

TOWARDS UTOPIA: FEMALISM IN CHIOMA OPARA'S *HER MOTHER'S DAUGHTER*

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Abstract

The reality of binary sexual streams in human configuration is laced with intrigues, subjugations, revolutions and revisions. Over the years, the drawn-out negative influence of patriarchy has elicited feminist consciousness with discernable quality of protestation of male oppression and female individuation. This protestation gave rise to a motley of radical feminist stances amongst Western female intellectuals (beginning from the last quarter of the 18th century) that sought vigorously for its eradication. Birthed in the murky waters of Africanist adaptations to the radical liberal feminist principles of the west, Chioma Opara's femalism "foregrounds the body while applying psychoanalytical criticism in its negation of the gendered subjectivity deemed as culturally and socially constructed." In deconstructing extant Western and African shades of feminism, Opara carved a niche for herself by expostulating aspects of some brands, while integrating aspects of others. The resultant hybrid—some sort of eclectic phenomenon, is what she termed femalism. This essay identifies that the addition of femalism into the nomenclature of African women's literary quest for female emancipation, is stoutly heralded as a potent genre. It notes that in spite of its wide acceptance, femalism falls within the cast of Opara's predecessors' genres: idealistic and chimerical. It concludes by exploring how Opara's coinage—femalism, shares in the ambivalence that has characterised African feminism generally—a sort of melancholic attraction to an object of impossible possibility.

Keywords: Femalism, Utopia, Chioma Opara, Culture, Feminism

Introduction

In as little as over half a century, the flurry of scholarly works arising from African amazons on the emancipation of the womenfolk, is amazing. Inspired by the pioneering vision of Flora Nwapa (regarded as the mother of modern African

Literature) in *Efuru* (1966), other female African writers like Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall, Nuruddin Farah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Marie-Pauline Eboh, Obioma Nnaemeka, Akachi Ezeigbo, Catherine Acholonu, Chinyere Okafor, amongst others, became courageous in using their literary skills to subtly challenge patriarchal inhibitions in African societies. Taken individually and as a consortium, these trail blazers are well ensconced in what Nnolim terms “feminist wars with spiraling and unabating new fronts” (xi). Chioma Opara’s preoccupation with feminist/gender cause shows how deeply she is immersed into the fray.

Prior to, and as a foreground to African variants, is western feminist consciousness. Stimulated in modern times by Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 seminal work –*Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and buoyed by John Stuart Mill’s (1869) *The Subjection of Women*, a variety of scholars have flayed the suppression of womenfolk, structuring in their trail a procedure for female liberation that is hinged on the dialectic of law and human rights. Although without a uniform stance or procedure for the achievement of its ends, these ‘feminist’ authors possess a discernable quality of protestation of male oppression and female individuation, and sought vigorously for the eradication of patriarchy. In time, the struggle bore fruits, and led not only to the enfranchisement of women in Europe and the United States, but to some sort of hybridity in the perception of the human person. At some instances, it elicited a role reversal move, whereby policies and structures, especially relating to family life, skewed the pendulum in favour of women.

Birthered in murky waters of African and Africanist adaptations to the radical liberal feminist principles of the west, Chioma Opara’s femalism “foregrounds the body while applying psychoanalytical criticism in its negation of the gendered subjectivity deemed as culturally and socially constructed” (18). In deconstructing extant Western and African shades of feminism, Opara carved a niche for herself by expostulating aspects of some brands, while integrating aspects of others. The resultant hybrid—some sort of eclectic phenomenon, is what she termed femalism. The addition of femalism into the nomenclature of African women’s literary quest for female emancipation, is stoutly heralded as a potent genre. Nonetheless, having subtly cast much of the predecessors’ types as idealistic and chimerical, it remains to be seen how less it shares with these genres. My task in this ‘celebratory piece of writing’ (festschrift) is to explore how Opara’s coinage—femalism, shares in the ambivalence that has characterised

African feminism—a sort of melancholic attraction to an object of impossible possibility.

