Probing Postcolonial Feminist Concerns in researching Igbo women’s Social Change project: An emerging research methodology

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the possibility of utilizing postcolonial feminist concerns around representation, cultural alterity, and reflexivity in order to account for the intersections of gender, race, class, and ethnicity in researching for social change in postcolonial context. While drawing from an emerging Southern theoretical positions – scholars who have provided the theoretical lens to address issues of gender from the perspective of the postcolonial female subject and expose the multiple social and historical locations from which men and women speak – it aligns this perspective as preceded by gendered act of colonialism and its continued effects. Out of the methodological complications arising out of mainstream feminist ethnography emphasising “insider” perspective in fieldwork setting, the research work builds on the postcolonial feminist insider/outsider positionality /ies of a researcher working in postcolonial context. While acknowledging self-reflexivity of traditional feminist scholars, postcolonial feminist positions (re)conceptualizes the ethnographer’s positionality in the field through the intersections of epistemological concerns, ethical practices (“for whom do ‘we’ produce knowledge?”) and political commitments (“what are the consequences of such claims of knowledge?”) in relation to the researched participants. The commitment entails taking further recourse through auto-ethnography and ethnonarrative both of which refer to a reflexive practice. It allows me to consider what I pay attention to and how I pay attention to it in terms of what becomes called data. These concerns and positions distinguish postcolonial fieldwork as a political project beyond a critical approach to qualitative inquiry.

Introduction

In an earlier issue of Journal of Ethnic and Radical Studies, Peter Chua et al., argue that “much work which focuses on the Third World either operates with a conception of women as beings without agency, or does not analyze the roles played by women in both public and private domains” 1. These authors, like most postcolonial critics of Western knowledge production2, of International Development discourses3 and critics of Western feminism4, have revealed the “modes” and “means” of representing the non-Western “Other” as “the noble savage”, “the cultural Other” or “weird regime”. This representation reached a crescendo as gender issue

in postcolonial context collided with the polemic history of the ethnocentrism of Western academic discourses and their Universalist agenda. More and more, the non-Western woman is being represented as a paragon of softness, passivity, and docility, needing to be spoken for because of her victimized patriarchal tradition\(^5\). In this postcolonial context, therefore, the issue has become how to narrate the “Oriental Woman”\(^6\), the “Third World Woman”\(^7\), or the “Subaltern Woman”\(^8\) without speaking for her, without condemning her to an archetype (the docile wife or the vengeful goddess). This misrepresentation of non-Western woman in scholarship raises important questions regarding both the theory and practices of feminist research. One of these concerns centers on how to research Third World women’s everyday lives or edify postcolonial feminism that could consider cultural specificities, which would be consistent with the “historically muted subjects of women in postcolonial context. These issues have been raised by postcolonial feminist scholars writing from the global South and developed, over the last few decades in literature that engages with critique of representation and intersections (or shifting constructions) of gender, race, class relations and culture. These perspectives further our understanding of how material existence, shaped by history, influences women’s mobilization and social change goals for those who, in Homi Bhabha’s\(^9\) words have “suffered the sentence of history” – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.

As qualitative research enters into what Denzin and Lincoln\(^10\) call the eight moment, ethnographers have begun to confront these controversial issues, such as notions of truth, representation, colonialism, and power in epistemological, theoretical and methodological research. Specifically, from the 1980s, new epistemologies has emerged examining knowledge as socially and contextually produced. What emerged, according to Foucault\(^11\),

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\(^{6}\) Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*.


\(^{9}\) Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*, 172.


was the reappearance of [subjugated] knowledge – a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientifi city. The emerging “subjugated knowledges” draw from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, including, a highly influential writings of phenomenology\textsuperscript{12} which directed scholars to examine the notion of subjectivity and the inner-subjective construction of meaning. Other various writings from the field of the interpretive social sciences, such as critical theory of Frankfurt School, engagement with “reflective practices”\textsuperscript{13} of 1980s and, later, poststructuralist, postmodernist and feminist discourses on knowledge development provided new insights into an alternative perspective to positivist science.\textsuperscript{14}

Research, in turn, becomes a means of social change and represents a call to use reflexivity in decolonizing the production of knowledge\textsuperscript{15}. It is on this basis that contemporary research process has been described focusing on critical and ethical discourses of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and social justice. Hill Collins\textsuperscript{16} contends that race, gender, and class construct and reproduce differences in the research process. Hooks\textsuperscript{17} emphasizes the double impact of whiteness and maleness in shaping the authoritative discourse of traditional ethnography. Alongside these multidisciplinary perspectives, postcoloniality has emerged as a paradigm of inquiry that provides “a situated engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects”\textsuperscript{18}.


