

Towards a Decolonized and Transformed Academia and Community through Snail-sense Feminism, an Indigenous Model

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Abstract

One of the issues trending in scholarship today is “decolonization of knowledge”. How can knowledge be decolonized in tertiary institutions to make allowances for an integrative and inclusive future that makes for social justice? In the world: Whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is being undervalued? In 2002, I became Head of the English Department at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, and it was my responsibility to manage the affairs of the Department, including ensuring the smooth delivery of lectures and the general welfare of students and staff. Out of twenty teaching staff, only three were females in a Department where most of the students were girls. One year in office, I ensured that three new qualified female lecturers were employed. The aim was to decolonize notions of gender, promote inclusion and increase women’s contribution to knowledge. The works of more female authors were included in the curriculum. Based on my sometimes painful experiences as a woman operating in a patriarchal society, I have devoted significant research effort to the lives of women of my community – past and present – in order to make their experiences known for the purpose of individual and societal re-orientation and re-education. In this paper, I intend to highlight my own home-grown feminist theory known as Snail-sense feminism which has been effective in dismantling gender hierarchies and transforming patriarchal attitudes in tertiary institutions and communities in my country – an indigenous model that allows the tenets of inclusion, equity, negotiation and dialogue to thrive in the academia and the society at large. I conclude by asserting that there is much modern society can learn from workable feminist concepts in order to create positive change in society.

Keywords: Decolonization, Feminism, Inclusion, Transformation, Academia, Knowledge.

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Introduction

One of the issues trending in scholarship today is “decolonization of knowledge”. A question that has come up in recent conferences organized around the world, especially conferences pertaining to area studies such as Asian and African Studies is: How can knowledge be decolonized in tertiary institutions to make allowances for an integrative and inclusive future that makes for social justice? African scholars have often lamented that they are marginalized and treated patronizingly in scholarship by Western scholars and academic establishments and are often expected to adopt Western standards and criteria in their research while their own contributions as Africans are disregarded, devalued or ignored outright. They claim that even in publishing, their efforts to publish in Western journals are thwarted and their home institutions expect them to publish in the so-called Thompson Reuters and Stimago or Scopus journals while the local or home-based journals are rated poorly and are not reckoned with in professorial and other assessments for promotion and appointments. Thus, African scholars press for a more equitable and balanced recognition of the work and research they do by their counterparts in the West and the local authorities, and they also demand a better access to getting grants and other supports for their Africa-based research.

Another related question one might ask is: In the world: Whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is being undervalued? Often it is the values of the West that are promoted and projected. In October 2020, the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London had a week-long event tagged ‘Virtual SOAS Festival of Ideas’ where issues of decolonizing knowledge in tertiary institutions were addressed. Many people in the world today describe themselves as both local and global individuals. In light of this, knowledge of the local and the global should count so that more spaces and sites can be opened for the dispersion of knowledge of various types. Thus, both local and global problems can be solved while useful and empowering ideas from even the remotest parts of the world can be exposed and made available to everyone. I am of the opinion that as we go global, we must not forget to remain local in order to propagate good ideas from the local landscape that will benefit us and the future generation. As a local and global Nigerian, I would like to raise the consciousness of my people to appreciate our culture, especially positive aspects of it that existed in the past and are now fading from our collective memory for the purpose of social and cultural redirection. In a monograph entitled *Women and Leadership in Igboland: Omoku, Ime Chi and Omugwo Institutions* (2021), I examined Igbo women’s leadership roles in three spheres of influence under their control and argued that women exerted their influence to ensure the well-being of their

families and communities. The motivation to research and write the monograph was my desire to encourage and empower Igbo women in particular and Nigerian women in general with the knowledge that, like their foremothers, they have a right to hold leadership positions not only in the home but also in the workplace and public space. We need to claim the knowledge of the present as well as reclaim the knowledge of the past to be able to align ourselves properly in the pursuit of the knowledge of the future. When we reclaim the knowledge of the past, we would understand ourselves better and be able to take from it what is relevant to our lives in the 21st century and thereafter apply it to solve today's problems and challenges. The workshop "Current Trends, Uncommon Paths: Decolonizing the Academia through Feminism" organized by the Department of African Studies at the University of Vienna on 14 and 15 January 2022, focused on ideas, methodologies and implementations of issues of decolonization through the lens of feminism, not only in the academia but also other sites such as the media, the community and the society in general.