Unmasking the Leitmotif of *Her Mother's Daughter*

Without claiming expertise to literary genres, the task of unmasking is encrusted chiefly in two somewhat diametrically opposed nuances: one is that of 'revealing', 'uncovering', or 'exposing'; the other is that of 'debunking', 'deflecting', or 'discrediting.' A third forte which, perhaps, englobes aspects of the above duo, is that of 'demystifying.' African values manifest in various cultures, largely derive their vitality from traditions, which origins are found in the overbearing forces of the ancestors. The ancestors or ancestral spirits, in Nnolim's asseveration, are "the repository of all that was sacred, mythical, mysterious, cultural, superstitious and supernatural in Igbo culture" (*Approaches* 24). Being repository of the mysterious and supernatural, the ancestral powers are thus, locked in obscurity, and are only accessible with the aid of mediators—custodians of tradition.

By bestowing ancestral forces with the power of lurking to punish dissenters of tradition, custodians of tradition instilled fear into the populace, and in so doing, were able to brashly emasculate one half of the human race (womenfolk) for so long a time. Hence, in line with the age-long medical practice of *senacio in radice* – healing from the roots, most women understood that any meaningful liberating strategy must begin with unmasking the source of this infamy. Unmasking in the sense of demystification, became clearly a dominant motif in African women's literature (Opara 7).

In a display of profuse literary skill, Opara navigates Ezeigbo's *Echoes in the Mind*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, and Zaynab Alkali's *Cobwebs* to deftly highlight the efforts of female writers in unmasking the overbearing attitudes and behaviours of men, as one would dare a sacrosanct masquerade. To buttress this, she accentuates Ezeigbo's use of the story, "The Missing Hammer" to unmask the ogre by "baring *the yam seller's* genitals in full view of all including the harassed heroine" (7). By likening the forced disclosure of the genitals—customarily shrouded in sanctity and secrecy (even amongst the near nude dress code of traditional society) to the unmasking of ancestral spirit in African culture, Opara envisions that unmasking the spirits—repository of the sacred, is a profane feat which debunks the sacrosanct in subversion (8). This

subversive intent patent in Western feminist writings of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, or Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, is also manifest, even if in attenuated fashion, in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, or Marie-Pauline Eboh's gynist philosophy. Unmasking the leitmotif of *Her Mother's Daughter*, as is envisioned here, does not follow the subversive ploy of casting aspersions, but rather an expository or revelatory scheme to lay bay the budding context foregrounding this masterpiece.

Beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Opara traces the launch of African feminist thought to the efforts of those she terms the "harbingers and doyennes of feminist criticism" in the West (*A House Integrated* 28). Included in this circle are John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, which proposed the emancipation and enfranchisement of women; Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, which by its androgynous model sought to obliterate the masculine/feminine binary; Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own*, which separates women writing into tripartite stages of the 'feminine', the 'feminist' and the 'female' phases, accentuating, as it were, the valorisation of female experiences and subculture. Others are Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which by drawing a distinction between gender and sex, uses existentialist principles to excoriate the prismatic vision that downgrades women and uplifts men; Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which challenges patriarchal structures that have spitefully subordinated females to males; and Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, which resolutely set out to repudiate phallogocentric Freudian postulations. Relying on textual criticisms of Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*, and Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Opara weaves together an epistolary of western feminist critiques, which culminates in the intellectual descendants of Derrida's deconstructionism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. With Elaine Showalter, she adumbrates that "French feminist criticism is essentially psychoanalytic and stresses repression; English feminist criticism essentially Marxist and stresses oppression; American feminist criticism essentially textual and stresses expression" (*A House Integrated* 61; *Feminist Criticism* 16). The question that remains to be answered is: what then is the texture of African feminist criticism?

