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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The Ibo Societal Virtues and the Individual Subjectivity

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| ABSTRACT

This article investigates the African societal virtues with a particular accent on subjectivity. There are qualities which are like high moral standards and they are praised by the Ibo community depicted in Anglophone African Literature. The sociological, sociolinguistic and psychological approaches will be applied. This paper tackles praiseworthy qualities of strength, hard-working capacity and polygamy. Any attempt to deprive freedom of opinions, there is a counter-action to restore this freedom. That is, psychological reactance which strengthens the individual subjectivity.

**Résumé:**

Cet article explore les valeurs sociétales africaines avec un regard particulier sur la subjectivité. Il y a des qualités qui sont comme les standards élevés de moralité et elles sont louées dans la société Ibo, représentée dans la littérature africaine anglophone. Les approches sociologique, sociolinguistique et psychologique seront utilisées. Ce travail de recherche aborde les qualités requises dans la communauté Ibo, telle que, la force, la capacité de travailler dur et la polygamie. Toute tentative de privation de liberté des opinions, amène à une contre-action visant à restaurer celle-ci. C'est la manifestation de la réactance psychologique, laquelle consolide la subjectivité individuelle.

| KEYWORDS

Societal virtues, Ibo, "psychological reactance" and subjectivity

**Mots Clés:** Vertus sociétales, Ibo, "réactance psychologique" et subjectivité.

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### 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate the African societal virtues according to the collective mind with a particular accent on how a member of the community may make a decision to follow his subjectivity.

This research paper intends to scrutinise the societal virtues, shared qualities and the individual quest to restore the deprived freedom as it will be depicted through the analysis of the following novels, *The Slave Girl*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*.

This article underscores the community virtues and the choice made by some members of the community in the above-mentioned novels to follow their subjectivity despite their belonging to the community where societal virtues and interests are crystal-clear.

The following questions may be considered as the central questions of this article:

What are the virtues one should comply with in the Ibo society, portrayed by Anglophone African Literature writers?

What is the choice made by some Ibo Community members in comparison to societal virtues? To what extent is their

motivational status manifested?

This article highlights the psychological process which is going on in some Buchi Emecheta's Characters who chose to follow their own beliefs, feelings instead of some outside influences or societal beliefs and interests which are collectively considered as virtues.

Spivak in "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution" from *The Post-Colonial Critic Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* says:

Of course, you don't think this through at the moment of practice, but a notion of generalised textuality would say that practice is, as it were, the 'blank part' of the text but it is surrounded by an interpretable text. It allows a check on the inevitable power dispersal within practice because it notices that the privileging of practice is in fact no less dangerous than the vaguadism of theory. When one says 'writing', it means this kind of structuring of the limits of the power of practice, knowing that what is beyond practice is always organising practice. (1990:2)

In the light of the above lines, for Spivak generalised textuality is a kind of practice where there are two main things which make it possible. That is, the blank text on the one hand, and an interpretable text on the other hand. So, the reader or critic may be allowed to practice his or her literary art, by giving his or her interpretation of the text.

Susan Ritchie in article "Dismantling Privilege, Inventing Self: Postmodern Feminism and South African Post-Colonial Subjectivity" from *Writing the Nation Self and Country in Post-Colonial Imagination* writes:

Finally, it is unclear what exactly, besides table manners and a powerful husband, it is that Hillea, has achieved. We might say finally, that Hillea's discontinuous subjectivity is a result of the discourses which are constantly displacing her with their seemingly more pressing agendas, and as such consists in a non-essential subjectivity of markedly different characteristics than that the nonessential postmodern subjectivity - the subjectivity that is still engaged with and defined by the structure of privilege even in its absence. (1996:157-8)

Susan suggests that Hillea's discontinuous subjectivity is caused by the talks which are changing her. These talks have some pressing agendas. She underpins that the subjectivity is shaped by other people's thoughts. In other words, what seems to be personal opinions, tastes and beliefs, is already corrupted by the outside. This kind of subjectivity may not be really genuine.