\textsuperscript{13} Quentin Skinner, “The flight from positivism”; Giddens, Anthony. \textit{Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age} (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1992), among many authors of “reflexive project of the self” critically examine the contemporary sociological problems in the late modern societies


\textsuperscript{17} Hooks, Bell. \textit{Talking Back, Thinking feminist, Thinking Black}, (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

\textsuperscript{18} Quayson, Ato. \textit{Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process}, (Cornwall Polity press, 2000).
This paper is limited to a substantial literature on postcolonial feminism developed over the last few decades that engages with representation, culture and reflexivity and its shifting constructions of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. My aims are more modest and I focus on exploring the possibility of utilizing “postcolonial feminist”19 concerns around representation, cultural alterity, and reflexivity to account for the intersections of gender, race, class, and ethnicity in researching for social change in the context of Igbo women’s organisations in Nigeria.

As the history of Western feminism (understood here as a universalizing elitism), neoliberal globalization models (as new forms of colonialism in developing countries) erase the specificities of Third World woman, how can a postcolonial feminist researcher theorize and examine North/South relations amidst the complexities between feminisms and globalization20. Given the extant feminist theories and calls for activism available from theoretically diverse positions21, what kinds of possibilities are there for theorizing and ‘writing differently’? If we focus on the ‘modes’ and ‘means’ of representing women in colonized contexts (i.e., a Third World woman who is a ‘a paragon of softness, passivity, and docile who submits to an immutable patriarchy’) as issues raised by the collusion between women in a postcolonial and feminist discourses; how do we narrate this ‘Third World woman’ (e.g., Igbo), without speaking for her, without condemning her to the same colonial narratives? How can the researcher negotiate his/her feminist research method in the field in order to free indigenous feminism from monolithic and essentialist thought that are Eurocentric? Or, how can this research field, in the context of grassroots women’s organisation, edify Southern feminism that is negotiated around cultural specificities in consistent with the previously ignored informants or ‘subaltern woman’, according to Spivak22?

19. Bhabha, Homi. The Location of Culture; Mohanty, T. Chandra. Feminism Without Borders; Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
22. Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
While acknowledging the rich insights into gender relations provided by mainstream feminist theorizing, this work draws, not only from my recent empirical fieldwork experiences and findings, but also from postcolonial feminist scholars who explicitly addressed ‘race’ and class relations. These, including Bannerji, hooks, Collins, Spivak, Mohanty, Smith, and many others, have opened up a new analytic space that would enable a researcher like me to address these questions and complexities relating to representation, cultural alterity, and reflexivity when deploying a postcolonial feminist approach to research. More importantly, they have provided another view that illuminated social life at the margins, and from which to interpret the dialectic between margin and “center”. In so doing, they brought the voices of those “subjugated knowledges” from the margins into discourse with the center and made visible that which was subjugated and hidden. Above all, this critical scholarship has provided a new angle on the intercession of gender, “race”, and class relations and meshed them well with the work of postcolonial scholars such as Said, Bhabha, and Hall. Altogether, this body of work has offered novel insights and understandings of the rudiments of a praxis-oriented science. In this way, they showed how historical positioning and racialized constructions structure our global society as well as impacting on the material conditions of daily life. In the course of this study, therefore, I discuss how these “concerns”, and the challenges that come with them, provide new directions for scholars who are engaged with postcolonial feminist praxis in relation to social change, research, and writing as an emerging Southern theory and research methodology.