In this paper, I shall highlight ideas and forms of decolonization I have pursued and dealt with in my research at my university in Nigeria and in my communities in Lagos and in Uga, my hometown in the Southeast of Nigeria, through feminism, especially the Indigenous brand I have described as Snail-sense feminism. I intend to shed some light on the applicability of Snail-sense feminism to fight different forms of patriarchal and gender discriminations in the academia and the society by providing concrete examples, actions, measures, and institutional structures that have served and empowered women.

Theorizing Gender, Advocating Gender Equality

The issue of gender equality has not only become a social factor of immeasurable importance but is also the motivating factor that gave birth to feminist ideology. Gender issues are pervasive in seminars organized in academic institutions, in the activities of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in the policies of government and in national, regional, and global debates on human development. What mostly drives gender discourse is the advocacy for gender equality for the mutual benefit of men and women and this is a subject that engages feminist scholars, activists, and writers. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is part of United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the aim of eliminating extreme poverty by 2030. Undoubtedly achieving gender equality was an important subject that featured prominently or significantly in the workshop at which this essay was but one of several contributions from several speakers. Gender has assumed a central position in contemporary discourse as a result largely of the efforts and activities

of feminist activists, writers, scholars, literary critics, and theorists from different disciplines such as the Humanities, the Sciences, Social Sciences, Medicine, Education, Law, etc. Gender denotes the classification of people into sexual categories (Ezeigbo 1999: 24). However, most scholars and theorists in gender studies believe that many gender differences are socially constructed.

Theorizing about gender has passed through different phases as scholars, especially feminists, continue to research into the lives of women and their identities. New realities emerge to redefine the roles men and women play in families and communities in a way that makes generalization about gender highly suspect. For instance, the claim that women were submerged by the patriarchal society in Africa either in the past or even in the recent postmodern time is erroneous or unfounded. Gender status or role has always been unstable and quite fluid, so it becomes problematic when general statements are made in a bid to classify the feminine gender and masculine gender according to role and status since gender role seems to keep shifting today as it did even in the traditional society. Some researchers, including Judith Butler (2013), Rowland Amaefula (2016) and Sylvia Tamale (2020) have discussed the unstable nature of gender role in their work.

Undoubtedly, it was at some point convenient for men to be simply classified as intelligent, aggressive, forceful, strong, brave and daring while women were classified as passive, ignorant, self-effacing, weak, gentle, and domesticated or caring. However, the truth is that this was not and is still not the complete picture. There were women who exhibited the traits attributed to men, just as there were men who displayed the so-called feminine attributes. Cases abound in literature, history, and daily life. Consequently, the idea that gender roles are specific to individuals is incorrect. Indeed, what largely determines gender role is performance. There is fluidity in gender performance of men and women today (as there was to some extent even in the traditional society). In Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it is not gender that prescribes an individual's gender performance but the condition or situation in which the individual finds himself or herself (2013: 581ff.). This means that roles are not fixed for men and women, but roles vary depending on the circumstances affecting the individual. For example, many women are breadwinners for their families; they are performing a role that was assigned to the masculine gender, but circumstances such as loss of a spouse, single parenthood, and loss of a job by a spouse act as a catalyst for gender role reversal that energizes a gender performance that would be viewed as a masculine trait. Scholarship on African women such as my monograph *Women and Leadership in Igboland: Omoku, Ime Chi and Omugwo Institutions* (2021) demonstrates clearly women's contributions to

the economy of their families and communities, and the leadership positions they occupied in traditional societies. Thus, the rigid demarcation of gender roles along biological lines is not practical, for it gives a false picture of the gender performance of men and women. Consider, for instance, a common situation these days where wives are transferred to other locations by their employers and their husbands take over the domestic chores, and care for the children while the wives work away from home and probably visit at weekends or month-ends. In a situation such as this, gender role reversal has taken place and gender role is determined by performance.

