

Elena's success, achievements, empowerment and self-sufficiency are also identified in the novel by her high living standard; she lives with her family in a six room palatial duplex with a beautiful landscape, security and garden lights and swimming pool. She has a hoard of domestic staffs like nanny, cook, maids, waiter, driver and housekeeper. She also eats choice foods, has many cars and her children attend expensive private schools amongst other things.

In addition, the value of women's self-sufficiency and empowerment on the nation's economy and the Snail-sense strategy of individualism are projected through Nene Obinna, the philanthropic founder of 'The Family Leading Foundation' who "has a foundation that focuses on the family and she does not require much support from the government. Already she has started doing things for herself with her savings"(sic) (p. 102). This implies that empowered women can participate and contribute more meaningfully to the economy of the nation.



The effect of a woman's good education transcends to her children as buttressed by Nene Obinna in the novel:

If she is wise and educated, if she so much as uses her native intelligence, she will know that she owes it as a duty to herself, the child and the nation to impart sound knowledge into her children. She cannot depend entirely on anyone else to do this for her. Let her improve herself and lead a fulfilled life. Let her work if she finds fulfilment and joy in it. She must never be idle for a mother cannot afford to be lazy... (p. 309)

Ogochukwu's portrayal of the importance of education conforms to the good education strategy for women empowerment and emancipation of the Snail-sense feminism. The depiction of Elena and Nene Obinna in the novel foregrounds the Snail-sense ideology that educated women are great assets to their children, husband, parents and, most especially, to their nation as they have been equipped to take up national assignments.

This study also identifies the Snail-sense strategy of resilience and perseverance in Nene Obinna whose marriage is threatened by her son's chronic addiction to hard drugs. The harrowing experience of having to put him in a rehabilitation centre and the painstaking efforts to make him live a normal life again strengthens Nene while it temporarily turns her husband into a drunkard. Her resilience and perseverance eventually pay off as Afam, her son, gets healed of drug addiction and her husband also stops drinking and as a family, they decide to help in counselling families going through similar experience they went through by establishing a non-government organisation which works

"with families, helping them to do the right things about their children, about their lives, about the nation before it is too late" (p. 88). Nene pursued passionately her belief in the "importance of keeping a healthy family grounded in social behaviour and how this will help in shaping up the nation" (p. 299). Her affectation of her society was borne out of her own self-actualization, self-development and good education.

The Snail-sense strategy of wisdom is portrayed in the novel by the First Lady, Memuna, a victim of loneliness and a loveless marriage, as she opts for friendship with Elena as a remedy to her misery and loneliness. She is not discouraged by Elena's initial resentment and dislike for her as she wisely makes conscious and deliberate efforts of being warm and friendly so as to gain the friendship of a respectable, experienced and intelligent judge who is also married and has children of her own, although with her own flaws unknowingly to Memuna. Memuna's homosexual husband, President Daveruah, does not reciprocate her love, opting instead to satisfy her with material things. With the children away to school, this situation leaves Memuna depressed and lonely, such that she "feels like dying" (p. 246). Eventually, she gains Elena's friendship such that she becomes her confidant and adviser thereby becoming a happy and lively woman again. The effect of Elena's first advice to Memuna is the improvement on the content and delivery of Memuna's television programme tagged "The Innocent and the First Lady" (p. 147). Memuna disengages from patriarchal oppression targeted at her as she doggedly aims for survival by going after her personal ambitions with or without an affectionate relationship with a man.

## Synopsis of *Purple Hibiscus*

Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) uses first person narration to tell the story of Eugene Achike, a tyrannical and abusive husband to Beatrice and father to Jaja and Kambili. Also known as Papa in the novel, Eugene is a wealthy business executive that terrorises his wife and children through his fanatical inclination to Catholicism. He has a perverted understanding of his church's doctrines that cages his family's freedom by conceiving every act as sinful.

Kambili and Jaja must abide by a time schedule every day, denied access to the television, visiting friends, neither were they permitted to neither talk out loud nor freely express themselves, a situation which turns them into stereotypes. They become temporarily relieved of this physical and psychological incarceration when they visit Auntie Ifeoma's house in Nsukka. To their surprise, Jaja and Kambili discover that laughter and freedom of expression exist in Auntie Ifeoma's home which theirs lack.

Eugene's violence and battering leads to Beatrice having two different miscarriages of long-awaited pregnancies. The loss of the second pregnancy makes her devastated and broken because of what the pregnancy meant to her. It was much anticipated considering the fact that she has only two children and Kambili, the last of the two is already fifteen years old. As a means of deriving joy and comfort, Beatrice always polishes her cherished étagère figurines particularly after bouts of beating by her husband.