Postcolonialism: A theoretical framework

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27. Mohanty, T. Chandra. *Feminism Without Borders*.
31. Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*.
For this study, I employ postcolonial feminist scholarship generated through the convergence of postcolonialism and Southern feminist perspective as a theory and methodology for feminist change orientation. Like other Southern feminist scholars, I conceive these two perspectives (postcolonial and Southern theories) as complementary. On one hand, the postcolonial project focuses on issues of misrepresentation and appropriation. It reflects the ways in which dichotomous categories can be re-inscribed – “us” and “them”, “colonizer” and “colonized” along the lines of “race” and racialization. Drawing from a range of contemporary critical theories, postcolonial highlights the impacts of colonisation throughout the centuries as well as the ongoing neo-colonialism, and the humiliation and suffering of those who, according to Homi Bhabha “have suffered the sentence of history”33 – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement. Postcoloniality, as a movement has a discursive and materialist connection in decolonizing research34. It critiques and understands the marginalization and histories of colonialism and, perhaps ironically, the persistence geopolitical inequalities that define knowledge production between the global North and South35. On the other hand, Southern feminist perspective indexicalizes the contemporary geopolitical location, of ‘third world’. It uses a contextualized approach to research process to account for the postcolonial context as preceded by earlier European colonial efforts to introduce their own models of productivity as part of the colonial mission.

The use of “postcolonial” is sometimes metaphorical. If “postcolonial” suggests “after” the demise of colonialism36, then postcolonialism indexicalizes actual geographically specific locations or spaces referred to as “third world” and “developing” bequeathed to the “global South” in the post-world war decolonization or via dependency theory37. If, however, postcolonial transcends the geographical imperative of non-Western “periphery” and, perhaps, Western “Metropolitan center”, then, scholars of both “divides” employ “postcoloniality” to critically analyze the colonial aftermath and challenge the hegemony of Western science38. The word “postcolonial” does not mean the end of the colonizing process per se. Quayson admits: “To understand this process (postcolonializing), it is necessary to disentangle the term “post-colonial”, from its implicit dimension of chronological supersession, that

33. Bhabha, Homi. The Location of Culture, 82; see also 66, 85ff, 111, 172.
38. Bhabha. The Location of Culture.
aspect of its prefix, which suggests that the colonial stage has been surpassed and left behind. It is important to highlight instead a notion of the term as a process of coming-into-being and of struggle against [italics added] colonialism and its after effects. In this respect, the prefix would be fused with the sense invoked by ‘anti’39.

In this sense, postcolonialism offers a framework for challenging and contesting the fixity of gender, race, and culture. It directs attention to intersectional factors as socially produced through historical, socio-economic and political processes of colonialism and imperialism. It challenges the unitary notion of culture and contests images and representations of the essentialized cultural “Other”. For the “colonized” or “raced” subjects such as Igbo/African women, the notion of identity involves a loss of precolonial, relatively substantive forms of subjectivities ...40. By devaluing and under-representing them in the colonial records, they become essentialized, unified or totalized as cultural entities. But postcolonial feminist scholarship is now exploring the fluidity of these identities and their new construction within hybrid cultural spaces41. By so doing, McConaghy suggests, it:

creates a “Third Space” for theorizing the conditions of the colonial. It moves to and fro in this Third Space in order to ensure that postcolonialism serves neither the cultural requirements of global capitalism and colonialism, nor the new ‘methods’ of the privileged in the West. For this reason, postcolonial theory remains a key resource for disrupting scientific culturalism and engaging in decolonization within Indigenous education, especially when incorporating the feminist insights ... [of] postcolonial feminist theorists42.

Feminist Intersections with Postcolonial Research

This research is located at the intersections of postcolonial critiques of ‘Western’ representations of non-Western contexts and the latter’s concern over gender, race, class, ethnicity (among other) relations. I assume that postcolonialism and Southern feminist perspective, taken together, shed light on the complex issues at the intersection of gender, race, class relations, and culture. That is, postcolonial feminist positions serve simultaneously

41. Bhabha. The Location of Culture.
as critique and recovery tools in the examination of representations and material conditions confronting postcolonial subjects, especially, in the historic context of North/South relations ongoing through contemporary neoliberal globalization process. Furthermore, these intersections further our understanding of how voices from the margins – “those who have suffered the sentence of history”, “the colonized or raced subjects” produce insights that are intended to interrupt dominant discourses about race, class, gender relations and feminism.