In order to resolve this, Opara delves into deep analyses of the historical progression of trends in African feminism. As with other indigenous ideologies which began to emerge after liberation from colonial rule, she discovers that African feminism is relatively new on the world feminist radar. With the 1966 publication of *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, it became clear that given same exposure,

African women can voice out their displeasure against subjugation, albeit in diverse forms. Given the patriarchal strictures in African societies, *Efuru* can be adjudged as a master pragmatic piece, which, while non-combative in structure and form, accentuates the immanent power women possess for their liberation. In fact, its non-combative or conciliatory form, in contradistinction to western confrontational feminism, is largely responsible for Nwapa's preference of the womanist tag to that of feminism. For her pioneering work in *Efuru* both in the sense of initiating feminist discourse, as well as its direction, Nwapa is considered the forerunner to a generation of African women writers.

Nwapa's efforts at contextualizing women struggle paved way for much of subsequent African feminist critics. Given the shackles of slavery, colonial and post-colonial suppressions that consign African women to subservient status, it would have been a waste of time to idealize with socio-psychological concerns that have little or no bearing on African predicaments. African feminism had to latch on indigenous structures under which prognoses can be tailored to particular needs of African peoples. In the main, this led African female writers to adopt variant terminologies from the mainstream feminism. Those who shared Alice Walker's view (Ifeoma Okoye, Akachi Ezeigbo, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, and Chidi Maduka) that "a womanist loves struggle and is committed to the survival of both men and women," (xi) accepted the womanist tag of a sort (*A House Integrated* 62-63). Whist others like Molarra Ogundipe-Leslie reckons with stiwanism—an indigenous feminist outlook, which contends among other things, that every man in Africa should be a progressive feminist; Obioma Nnaemeka is enthused with her negofeminism or no-ego feminism, which consists in negotiating with and around men in times of need.

By analyzing the works of these trail blazers (which we shall explore more in subsequent section), Opara discovers that aside Eboh's radical gynist coinage which is bereft of masculine affix or root in its etymology (65), other strands are, in varying degrees and intensity, indicative of the African feminist's overriding dream, namely "a peaceful, salubrious and integrative society, conducive to gender symmetry, recognition of the female self and mutual respect" (66). To complement these, she seeks for the accentuation of the female body in what she terms *femalism*. For her, since African feminism stresses the body, *femalism* as its variant, balances the female nurturance against the female Continent—Mother Africa (*Her Mother's Daughter* 20). With this, she resolves the earlier poser by noting that the texture of African feminist criticism is essentially historico-cultural and stresses the body (19).

The African feminist textual emphasis on the female body is not by any happenstance of history, but a logical consequence of the collective source of textual criticisms. Most referenced African feminist commentators are either first or second generation writers whose literary prowess are foregrounded in the oral traditions of their forebears, in general, and their mothers, in particular. Micere Mugo in *Opara* relays women writers' testimonies of being influenced by their mothers, grandmothers or older sisters through orature stories (5). Through storytelling, singing, dancing, riddle posing and folklores, these oral foremothers visibly influence their progenies, and ignite in them the passion to document reality. While Nwapa is never tired of acknowledging the influence of moonlight stories of Ugwuta women on her creative works, Emecheta is eternally indebted to her 'mothers' for constantly enthralling her with folktales. These acknowledgements, coupled with personal experiences, led to *Opara's* avowal that "the uncanonized matrix of African creative arts—oral literature—has been regenerated by the potent pen of the attentive daughter who had been expressly invigorated by the repertoire of her mother's tales and performance" (6). *Her Mother's Daughter*—a piece strewn together to analyse African feminist criticism, is thus, both a deconstruction of fellow daughters' narratives, as well as a tale of tribute to maternal influence. As a female writer mimics aspects of oral style transmitted by her mother, she clearly infuses it with creative embellishments using deconstructive tools. It is precisely at that point that the daughter carves a niche for herself, even as she regularly looks up to her mother's inspiration (7).