Many women today have acquired attributes that were traditionally defined as masculine. This makes gender an unstable, fluid, and dynamic experience in today's world. As Rowland Amaefula rightly remarks,

“it is increasingly obsolete to assume that men as a homogenous group unanimously oppress women as a homogenous group – masculinity imbues men with superiority and femininity plagues women with inferiority. This pattern of thought eliminates the immanence of women whose interior beings are masculine and men whose interior beings are feminine, gay, lesbians, effeminate persons and other forms of sexuality.” (2016: 6)

Feminism in the Academia

As mentioned above, the focus of my argument in this article is to establish or highlight the process of decolonizing knowledge in diverse fields and situations through feminism. And to achieve this, I have used my own home-grown feminist theory and strategy known as Snail-sense feminism, an indigenous model which will be discussed in more detail below. The theory, which I first presented at a conference in 2003, was published as a monograph by the Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos in 2012. The aim of the theory is not only to decolonize knowledge in the academia by ensuring diversity and inclusion, but also to bridge the huge gap in knowledge production and consumption inside and outside the academy – the ivory tower and the community, which we refer to in Nigeria as “town and gown”. This is very much related to the work I have done and the roles I have played over the years not only as a researcher, creative writer, and teacher but also my civic activities in my community in Lagos and at my hometown, Uga, in Southeastern Nigeria.

There are different shades of feminism with varying degrees of commitment. The cleavages are often along class, cultural, and racial lines. The history of feminism in the West is well documented. Some prominent names among feminist theo-

rists include Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Wolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Christeva, Toril Moi, Monique Wittig, Betty Friedan, and Eva Figes. We are particularly familiar with those from Britain, France, and the USA. These and some other feminist theorists and writers have contributed immensely to the development of the discourse. Most White feminists are either liberal or radical even though there are other shades such as socialist feminism and ecofeminism, etc.

Western feminism has had a profound influence not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world. In time the impact of feminism has spread to other regions of the world, though it has been modified by the culture and worldview of these regions. Like some other critics, Nada Elia (1999) has argued that feminism does not have a universal application as a theory that would unite women across national, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and other boundaries. Such an argument underscores the need for and the existence of African feminism. Filomena Steady (1987) is of the opinion that African feminism is a humanistic feminism founded upon the principles of traditional African values that view gender role as complementary, parallel, asymmetrical, and autonomously linked in the continuity of human life. Another feminist theorist, Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), describes Western feminism as combative while its African opposite is prone to negotiation and collaboration. The relationship between men and women is, therefore, based on complementarity.

Over the years, African feminism has been variously defined and named by African women scholars and theorists, thus giving rise to such variants as *African Womanism*, *Stiwanism*, *Motherism*, *Femalism*, *Snail-sense feminism* etc. *Womanism* was described and popularized by the African American writer, Alice Walker, in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Another African American theorist, Clenora Hudson-Weems, proposes a variant in her essay "Africana Womanism" (2019 [1993]). *African Womanism* is similar to the Walkerian and Hudson-Weems's models, yet it is different from both in significant ways. *Womanism*, as a concept, advocates gender complementarity, which would ensure the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. The Nigerian scholar, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi puts it more graphically when she states that "African womanism is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women [...] wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change their sexist stand [...]" (1996: 65).

It is noteworthy that many of the internationally recognized African feminist theorists and critics are Nigerian. They have theorized about women in Africa

and written books to highlight issues that concern women. However, it is important to point out that Africa is not a homogenous entity, but a continent with dynamic cultures with different historical, socio-political and economic experiences. However, our intention in this essay is to limit the discourse on feminism to Nigeria, but references would be made to feminism in America and other African societies and their writers when it is necessary. For example, the work done by the Ugandan feminist researcher, Sylvia Tamale (2020), is relevant to this article.

Snail-sense feminism: An Indigenous Model

The feminist fervor in the theorization, interrogation, and criticism of the condition of black and African women and women's writing which started in the United States of America has gained a foothold in African literary studies as may be seen in the commendable efforts of renowned African feminist/ womanist theorists and critics to create a space for women in discourse. Most African women theorists believe that critical sensitivity and a search for relevance should be guiding principles for African women as they theorize their own feminism. These theorists, some of whom have been in the literary scene since the 1980s, including Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Helen Chukwuma, Catherine Acholonu, Obioma Nnaemeka, Mary Modupe Kolawole, Chioma Opara, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Ada Azodo, Onyeka Iwuchukwu, and the author of this article, choose to articulate their own ideas of feminist concepts that are suitable to discuss the needs and experiences of women in Africa's indigenous cultures. All the theorists referred to above are Nigerians. Quite a number of them are based in universities in the United States of America and Europe – African Diaspora as it is now known – and the rest in Africa, especially Nigeria.