Abioseh Michael Porter writes this in his article entitled 'Second-Class Citizen: The Point of Departure for Understanding Buchi Emecheta's Major Fiction' from *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*:

It is my view, however, that if *Second-Class Citizen* were read as a novel of personal development (Bildungsroman), some of the seeming inconsistencies within the text would be more fully understood. Also, a look at this work as a novel dealing with a young African woman's gradual acquisition of knowledge about herself. (1996:268)

Here, Abioseh tries to explain how Emecheta's female characters are progressively coming to know themselves in a passive way. This is noticed by the presence of the word 'acquisition'. Something which is acquired, it is passive not active and unconscious not conscious. Abioseh means that Emecheta depicts an Ibo community where females start to discover what they are worth but in a childish way, illustrated by the word 'acquisition'

Seyifa Karoye in her article entitles 'The Ascetic Feminist Vision of Zaynab Alkali' from *Nigerian Female Writers A Critical Perspective* writes:

The answer may be summarised thus: Mrs. Alkali's subject is (perhaps, predictably) woman, but her treatment of it indicates a remarkably new emphasis which is different in degree, if not in kind, from the feminist positions made familiar by novelists like Flora Napa and Buchi Emecheta. An ascetic vision of the truly liberated woman informs the theme as well as the style of *The Stillborn*. There is hardly a trace of excess of self-indulgence in Mrs Alkali's prose; and this austere style effectively underscores the central argument of the novel. For the image of the new woman - not a stillbirth, but a fully formed, independent person. (1989:47)

It is clear, Seyifa underscores the fact that Zaynab Alkali in her writings, she is not advocating women's subject in the same way, Flora Napa and Buchi Emecheta do. Soyifa means that for Alkali, women have not to be considered at the stage of stillbirth according to their personal development and empowerment. This image has to shift to fully formed and independent community

members. Women's choice and beliefs should not depend on other society decision makers mainly male ones.

Salomé C. NNOROMELE in her article entitled "Representing the African Woman Subjectivity and Self in *The Joys of Motherhood*" from *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* presents a specific situation where two female characters' reactions differ from the societal expectations. Salomé C. NNOROMELE makes it clear as follows:

Although Nnu Ego's consciousness and point of view dominate the novel, Emecheta provides the reader with other ways of seeing Nnu Ego by juxtaposing her ideology of self with those of other women around her, specifically her mother, Ona, her co-wife, Adaku, and the collective voices of the community women. These women make choices different from Nnu Ego's. Like her, they grew in the so-called patriarchal society. But unlike her, they have enough foresight and self-realisation to know that life is much more than following traditions and doing what is expected of one. The difference between the choices that Nnu Ego and Adaku is evident in the narrative. Both women find themselves in similar circumstances, with an inept husband and ever-present excruciating poverty. Adaku chooses to leave and forge a life for herself and her daughters. Nnu Ego stays because she assumes that is what society expects from her. (2010:184)

It is clear that, Nnu Ego, Ona and Adaku are three characters brought up in the same Ibo Patriarchal society. Unlike Nnu Ego, these women do not leave room to the societal opinions to deprive them of their freedom of choice as far as marriage is concerned. However, Salomé C. NNOROMELE does not elaborate about the motivational status of Ona and Adaku to restore their freedom. That is, the manifestation of psychological reactance.

It has been highlighted in the above lines, some themes written by Critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susan Ritchie, Abioseh Michael Porter, Seyifa karoye and Salomé C. NNOROMELE. However, they do not analyse to the extent to which the Ibo societal collective beliefs and opinions may cause a psychological discomfort to some community's members. This discomfort is noticed through the feeling of freedom deprivation. This will lead to the manifestation of motivational status, that is psychological reactance. In the lines below, an analysis will be carried out to shed a light on the reactance theory. Then, the introduction of the Ibo societal virtues and finally the quest to restore the deprived freedom through the psychological reactance with regard to individual subjectivity.