Femalism: A twig from *Opara's* Deconstruction of Feminism

The use of deconstructive genre became germane and rife in literary works up from Jacques Derrida's 1967 seminal work in *Of Grammatology*, where he explored the interplay between language and the construction of meaning. In this wise, deconstruction is understood as a philosophical theory of textual criticism which assumes that texts do not have a fixed meaning. With its later refinement in the "Force of Law" (*Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* 21), Derrida applied it to the task of analyzing certain binary dichotomies or dialectical oppositions such as spirit/matter, mind/body, culture/nature etc., showing that these binary dichotomies implicitly privilege or hierarchize one term over the other. For instance, within the intellectual culture of Hegelian "Phenomenology," spirit is privileged over matter, mind over body; but in Marxist or Nietzschean "social constructivism," matter is privileged over spirit, body over mind. Thus, the deconstructive genre decrypts how binary dichotomy

or dialectical opposition can be subverted and overturned by re-privileging the supplementary, deprivileged terms over the privileged dominant ones.

Buoyed by the arrival of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, feminist writers have, in diverse forms, challenged patriarchal strictures and dominations. As liberal feminism seeks equality of rights of all sexes, suppressing procreative differentiation with common humanity of all, radical feminism pits women against men by seeking women-only consciousness-raising groups and alternative organizations (Lorber 9, 18). The radical feminist strand, vivified in the gender politics of resistance to patriarchy (16), steered the formulation of ideologies such as androgyny, gynism, among others, which later ossified into formidable revisionist movements. For instance, in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf demands the obliteration of the masculine/feminine binary, hoping, in the process, to create a *nouveau* being bereft of biological essentialism hinged on sexual differences (*A House Integrated* 58). Although Woolf's androgynous proviso met with scathing criticism from some feminist critics like Showalter, the *aporaiac* idea of 'deconstruction as dismantling,' gained traction amongst scholars of subsequent generations.

Due, in part, to the combative stance of some feminist critics that especially sought for 'role reversals', the late 20th century saw the emergence of the pejorative use of the word deconstruction to mean nihilism. As a result, deconstructive efforts came to be viewed as incredulous giddy romance with the absurd. But in popular parlance, it became the underlying force in the critical dismantling of tradition and traditional modes of thought. Even though manifest in attenuated forms, African feminist criticism followed the western deconstructive patterns. Its unique structure is, however, consequent upon being a melding of western liberal feminism, Marxist/Socialist leanings and colonial and post-colonial experiences. While some, following Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, are quite polemical, seeking for the complete elimination of masculine affix or root in feminine constructions, and hoping, as the needs present, to craft integration from a melding of differences (Eboh), others like Nwapa, Okoye, Ezeigbo and Ogunyemi favour a more conciliatory approach that seeks to optimize the strengths of both men and women in what is termed "womanism."

As truly her mother's daughter, Chioma Carol Opara absorbed much of the intellectual trajectory of her female forebears, and using deconstructive tools, infused them with some creative embellishment in what she calls "femalism." For her:

Femalism as a praxis, foregrounds the body while applying psychoanalytical criticism in its negation of the gendered subjectivity deemed as culturally and socially constructed... femalism views the female body as a site of the contrasting sensibility of pain and nurture, manipulated by the patriarchal hand and revised by the femalist foot – the synecdoche of the itinerant prime African woman (*Her Mother's Daughter* 18).

In *Her Mother's Daughter*, Opara underscores the feminist literary heritage in western feminism, and the subsequent adaptive efforts of first generation African feminist critics. With deconstruction—in the sense of unmasking, as a salient feature of her literary genre, she displays her ingenuity by isolating average African female writers into a femalist rather than a feminist mode, thus:

Femalism, a hue of African feminisms, is a softer tone than liberal feminism and highly polarized from radical feminism. Unlike womanism, which was made popular by Alice Walker and Africanized by Ogunyemi, femalism is essentially African and accentuates the body (17-18).