Beatrice eventually snaps out of her passiveness and she takes her destiny and that of her children into her hands by taking the extreme measure of poisoning her husband. Jaja is sent to prison as he takes

responsibility for the death of his father. He was eventually released after thirty-one months and life brightens up for their family for the first time.

### **Viability of the Application of Snail-Sense Strategies in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

This study proposes that the Snail-sense feminism is a more viable option open to women when other feminist models fail as it permits the expression of thoughts influenced by the change in the orientations and perceptions of women in today's globalised world. This is a major prerequisite to individualism, self-preservation and self-actualisation which can lead to much sought after women emancipation and empowerment. There are many ways that the modern Nigerian woman can apply the Snail-sense strategies to modify tradition, respond to political, socio-economic and cultural impositions and achieve success without resorting to violence, aggression, confrontation and even murder.

In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice resorts to a drastic strategy by silently eliminating her brute of a husband when she could no longer bear his brutality. In the novel, Beatrice is portrayed as a defenceless, gagged, oppressed and humiliated wife who is too afraid to talk in order not to stir up the wrath of her husband. Such was the situation with her and her two children Kambili and Jaja as Kambili, the daughter/narrator reveals that “Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips” (p. 15). The trio therefore became partners in suffering from the hands of Eugene, a tyrannical and abusive Catholic fanatic, who will not overlook insignificant acts such as eating before

going to mass, staying over in the same house with their 'pagan' grandfather, refusal to take communion etc.

What the Snail-sense strategies of negotiation, dialogue or even outright withdrawal from the scene of oppression (separation or divorce), could have solved results to murder and subsequent incarceration of Jaja for thirty-one months. Beatrice's sister-in-law, Ifeoma, advised her when Eugene beat their daughter, Kambili, to a state of coma, "this cannot go on, nwunye m,"... when a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head." (p. 219). The snail withdraws into its shell when threatened but this is a most unlikely option for Beatrice because she also lacks other snail strategies of good western education and individualism. Her lack of self-empowerment makes her totally dependent on her husband for survival and leaving him will most likely subject her to a life of lack and suffering. Beatrice says thus at another instance when Aunt Ifeoma advised her to stay away from her husband after her second miscarriage which occurred as a result of him breaking a stool on her six weeks pregnancy:

"Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go?" She did not wait for Aunt Ifeoma to respond. "Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying the bride price?"

"And so? I ask you-and so?" Aunt Ifeoma was shouting now.

... "You have come again with your university talk, Ifeoma," she said, mildly, and then looked away to

signal that the conversation was over. (p. 255).

Irrespective of the circumstances of her action, Beatrice becomes a murderer and her son is the one that pays for her undetected crime by spending some years in jail.

Aunt Ifeoma is portrayed in the novel as an educated, empowered and self-sufficient woman who, even though a widow, struggles to cater for the needs of her three children as well as her own. Her good western education enables her to get a job as a university lecturer and even though her meagre pay could not make her live comfortably as she desires, she does not subject herself to the biddings of her wealthy but oppressive and abusive brother, Eugene, in order to gain his financial assistance. Aunt Ifeoma makes this clear to Beatrice when she was trying to persuade her to ask her brother for a full gas cylinder when she needed one to ease the stress of cooking with her battered kerosene stove:

“Have you forgotten that Eugene offered to buy me a car, even before Ifediora died? But first he wanted us to join the Knights of St. John. He wanted us to send Amaka to convent school. He even wanted me to stop wearing makeup! I want a new car, nwunye m, and I want to use my gas cooker again and I want a new freezer and I want money so that I will not have to unravel the seams of Chima's trousers when he outgrows them. But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things.” (p. 103)

In contrast to Beatrice who opts for a drastic decision of

poisoning her husband, Aunt Ifeoma in the novel, eventually resolves the issues that oppress her by taking the option of relocating outside the country to create a conducive environment for her and her children to survive and succeed.

## **Conclusion**

The essay has foregrounded the merit in Akachi Ezeigbo's Snail-sense brand of feminism. This is against the backdrop of the fact that, despite all the theories that have been formulated to tackle the problems encountered by women in Nigeria and other African literary contexts, some problems still persist. As shown in the exploration of the theory in Ogochukwu Promise's *In the Middle of the Night* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, there is the need to include other realistic, practical and functional means of solving women's problems. However, this does not imply that other theories before Snail-sense feminism should be discarded, since they equally attempt to solve women's problems and as a matter of fact Snail-sense feminism has common features with a few other African feminist theories, where it mainly differs is deriving its strategies from the habit of a snail and its emphasis on the individual pursuit of success. The desired women emancipation and empowerment can be realised when all African feminist theories are combined and applied.

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