## 2. Reactance Theory

In any human community, everyone's desire is to have freedom of choice, beliefs and actions. Sometimes, when societal pressure is great on the individuals' actions and choices, it may bring people to a refusal of complying with the social established standards. This explains the reason of the reactance theory developed from the book entitled *Psychological Reactance A Theory of Freedom and Control* by Sharon S. BREHM and Jack W. BREHM. The analysis of this article will introduce the above mentioned theory and investigate how it is a justification of the individual subjectivity which is perceived through characters of novels under consideration. The lines below from *Psychological Reactance A Theory of Freedom and Control* are illustrious:

The theory stipulates what constitutes a freedom, how freedoms can be threatened or eliminated, and how the ensuing motivational state (psychological reactance) will manifest itself. In general, the theory holds that a threat to or loss of a freedom motivates the individual to restore that freedom. Thus the direct manifestation of reactance is behaviour directed toward restoring the freedom in question. (1981: 4)

It is obvious that, in the theory of reactance when freedoms are threatened or eliminated there is a quest of restoring it. This is noticed by the behaviour of the person whom freedom is deprived of. There is another aspect of the theory of reactance which can be perceived through the following passage from the same book by Sharon S. BREHM and Jack W. BREHM :

Reactance theory, as outlined to this point, has a wide variety of implications for the understanding of behaviour. It suggests that individuals will sometimes be motivated to resist or act counter to attempted, social influence, such as in mass persuasion or in psychotherapy; that individuals may resist having their personal space or their privacy invaded; that they may resist favours that tend to obligate them; and that they can even threaten and eliminate their own freedoms and thereby increase the difficulty of choice when they have to choose one from two or more alternatives. (1981: 4)

The reactance theory displays another feature too regarding the individuals who are deprived of freedom. In this case, that feature is the resistance against the outside pressure or the desire to act in opposition with the societal expectations.

### **3. The Ibo Societal Virtues**

The Ibo society is a place where a man is trustworthy according to the way he displays the qualities praised by the community such as strength, the hard-working capacity on the farming activities and polygamy. The above-mentioned qualities are considered as societal virtues. According to *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* virtue is defined as follows: "Conformity of life and conduct with moral principles; voluntary adherence to recognised laws or standards of right conduct ; moral excellence ; uprightness". It is obvious from the above lines, a virtuous person is the one who chooses willingly to comply with the recognised laws; in other words, the laws set by his or her close social environment. Some qualities which are considered as virtues will be analysed in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In this regard, the narrator says:

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. (1958:6)

It is obvious that Okonkwo meets the scale of Ibo Societal virtues. First, he is the greatest wrestler in all the nine villages. The bravery and strength are very critical required qualities by the Ibo society to its male members. In fact, when male members of the community have bravery and strength, they can protect their community against invaders or foreign warriors. The wrestling art is an Ibo societal fighting art which trains wrestlers to be prospective good warriors when it comes to protecting their community. So, bravery and strength are not only required but also praised by the Ibo Community.

Second, Okonkwo is a wealthy farmer and has two barns full of yams. The main role as head of a family apart from educating and watching over the well-being of his family members, he has to provide food to his family throughout the year. That is why, an Ibo man who is able to feed his household from one harvest to another is a real man. In other words, he is a hard-working man who has his place in the society where there is no room for lazy attitude and persons.

Third, Okonkwo has three wives, his being a polygamist is not only an external sign of wealth but it shows that he complies with the societal virtues which encourage men to have more than one wife. This will enable the community members to have many children whom are necessary manpower for their community through farming activities or any other economic ones. Someone who lives in such a way, he is praised in Ibo community; because such a behaviour entails that he relays on standards of right conduct according to the collective mind.

There is an example of another character who lives according to virtues of Ibo portrayed society in Anglophone African literature.