In Africa, the woman's body, for the most part, is a gendered body, objectified for male admiration and "use." As a gendered body, she literally exists for men (Brittan and Maynard 13), implying that any meaningful unfettering must begin with the freeing of the body. This perhaps, is why in Opara's femalism and other African feminist brands, emphasis is laid on the female body. The accentuation of the body, in her ideation, is largely responsible for many African writers balking at the feminist tag, while identifying with the womanist one (19). A womanist, as Alice Walker avers, is one who "loves struggle and is committed to the survival of both men and women" (*A House Integrated* 63). In adapting this integrative sentiment of human emancipation to the multipronged challenges of Nigeria, Ogunyemi further explains the canons of womanist outlook thus:

Womanism, with its myriad manifestations, is therefore a renaissance that aims to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic, geographical, educational, gender, ethical, class, religious, military and political differences. The oppression emanating from these differences has to be addressed to counter further division and hardships. For a post militaristic reconstruction, womanism asks relevant questions: what is wrong with the relationship between men and women? What are the strengths of men and women and how can they be optimally utilized for their own and the national good? (123)

In effect, a womanist is one whose struggles center on the liberation of men, women, community, the nation or continent, as the case may be. And this can be achieved, as Ogunyemi continues, only if the four Cs—conciliation, collaboration, consensus and complementarity predominate relationships between men and women. As do femalism, African womanism is, first, propelled by the mission for complete emancipation of colonized Africans in general; and secondly, by the reality that the liberation of African women depends on the liberation of their men, in particular.

Femalism, as a mode of enquiry, is Opara's model in attempting to resolve thorny issues such as: what distinguishes the body of an African woman from that of her Western counterpart; how the African woman's body is manipulated to conduce socio-cultural desires; and how the African female is expected to fulfil her female and feminine roles to fit into somewhat dehumanizing cultural categorization (18). In line with African womanism, the feminist model exhorts complementarity. But unlike womanism, its complementarity is of two kinds: one is between man and woman; while the other is based on accord between national issues and women's concerns (20). It is in the later that femalism diverges from womanism, and on the basis of which the female nurturing body is juxtaposed with the female Continent—Mother Africa.

Besides Ogunyemi's womanism, Opara infuses other hues of African feminism with her feminist tale. In the subtext, "The Esoteric and Erotic in Flora Nwapa's *Woman Beings*," she deftly inserts the feminist tale while navigating between the conundrum of a supposed lonely figure *Efuru*, who whilst discarding parents, husband and child, is at peace, and that of the pregnant *Idu*, who could not find peace after her husband's death, and in consequence wishes death for herself. While *Efuru's* tale portrays the capacity of African women for independence in Nwapa's 'woman being', *Idu's* account highlights a paralyzing ambivalence in African women's quest for liberation. Mourning her husband unreservedly, and relinquishing all the erstwhile productive powers draws the ire of Uhamiri — the jealous deity, who, in an act of poetic justice, cuts down *Idu's* life. Together with other characters in subsequent novels, Nwapa deconstructs the traditional image of femininity and creates pragmatic woman beings who are not afraid to venture into unchartered territories. Opara interprets this as a didactic feminist tale that instils the lesson of pragmatic independence (36). In the vein of Nwapa's woman being, Obioma Nnaemeka presents negofeminism or no-ego feminism as her own variant. As the name goes, negofeminism involves the use of principles of negotiation and compromise to create balance within African societies. It entails

negotiating with or around men, or negotiating in a manner devoid of the eruption of the ego (377-8). As endorsing reciprocity and complementarity, femalism glides with both aspects of negofeminism.

In “The Wailing Walls of Ambivalence: Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes*,” Opara depicts *Changes* as a feminist parable that conflates female individuality with Afracentrism (44). She explores Aidoo’s contrapose in the use of two career females in—Esi and her friend, Opukuya, and establishes femalism as the practical viable option for women liberation in Africa.