In May 2003, I introduced a theory, *Snail-sense feminism*, at a roundtable discussion on Feminism in Africa at the international conference "Versions and Subversions in African Literature" at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. This theory, based on Igbo philosophical thought, was later published as a monograph by the Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos, with the title *Snail-sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model* (2012). *Snail-sense feminism*, which has attracted much attention to feminist literary criticism in Nigeria, is my own home-grown theory: a result of in-depth research or investigation into the condition of Nigerian women, their reaction and response to socio-cultural and political forces that impacted and still impact on their lives in the past and in contemporary times. I have argued that the principles of shared values which operate in many cultures in Nigeria encourage one to learn to be tolerant, to

imbibe the virtues of negotiation, give and take, compromise, balance, and inclusivity. It is this reality that shaped the concept of *Snail-sense feminism* – a feminist model that is realistic, practical, and functional.

The theory derives from the habit of snails which most Nigerian women adopt in their relationships with men. Women in our cultures, from different parts of Nigeria, often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men. This is akin to what the snail does with the environment in which it moves and exists. The snail moves over boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with a well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects.

The Igbo people say, *Ire oma ka ejule ji aga n'ogwu* – meaning, “The snail passes over thorns with a fine and well-lubricated tongue.” Moreover, the snail carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. This is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria’s harsh patriarchal cultures. It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men that informs this theory which I call Snail-sense feminism. The snail does not hesitate to climb trees, mount fences, climb up and down rocks, and go over thorny and spiky surfaces. It moves steadily forward, undeterred, determined, and triumphs over obstacles. It does not *confront* these objects with any form of violence but rather *negotiates* its way past obstacles. A woman must strategize effectively and act wisely but determinedly to be able to counter the oppressive structures erected by patriarchy to curtail her freedom or scuttle her aspirations. In such cultures as these, the woman must take her destiny in her own hands to be able to overcome the impediments placed before her and live a good life. She must be proactive and strong (see Ezeigbo 2012: 27).

Using the metaphor of the snail, I have highlighted and emphasized the sterling virtues of Nigerian women. As I stated in my monograph,

“The snail is wise, sensitive, resilient, and dogged or determined. Nigerian women are all these and more. They work very hard, are tenacious and patient. However, these virtues must not be seen as a weakness on the part of the woman. Rather they should be seen as a way to complement the man and join forces with him to develop the society for the benefit of all. 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” (Ezeigbo 2012: 28f.).

Consider, for example, the powerful women associations in Igboland in the past – *Umuada*, an association of the daughters in every Igbo community, and *Alutara-di*, an association of the wives in every Igbo community. These women organized their own affairs and worked with men to achieve communal development, peace, and order. Leith-Ross’s admiration for the dynamism of these ingenious women is graphically captured in her description of them as a “rare and invaluable force, thousands upon thousands of ambitious, go-ahead, courageous, self-reliant, hardworking, independent women” (1939: 337). Some critics of *Snail-sense feminist theory* have contended that the snail is too slow and should not be seen as a viable symbol for women’s liberation and empowerment. In my response to the criticism, I have pointed out that the snail’s delicate physique or slow movement is not the focus of the Igbo philosophical idea that gave rise to *Snail-sense feminism*; the focus is solely on the metaphorical and philosophical attributes of the snail that enable it to *defeat* all obstacles and succeed – its power to negotiate and dialogue with its environment, its wisdom, sensitivity, resilience and determination to overcome. It is similar to the metaphorical significance and symbolic intelligence, or wisdom demonstrated in famous African tales about the exploits of the tortoise (*Mbe/Ijapa*) and the spider (*Anansi*) in which these relatively small and weak animals are not only a match for big and strong animals like the elephant and the lion, but even defeat them in many situations and contests. It is important to point out that negotiation or dialogue is most of the time more efficacious in achieving success or peace in human relations than aggression or confrontation. In like manner, the Nigerian woman ought to be wise, sensitive, and proactive in her quest for justice and self-actualization. It is important to note that the size or slow movement of the snail is irrelevant to the symbolic import of *Snail-sense feminism*.