Nwokocha Agbadi is a character of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, who meets the standards of his social environment. In the above mentioned novel, the narrator says:

Nwokocha Agbadi was a very wealthy local chief. He was a great wrestler, and glib and gifted in oratory. His speeches were highly spiced with sharp anecdotes and thoughtful proverbs. He was taller than most and, since he was born in an age when physical prowess determined one's role in life, people naturally accepted him as a leader. Like most handsome men who are aware of their charismatic image, he had many women in his time. (1979:5)

The above lines provide substantial information about Agbadi. He is a wealthy local chief. It is well known that in the Ibo community wealth is generated by farming activities. So, being a rich local chief, it means that Agbadi is a hard-working farmer. Farming activities hold a special place within the African communities because they constitute the basis of livelihood. Without livelihood, no one can feed his household throughout the year.

Then, Agbadi is a great wrestler. It is a strength demanding activity. In other words, he can fight against the invaders to protect their community. The strength is perceived in the collective mind as one of the virtues of the land. Finally, Agbadi has many women. Polygamy is praiseworthy in his community. A man who has many wives is wealthy; because the more wives one has naturally there is a great offspring. The more children you have the more manpower you have. In this society, children and women are used in farming activities in order to contribute to the wealth growth of the Head of family. This is the reason why, Polygamy is one of the societal virtues.

### **4. Individual Subjectivity**

It has been analysed, how Nwokocha Agbadi meets the societal standards by displaying qualities such as hard-working capacity,

strength and polygamy. These above mentioned qualities are considered as the Ibo societal virtues in the novels under consideration.

Any existing human society has its socially accepted beliefs, values and opinions. However, some members of the community, may consider since their social environment prevents them to speak their mind; they have to follow their personal beliefs and opinions. The following definition of subjectivity from *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is helpful: "the quality or character of being subjective, esp. the ability or tendency to present or view facts in the light of personal or individual feelings or opinions". Subjectivity is any attempt to be influenced by one's personal opinions and not being moulded by the outside ones.

The Ibo societal virtues are perceived in Buchi Emecheta's novels as all what is praiseworthy according to the set of rules and interests of the same community. For example, in the Ibo community in particular and African community in general, every member of the society has to display the quality of hard-working capacity as far as the farming activities are concerned. Everyone who is not in the line with the above perception of the society is considered as a lazy man or woman.

Laziness is one of these features which are not valued at all. What is perceived by the community as laziness may be explained as the quest of the individual subjectivity by the characters of the portrayed Ibo society, in order to restore their freedom of actions and beliefs. To show how the Ibo perception of laziness affects some people's relationships with their respective communities, a few examples will be given from Anglophone African Literature novels. Instance taken from *The Slave Girl* runs as follows:

Okolie, on the other hand, was everything his elder brother was not. True, he too was tall, for their parents were a tall couple. But Okolie was noisy, he was not very industrious, and he hated going to the farm. He loved music and would blow at his horn pipe for days on end. For his sixteen years, he was very popular in the village.  
(1977 :13)

This quotation presents the situation of Okolie who does not like farming activities and any other activities which implies physical involvement. It is very hard for Okolie to stand all the criticism spread over him. Farming is the main economic activity in this community. How can a man, a true man, do otherwise without being condemned? So, what does he expect? To live like a person who depends on the work of other people. The whole community refuses to give him such a privilege. This explains the reason why, he is not highly viewed by the community because he does not meet the scale of virtues of this one, according to the collective mind.

Although, the Ibo community virtues are in contradiction with Okolie's individual subjectivity, Okolie is in the quest of his personal beliefs, interests that he thinks they are very critical for his personal development but less valued by his environment. He does not allow the outside influence to deprive him of his freedom to choose his profession of being a musician. So, his psychological reactance is manifested by his endurance to continue to play flute despite his community's contempt for musicians who are not hard-working farmers. Okolie is popular in the village for his skills in dancing and playing the horn pipe. Even though all the activities which fall into the category of entertainment have no economic value, Okolie highly values them because not only they contribute to the joy and the harmony of the Ibo community and but this is his way to restore his freedom of choosing his profession. When he resists to the Ibo society's perception of life or acts counter this one, this motivational status of Okolie, is the manifestation of psychological reactance. Through Character Okolie's attitude from *The Slave Girl* the reader may understand the power of subjectivity. Okolie's individual subjectivity is above the scale of virtues set by his social environment.