Esi—the “real touch bird,” is a data analyst who subordinates her conjugal roles to the demands of career. She feels stifled by monogamous commitments, and readily jettisons ‘marital rape.’ But after divorcing her husband, Oko, she ironically fell to the antics of Ali and became his second wife. On the other hand, Opukuya—a nurse, adopts the feminist stance of compromise, especially in the pesky subject of sharing a car with her husband who did not have any. She jettisons her ego and strives to negotiate with or around patriarchal demands. Ultimately, she creates a much needed balance in her family. Where Opukuya is compliant, willing to dialogue and concede, Esi is defiant, inflexible and arrogant (45). Opara deploys the poetic finale of this contraposition to accentuate the propriety of her feminist approach. While the reciprocal and complementary Opukuya enjoys marital bliss, the erstwhile self-styled liberated Esi, who felt smothered by Oko’s love and attention, is, by ironic twist of fate, reduced to a piteous, febrile, lonely love-lorn woman (48). For Opara, this shows that western feminist principles, which Esi imbibes, unlike feminist ethics, exist merely on the theoretical rather than practical level in Africa (49).

In its embracive Africanist stance, femalism encapsulates distinct aspects of both Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie’s STIWANISM, and Catherine Acholonu’s motherism. With regard to STIWANISM—Social Transformation Including Women in Africa, femalism embraces the inclusion of African women in the social and political transformation of the continent, enjoining everyone – men and women to be progressive feminists; while in the vein of motherism, it deftly subscribes to extolling the female reproductive organ for being contiguous with Mother Earth in nurturance (*A House Integrated* 66-67). Femalism extols motherhood and views the body as a matrix of creativity.

As her mother’s daughter, femalism is adept in deconstructing these emerging ideas into an ephemeral rainbow of dreams pitched against the concrete granite of patriarchal institutions. It sifts out and vivifies relevant extant strands in African feminism, endorsing nurturance, temperance, mothering instinct,

reciprocity and gender alliance, on one hand, and rejecting western individualism / relativism, androgynous elimination of male/female binary, and the radical feminist abhorrence of motherhood, on the other (*Her Mother's Daughter* 45). In the very words of Opara:

...femalism as an ideology, extends beyond the boundaries of motherism's explicit idealism of motherhood; African womanism's principles of four C's; nego-feminism's performing artistry in peaceful negotiations; gynism's occlusion of the male root; Africana womanism's rootedness to African culture. It strives at pragmatically absorbing essential concepts as organizing principles. It stretches out as a humanistic ideology to embrace the biodiversity conception of ecofeminism which links the despoliation of nature with the violation of women (29).

Femalism, as thus elucidated, is both absorbing and outreaching: it engages with proffered African feminist solutions to the age-long segregation of patriarchy, but stretches out to incorporate ecofeminist ideology. It recognizes that the promotion of sublime values like equity, justice, and love in a fragmented society must be juxtaposed with deeper understanding of peculiar historical and social realities.

As a praxis, the femalist focus, in Opara's ideation, is on both the concerns of women and that of continental growth. Its style is conciliatory and collaborative, and its strategy is to emancipate women through the wholesome and holistic liberation of the African male still ensconced in the conflictive terrain of colonial objectification. Besides, Femalism is adroitly devoted to the abolition of a gendered subjectivity that is culturally and socially constructed (*A House Integrated* 66-67).

Femalism in *Her Mother's Daughter*: Realistic or Chimerical?

Human beings exist in the world and in specific relations to the things of the world. Primordially, they did not bargain to live in the world; they just found themselves in the world (Ogbujah 33). Their existence is in the sense of Heidegger's *thrownness*. Heidegger explains the facticity of human *thrownness* as implying that as being-in-the-world, humans understand that their destiny is bound with the being of other entities which they encounter within the world (82). Man's finding of himself in the world is his situatedness. Thrown into the world, he is disclosed as *situated* or *attuned* (*befindlichkeit*) in specific ways.

Recently, the concept of situatedness has gained traction within interdisciplinary fields. The intent is to explain the close relation between the individual and their environment. Every individual is born, grows and acts within specific situations. As Lindblom and Ziemke asseverate: “the characterization of an agent as ‘situated’ is usually intended to mean that its behaviour and cognitive processes first and foremost are the outcome of a close coupling between agent and environment” (1). This, perhaps, explains why feminist epistemology insists that knowers are situated in particular relations to what they know and to other knowers. In other words, there is no perspective neutrality: what is known, and the way it is known, reflect the situation or perspective of the knower (Anderson para. 3).