The issues raised in the preceding paragraphs are often explored in the works – novels, plays and short stories – of contemporary Nigerian female and some male writers. In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Adaku understands the working of snail-sense strategy in a way that Nnu-Ego does not. This is the reason why she survives and succeeds while Nnu-Ego fails and dies in a state of loneliness. Flora Nwapa’s character Efuru, the eponymous protagonist of the novel *Efuru* (1966), understands the snail-sense strategy and applies it to her relationship with her two husbands. When the marriages fail irretrievably, she opts out for a life of independence and moves on with her life. In Tess Onwueme’s play, *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), the protagonist, Wazobia, proves a veritable snail-sense strategist in her dealings with not only the women but also

the men and eventually succeeds in entrenching her position in the Ilaa Kingdom and consequently ensures improvement in women's condition and inclusivity for them in decision making, in the kingdom. Like any other brand of African feminism, the Snail-sense model is adequate to explore and analyze feminist texts and cultural productions of African women writers. In fact, this is being done in the works of feminist literary critics, in postgraduate dissertations and theses and in undergraduate projects and long essays.

Since *Snail-sense feminism* has common features with the other variants that have been propounded by other African women scholars, it cannot be seen as a totally new concept. However, where it differs from the others and what it adds to enrich feminist literary theory is its emphasis on the individual. A woman as an individual must empower herself before she can empower others. A woman must stand before she can help other people to stand. Thus, the pursuit of individual success and development is central to *Snail-sense feminism*. The woman should not just accommodate others but should empower herself or achieve recognition for herself because self-preservation and self-actualization are crucial to a woman's success in life. And if she succeeds, the success of the family or the community follows naturally. It would appear that Snail-sense feminism shares, to some extent, a trait fundamental to Western feminism: individualism. Indeed, Snail-sense feminism advocates symbiotically Western feminism's individualism and African womanism's communalism. In the monograph, I describe the symbiotic existence of aspects of Western feminism and African womanism within the Snail-sense model as "situated feminism" (Ezeigbo 2012: 35).

Decolonizing the Academia and Community Through *Snail-sense Feminism*

The first challenge I had as a young academic was to find myself as one of three women in a department that had over 80 percent female students, yet all the lecturers were male except for three of us. Later, one of the women left and another woman was employed. I told myself that I was going to see to it that we had more female members of staff to act as role models to the teeming population of young women that annually get admitted to read English and Literary Studies. The opportunity came when I was appointed Head of Department (HOD) in 2002 for a term of three years. By 2005, when my tenure as HOD ended, the department had nine and twelve female and male lecturers, respectively, teaching language and literature courses. The last set employed under my watch were all Assistant Lecturers – three men and three women. The university authority resisted employing six assistant lecturers at the same time. However, by deploying the Snail-sense strategies of dialogue, negotiation, and determina-

tion, and with the strong support of our gender-sensitive Dean of the Faculty of Arts, I persisted and insisted that they were brilliant and highly qualified candidates. Eventually, they were all given appointment letters. Through this action, it was possible to ensure that we had the structural or institutional change that improved gender equity in the English Department. Thereafter, more and more women were employed in other Departments to balance the gender equation. The most important thing about these changes was that we were able to decolonize notions of gender supremacy, promote inclusion and increase women's participation and contribution to knowledge and knowledge creation. Most of our female students were delighted to have role models among the female lecturers to look up to and share their problems and challenges with. It was amazing to see how often they approached us and narrated their problems to us and sought our advice and assistance – even to the point of confiding in us when they were being sexually harassed by some male lecturers. As HOD, I devised ways of intervening and helping them.

Other ways we enhanced inclusion and balance were to introduce new courses in the curriculum, expand the canon and add more female writers on the list of authors taught in the various courses. For instance, I was instrumental to adding to the curriculum “Introduction to Gender Studies” and “Feminism and Contemporary Literature” taught at the Third and Fourth Year levels respectively. I introduced the works of women writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, Tess Onwueme, Bina Nengi Ilagha (Nigerians), Nawal El Saadawi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Christina Rossetti, and a few others to the curriculum.