Unoka is a character from *Things Fall Apart* who does not meet the Ibo societal virtues set by the Ibo community portrayed by Chinua Achebe. The following quotation from Basile Marius Ngassaki's article entitled "Characters' psychology in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" is illustrious:

Okonkwo's father is the most rejected person by his community because he does not meet the scale of values required by his community as the narrator says:

In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry... Unoka was, of course a debtor, and owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to substantial amounts. ... He was very good on his flute and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. (2009:85)

As presented in the above quotation, Unoka is a very good flute player in other words a good musician. He lives in a farming community. This is a place where people are valued according to their capacities to work very hard. Every member of the community has to do his efforts to grow agricultural products so that he can feed his household from one harvest to another. In so doing, a man is highly viewed by this community. However, Okonkwo's father is not able to work very hard in the farming activities. He spends his entire time playing flute. This leisurely attitude is condemned in their Ibo community. So, Unoka does not meet the Ibo societal scale of virtues with regard to the collective mind.

However, Unoka who is Okonkwo's father in *Things Fall Apart*, enjoys music and does not care about farming activities. Despite the fact that his community people try to force him to give up his art. Unoka is in a constant quest of restoring his freedom of choice and actions. He is personally convinced that his profession of musician is the best thing which ever happened to him. Unoka resists to the Ibo community's distorted view of work category that everything which is related to music is less valued by the society. What sounds ironic during the festival periods, the same community praises the singers and dancers for bringing joy and harmony within the community by the means of songs and dances. Unoka is determined by his action to restore his freedom of profession choice, to resist against or to act counter the outside influence as far as his art of music is concerned. This motivational status of Unoka, is the manifestation of psychological reactance. Unoka believes that his musical skill is a must which prevails over his community's perception of life, by which only hard-working men are praiseworthy. This is how the individual subjectivity is clearly seen through the character Unoka's attitude. His individual subjectivity leaves no room for the outside influences of his social environment.

Buchi Emecheta in her novel entitled *The Bride Price*, underpins how Chike's quest of freedom regarding marital partner is noticed through his behaviour. This enables reader to understand to what extent Chike eagerly needs to restore the individual's deprived freedom. The following passage from Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* is helpful for our analysis. In this respect, the narrator says:

"Shh .... Don't talk so boldly - they may be listening". She snatched the letter from him and read it eagerly. Chike's message was short: he still loved her ; should listen for his whistle after dark when she went to the owele in the bush. She should tear up the letter and give piece to Nna-nndo, or put them on a fire, if there was one nearby. There was no fire around so she gave her brother the torn pieces, and just in time, too, for the next second Okoboshi marched in all his arrogance. He swept a disdainful look over Aku-nna and condescended to enquire of Nna-nndo if all was well at home. He went on to remark on his loyalty to his sister, after the shameful way she had treated them all. (...)  
A few stars were peeping shyly from behind the thick clouds. There was a movement by the bush very near owele, and before she knew what was happening, she was being held tightly by Chike. For a moment he seemed to breathe life into her, giving her exhausted body the energy it lacked, then as suddenly as he embraced her, he moved away, and all she could hear was his low voice, urgent and insistent. "Come on, my own - run". (1976: 143,145)