African feminism has amply demonstrated that its theorizing is structured by specific African problems, stretching from domestic, to cultural and national issues. That is, African feminist criticism echoes the specific conditions under which these amazons reflect. Opara underscores this point when she notes that “the historical and social realities of colonization, neo-colonization, post-colonization, globalization and underdevelopment have bestridden the heavy-laden African woman” (*Women’s Perennial Quest* 126). This realization, perhaps, should have tampered her portrayal of African female works as purely “protest literature” (120). Although instigated by the bigoted portraiture of womanhood in African terrain, their contents are beyond ‘mere protest,’ as they are didactic and useful for other pedagogical purposes. Besides, they simply demonstrate, in the vein of situatedness, that socially embedded contexts essentially determine the kinds of knowledge and practices that are constructed (Lave and Wenger).

In the incisive essay, “Women’s Perennial quest in African writing: Idealistic, Realistic or Chimerical,” Opara deftly classifies as utopic, the works of African feminist writers challenged by a debilitating patriarchy. For her, these “agitated and revisionary female writers” are caught up romanticizing with what ought to be, rather than with what is. And so, they become victims of “the occasional flight to the ideal located in utopian havens and iconoclastic feats in women’s relentless quest for gender parity and justice in a monolithic society” (*Women’s Perennial Quest* 120). She further argues that the corollary of what these ambivalent female writers could produce is “a medley of bare facts, evanescent pipe dreams together with chimerical quests rooted in illusions and delusions” (120).

Applying the same deconstructive canons, it is difficult to isolate Opara’s femalism from the overall pitfalls of African feminist criticisms which *Her*

Mother's Daughter seeks to overcome. Whilst different in structure—being purely textual and contextual hermeneutics of texts by women artists, the overriding motifs or concerns of femalism are much similar to those of other hues of African feminism. If the seminal works of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall, among others, are branded “protest literature” because they embody subtle and sometimes, blatant protestation against male induced cultural handicaps, then femalism, in the account of *Her Mother's Daughter*, can also be impugned for embodying a protest ideology. By objecting to the proprietary claims of each of the hues in the rainbow of African feminism, and supplanting them with somewhat eclectic creed in femalist approach, Opara, *ipso facto* acknowledges protest as a veritable option in literary criticism.

With regard to content, the femalist praxis of foregrounding the body in the vein of extant African feminist criticism, seems eclectic in structure. In textual criticism, eclecticism entails the selection and use of what seems to be best in various doctrines, methods, or styles. By examining a wide array of texts and selecting the variants that seem best in her portraiture of femalism, Opara weaves together a profuse philosophy of liberation in African terrain. After discovering the nexus of African feminism, she asseverates that it is not fortuitous that for all their differences, the female writers whom she discusses in *Her Mother's Daughter* share appreciable affinities (203). This affinity, by no means excludes her variant of choice. By tying African female writer's ideology to “the nurturant mechanism of womanhood, which is integral to the femalist philosophy,” Opara accentuates the rootedness of her brand in gender and national commitment, as do others. In the end, without yielding to ‘compositional error’, it is difficult for her type not to share in the befouling ambivalences that attenuate other brands.

To literary critics as well as to ordinary folks, Opara's femalism is a potent window to the vista of ‘isms’ that have flecked African women's perennial quest for the eradication of patriarchal structures. *Her Mother's Daughter* and her other incisive essays arising thereof, are potent literary masterpieces which, by means of deconstructive tools, deftly situate the literary criticisms of her female forebears into their fitting mode, namely: a romance with utopia. When she doesn't regard their confrontation with patriarchy as “occasional flight to the ideal located in utopian havens and iconoclastic feats,” she sees their literary melee as a “medley of bare facts, evanescent pipe dreams together with chimerical quests rooted in illusions and delusions” (*Women's Perennial Quest* 120). Opara highlights the invasiveness of this utopian ideal in Buchi Emecheta's