The influence of *Snail-sense feminism* has been paramount in guiding my strategies as an administrator, a teacher and even as a researcher. I made sure I worked well with my male colleagues and engaged them meaningfully by getting their cooperation in all I did. I neither side-lined them nor took them for granted. The habit of negotiation, dialogue and collaboration was privileged in my relationship with them, and this spirit was emulated by other female lecturers. So, there was peace and harmony in the department, and we worked as a team. Most of the lecturers, especially the younger ones and the early career academics, began to address me as Mother of English Department. To complement my work as a teacher who promoted the empowerment of women, I embarked on research into the lives of women of the past, especially in Igbo traditional society as well as modern society. This led to the publication of my novels – a trilogy entitled *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2001) and *Children of the Eagle* (2003). My extended research on the lives of

generations of Igbo women led to my writing a paper which I presented at a conference in the United States of America some years ago which was later published as a monograph entitled *Women and Leadership in Igboland: Omoku, Ime Chi and Omugwo Institutions* (2021). I have also written countless poems and short stories about women and their lives and relationships, projecting them to the limelight, giving them agency in works where they live their lives as full human beings rather than as appendages of men and people without a voice. I have written more than thirty books – mostly novels – for children, and most of them have female protagonists. I discovered that most protagonists in male-authored as well as female-authored children’s books in Nigeria before I began to write for children were boys. This is the situation in children’s books written by Chinua Achebe (*Chike and the River* 1966), Cyprian Ekwensi (*The Drummer Boy* 1960), Chukwuemeka Ike (*The Potter’s Wheel* 1974), Onuora Nzekwu (*Eze Goes to School* 1963), Ifeoma Okoye (*The Village Boy* 1986) and many others. My aim was to subvert this situation by making a paradigm shift and creating realistic or believable and strong characters who are female. Examples of such characters can be found in my children’s novels, *My Cousin Sammy* (2007), *Sunshine the Miracle Child* (2006), *Asa and the Little Stream* (2005) and *Sika of Iroko Clan* (2023). In my fables or fairytales, there is a reversal of roles, for it is the female (Princess) who rescues the male (Prince) as in *Sunshine the Miracle Child* (2006), *Asa and the Little Stream* (2005) and *Red One and the Wizard of Mula* (2005).

An aspect of my research into the lives of women of the past was useful when I participated in making a film “Daughters of Igbo Woman” in collaboration with two other black women, Vida Rawlins (Nevis, West Indies) and Ros Martin (Bristol, UK) in 2017. It is a transnational digital installation comprising a trilogy of literary films made in UK, Nigeria, and Nevis respectively. The film explores the experiences of three women who lived in the 18th century, including Ojiugo in Uga, Southeastern Nigeria, her daughter Adaeze (Igbo Polly), captured as a slave and taken to Nevis, West Indies, and Fanny Coker (Fumnanya) the latter’s daughter who was taken to Bristol as a slave from Nevis.¹ The film demonstrates how these three strong women faced the challenges in their lives in spite of the inhumanity and suffering they experienced. “Daughters of Igbo Woman” is thus a memorial installation that uses film and sound in remembrance of Fanny Coker (1767-1820) whose Igbo name was Fumnanya. She was maidservant to Mrs Pinney at Georgian House, Bristol, UK. The film installation made in 2017 marked 250 years since Fanny Coker’s birth in Nevis. Our aim in making the film

¹ The film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf-xayJyvzA>

was to decolonize the knowledge about Black women's experience of slavery from Nigeria/ Africa (Uga) through West Indies (Nevis) and UK (Bristol). As African women writers, Ros Martin, Vida Rawlins, and I respond to Bristol's transatlantic slavery legacy by evoking the voices of three generations of women from one family, separated by the Atlantic Ocean. In the film, Fanny's voice is created by Ros Martin in the UK; her mother's voice (Igbo Polly) is by Vida Rawlins in Nevis and her grandmother's voice (Igbo woman/ Ojiugo) is by me, Akachi Ezeigbo.

I have consistently carried alongside my teaching and research activities a legacy I inherited from my aunts and great-aunts – the role of a funeral artist or chanter and have performed celebratory dirges for renowned personalities who rejoined the ancestors such as Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta, and for Fanny Coker, Igbo Polly and Ojiugo in the Film "Daughters of Igbo Woman". Places I performed Achebe's celebratory dirge include Ogidi, Awka, Otuoke, Abuja, Owerri, Lagos, Abakaliki (Nigeria), and London and Edinburgh (UK), Johannesburg (South Africa), Yale University, New Haven and Brown University, Providence (USA). I performed Buchi Emecheta's celebratory dirge in London, at Yale University, Owerri, Lagos, and Abakaliki. My role as a chanter or funeral artist has enabled me to resurrect and give a voice to a profession that Igbo women of the past practiced to propagate and maintain their cultural tradition from generation to generation. I have also been able to promote and sustain indigenous knowledge. Thus, women's lives, activities, history, and culture deserve to be included in the broader activities, history and culture of institutions, communities and nations.