This passage indicates how Chike displays subjectivity in his behaviour. In quest of restoring freedom of choice regarding marital partner, Chike makes a decision to run away together with his lover Aku-nna whose bride price has already been paid by Okoboshi's family. This behaviour is a manifestation of motivational status, that is, psychological reactance. Being a slave decent, Chike is not allowed to marry a free woman like Aku-nna. But he runs away with her knowing that she is a married woman. This is how Chike avoids being influenced by the societal opinions and standards. This is a way to resist against the societal taboo and virtues. Lloyd W. B. Underscores it in "Emecheta" from *Women Writers in Black Africa* as follows:

Chike dramatically rescues Aku-nna from her abductor before the marriage is formalised and they elope to another village where they both find jobs and a comfortable home. Their union not only defies the taboo against intermarriages of "free" and "slave" families, but it also challenges an ancient curse - that any woman who marries against the wishes of her family and whose bride price remains unpaid will die in childbirth. (1981:49)

Chike violates the community's beliefs and norms because he has a personal feeling and an unshakeable conviction that some community members are deprived of their choice as far as marriage is concerned. He eagerly desires to restore the freedom of choice regarding marital partner. By following his subjectivity, Chike manifests a motivational status, that is psychological reactance which is his strong will to restore the freedom deprived of. There is a case of subjectivity in ancient time displayed by Adam. Adam was given the law by God to respect. This account is contained in the Bible (*New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*). The lines below from Genesis 2:15-17 are illustrious:

Jehovah God took the man and settled him in the garden of E'den to cultivate it and to take care of it. Jehovah God also gave this command to the man: "from every tree of the garden you may eat to satisfaction. But as for the tree of

the knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat from it, for in the day you eat from it you will certainly die”.

Here, the law given to Adam is crystal-clear, he is not allowed to eat the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. It means that Adam was created to follow his Creator's law not his personal opinions. However, Adam decides to do what he thinks is good for him. The account contained in Genesis 3:1-6 is informative:

Now the serpent was the most cautious of all the wild animals of the field that Jehovah God had made. So it said to woman: “did God really say that you must not eat from every tree of the garden?”<sup>2</sup> At this the woman said to the serpent: “ we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden. <sup>3</sup> But God has said about the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden: ‘you must not touch it; otherwise you will die. <sup>4</sup> At this the serpent said to the woman : “you certainly will not die. <sup>5</sup> For God knows that in the very day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and bad. <sup>6</sup> Consequently, the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was something desirable to the eyes, yes, the tree was pleasing to look at. So she began taking of its fruit and eating it. Afterward, she also gave some to her husband when he was with her, and he began eating it.

This passage indicates that Adam was given the law by God not to eat the tree which is in the middle of the garden. However, he decides to follow his personal feelings and opinions on that matter. In fact, when his wife Eva gave him the fruit of the forbidden tree he could have refused to eat it. But, Adam made his own choice regardless the law given to him. This is how Adam tried to restore his freedom regarding food choice. By doing so, he follows his subjectivity. There is a manifestation of a motivational status, that is, psychological reactance.

## 5. Conclusion

The Ibo Societal values and Individual Subjectivity have been analysed in this article first the introduction of the Reactance Theory by Sharon S. BREHM and Jack W. BREHM. Then, the presentation of Ibo perception of life as far as qualities which are praised by the community and considered as virtues. Anything which is related to strength and hard-working involvement, and the fact of having more than one wife is highly valued by the society. Such as wrestling and farming activities, and polygamy. These virtues are perceived through Okonkwo and Nwokocho Agbadi.

Finally, in this article, it has been analysed how community virtues are seen by some as an obstacle to individual personal freedom and development. As illustration, Okolie and Unoka and Chike are not highly valued by their social environment. However, these characters facing the community's pressure by which, their freedom of professional and marital partner choice seems to be deprived of. According to Adam, he seems to be deprived of food choice. Okolie and Unoka, Chike and Adam's motivational status comes out through their displaying psychological reactance. In fact, on the one hand, they make a decision to continue music. On the other, to go for a forbidden marital union and food choice despite the presence of the existing laws. This is how individual subjectivity has been analysed in this article.

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