The Rape of Shavi, Ogundipe-Leslie's STIWANISM, Ezeigbo's "situated feminism", and Eboh's gynism, among others, and goes on to supplant them with femalism, in the vein of Catherine Acholonu's womanism. However, as an ideology that embraces the biodiversity conception of ecofeminism (*Her Mother's Daughter* 29), feminist praxis likewise entails "a palpable melding of flora, fauna and humans in this biotic community" (*Women's Perennial Quest* 124). There is no doubt, as Opara herself would admit, that this sort of constructed integrative haven ultimately projects things, not as they really are in African cultures, but as they ought to be; not as practically realizable under the circumstances, but as they should be (ideal). In the vein of varied African feminist criticisms which seem entangled in measures of ambivalence, the praxis of feminist ideals may, factually, be more chimeric than realistic.

Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, we have established, majorly through Opara's lenses, that African feminist critics have made huge strides in the ongoing quest for the dismantling of patriarchal structures. As patriarchy constricted the space for physical activism, feminist writers and critics expanded the horizon through the power of the pen. Their pen becomes a veritable instrument of power in their quest to subvert male manipulations and hegemony, and /or to make sense out of the rapprochement between women's matters and national concerns. The need to figure out this rapprochement is impelled by the peculiarity of challenges. Besides male hegemony, African woman faces problems arising from colonialism, neocolonialism, globalization and underdevelopment, which are distinct from those faced by her counterparts in the west. To tailor down solutions to peculiar needs, African female writers and critics seek for expressions that are variants of mainstream feminism. The ensuing literary deconstructions cascade into a flurry of terminologies, which, for the most part, highlight each individual critic's interest. In the main, we have Ogunyemi's *womanism* (to which Nwapa and Okoye readily acquiesce), Ogundipe-Leslie's STIWANISM, Eboh's *gynism*, Nnaemeka's *negofeminism*, Ezeigbo's *snail-sense feminism* or *situated feminism*, Acholonu's *motherism*, and Azodo's *di-feminism*. Opara's *femalism* is thus, a deft input into the seemingly saturated array of intellectual gymnastics jostling for supremacy.

As a literary critic, Opara's efforts in femalism understands deconstruction as an ongoing process of questioning the accepted basis of meaning. Deconstruction is not a static or finished condition, but a multidirectional process leading to endless possibilities. This is why, in "Force of Law", Derrida concedes that it is a

relentless pursuit of the impossible. By deconstructing, we do not pursue answers that mark the end of inquiries, but rather engage in continual questioning which keeps the minds open to the idea that there may, in fact, be alternative meaning to reality. It is all about negotiating the undecidable, and at the same time, remaining open to new possibilities (Turner para. 8). Ultimately, this calls for intellectual humility. Opara's work typifies this value (intellectual humility) when, in the concluding remarks to *Her Mother's Daughter*, she avers that the volume is set out to merely proffer ample framework for analytical discourse while generating further debates for sound and wholesome scholarship (204). She does not claim that her *femalism* provides finality to all the knotty questions of African feminism.

Lastly, Opara did not allow herself to be dragged into the murky waters of androgynous obliteration of the masculine/feminine binary. She views deconstruction as aiming at restructuring, and not simply as reversal. Snippets of this are found in her theory of 'decomposition of traditional prejudices' (*Making Hay* 1); in her denunciation of gynist ambivalent excision of male roots (*Women's Perennial Quest* 127); and her reproof of the liberal feminist's reviling of motherhood and heterosexuality (*A House Integrated* 67). Her ideas rather toe the line of Pope John Paul II's counsel that "in the name of liberation from male 'domination' women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine 'originality'" (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 10). This is because, as the Pontiff continues, the typical vocation for women, is motherhood in its physical and/or spiritual dimension (18-21). Chioma Carol Opara's femalism patently celebrates motherhood which is open to fecundity, in the vein of Okafor's *Omumu* (*A House Integrated* 68), and as such, is both humanistic and transcendent.

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