The form of decolonization I have pursued in my community, especially in my hometown, Uga, in Southeastern Nigeria, has been my struggle towards inclusion and equity for women in socio-political and economic life of our community. It involves helping to dismantle institutional and economic structures that subjugate and disempower women. I see all this as a concrete example of the applicability of *Snail-sense feminism* and positive actions taken to put in place structures that would empower women in my community and give them a sense of belonging and justice. What happened was that *Igwe*, the traditional ruler of my community and the elected leaders of the town union known as Uga Improvement Union (U.I.U.) planned to give chieftaincy titles to fifty prominent citizens who had contributed to the development of the community but not a single woman was among them. I protested against this act of injustice by writing a letter on behalf of the women to the *Igwe*. When nothing was done to correct the gross injustice and gender discrimination, I mobilized the *Umuada* (Association of Daughters) and they planned a massive demonstration to protest

the injustice a few weeks before the ceremony. The leaders of the town and the *Igwe* were deeply worried about the repercussion of the planned demonstration and immediately called the women for dialogue and negotiation. The result was a firm promise that the next award would include women, and it did in 2016 when many women, including this writer, were honoured alongside men with awards for their contributions to the well-being of Uga community. My own award was described as “Gold Award for Excellence for Your Contributions to the Educational, Economic and Social Development of Uga Town.” Subsequently women have been carried along in most of the projects and issues concerning the welfare and development of the town and the old constitution of U.I.U. was amended. One of the female awardees started a Micro-Loan Scheme in the town through which women in small-scale businesses could obtain loans for their businesses and are given favourable conditions for the repayment of the loans. There are other examples of practical applications of Snail-sense feminism in my community in particular and society in general to fight against forms of patriarchal and gender discrimination against women, but they cannot be tabled here for want of space.

Conclusion

My advocacy for decolonization of knowledge has taken me to different places in the world and allowed me to work with men and women in the spirit of collaboration, cooperation and mutual respect which the philosophy behind Snail-sense feminist theory promotes. The Igbo philosophy of *Ire oma ka eju ji aga n’ogwu* which gave rise to *Snail-sense feminism* insists on collaboration, inclusion, building bridges and promoting inter- and intra-cultural literacy among people of different ethnic groups, races, and countries. It is a form of education that can empower people to understand each other. It is a peaceful way that people can relate to one another and be sensitive to each other’s needs. I regard myself as a local and global advocate of complementarity between men and women and between people from diverse localities and with different frames of mind. Snail-sense feminism believes in empowering the individual female as well as the group. A woman can only empower others after she has empowered herself. This is the philosophy that has shaped my life of service to the academy and to communities wherever I find myself – in my homeland in Uga where I am fully involved in community development and in educational activities; in my Lagos community where I have played leadership roles in the Women’s Wing of Uga Improvement Union (U.I.U.), Lagos Branch. I have not limited my activities to the classroom but widened my field of engagement to the urban as well as rural communities in Uga, Lagos, and Abakaliki – places I call home. I have spoken at

events organized by different women groups about cultural literacy (the importance of their knowing who they are and where they are coming from in order to live meaningful and fulfilled lives), self-reliance, self-actualization and the protection of their rights as human beings. The decolonization of knowledge inside and outside the academy cannot be complete until the tenets of inclusion, equity, negotiation and dialogue become entrenched in the academia and the larger society. I cannot think of a better way to end this article than quoting the words of Sylvia Tamale (2020: 42), the Ugandan feminist scholar and human right activist:

“If African women are to successfully challenge their subordination and oppression, they need to carefully and rigorously develop home-grown conceptualizations that capture the specific political-economies and cultural realities encountered, as well as their traditional world-view”.

Snail-sense feminism is a viable aspect of home-grown conceptualizations. Undoubtedly, there is much modern society, especially in Africa, can learn from workable feminist concepts to create positive change in society.

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