The “situatedness” which this lens brings to awareness, according to Lewis and Mills, is the visibility of both “contextualized and historicized” ways in which “identities and political positions of these indigenous women are embedded within the postcolonial context. In this sense, postcolonial feminists, in their various analyses, bring to understanding the issue of the representation of women in the postcolonial context, the cultural expression and its relationship with diversity of postcolonial subjects’ experiences as well as material conditions under which they live. In a physical fieldwork, these approaches enable researchers to acknowledge how differences in position and privilege, which operate through gender, ethnicity, and class among other relations, influence research as well as researcher/researched relations. They determine how postcolonial feminist qualitative interview contexts are shaped. In this sense, the positionality one adopts in the fieldwork setting is synonymous with his/her dual and often conflicting roles in that particular field. Such positions constantly shift and influence how and which narratives data are and can be collected. In other words, these factors problematize researchers’ positionality and enable them use their own sense of identity and image (reflexively) as insiders as well as outsiders to construct themselves and the researched. In this way, all researchers, particularly in the postcolonial context – including the natives of a culture – bring to the field acquired

43. Bannerji, Thinking Through.
44. Lewis, Reina and Mills, Sara (Eds.). Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, (Routledge, New York, NY, 1993),
knowledge and experiences that shape the researcher-researched relationship, the specific role each one assume, the knowledge obtained, how it is interpreted and used.

However, while positionality is necessary in feminist research project, it is not sufficient in postcolonial feminist research. In addition to highlighting marginalized (subaltern) experiences and subject positions as well as “giving voice” to previously silenced groups of women by describing the diversity of their experiences⁴⁹, postcolonial feminist research has to critique representations of Third World subjects in Western theories and texts. More so, it has to engage with the notion of the “native”⁵⁰. This involves, according to Louis Racine⁵¹, adopting “cultural safety” that enables one move beyond cultural theories to examine the beliefs and stereotypes by which gender relations and research diminish, demean, or disempower the cultural identity and well-being of the individuals. From this perspective, the aim of the researcher is not “correcting misrepresentation” nor producing authentic representation of subjects. Rather, such critique aims to highlight how North/South relational concepts are products of constructions of non-Western Other through contrasting images with the West. Hence, studying encounters between West and indigenous people requires feminist researchers adopt a reflexive stance in producing theory as well as in conducting fieldwork⁵². From this perspective, postcolonial feminist researchers are not involved in “information retrieval” from the Third World to be displayed on Western journals. The task of postcolonial feminist position is to highlight arbitrary assumptions over the conceptualization of the research subject (i.e., the essentialization of “womanhood”) in research relations as well as question its ethico-reflexive basis⁵³.

Still, these positions will not do justice to the aim of the research, namely, notions of “who can speak and for whom since it requires the acknowledgement of the messy intersections of


the agency of oppressed subjects and researcher reflexivity. It is argued that this acknowledgement complicates further the “situated feminist epistemology”\(^\text{54}\), since the oppressed or “subaltern” subjects, according to Spivak, have no agency to speak for themselves due to their exclusion from global capitalist processes. In the face of this situation, the researcher’s position relies on the subaltern (the oppressed) as a subject position rather than unreflexive person or group of people (see Loomba). By occupying the subaltern position, the researcher understands the possibility for a “collective subjectivity of agents” as well as being able to uncover how subaltern subject positions are produced. In the end, the researcher is in the position to examine possibilities for agency and change.

Critiquing Representation and methodology for change

One broad aim of postcolonial feminist research is to challenge existing approaches to representing non-Western people based on Western notions of selfhood. While critiquing hegemonic forms of knowledge and producing “autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies”\(^\text{55}\), taking an appropriate positionality in postcolonial feminist project is not enough. In order to highlight marginalized experiences and subject positions and letting the participants speak for themselves, the research should aim to produce locally grounded identity narratives based on shifting gender, ethnicity, and class relations between the researcher’s self and the research participants. In this sense, postcolonial feminist research approach adopts two-fold processes arising out of epistemological critique on one hand, and, on the other hand, the methodology through which social change is possible. While the first aims to identify and examine taken-for-granted (discursive) practices that produce a particular field (representations of Third World subjects in Western texts), the second step discusses research methodology and methods that was deployed during my empirical research process. I begin by locating postcolonial feminist epistemological critique around International Development practices and radical Western feminism that have, in the past three decades marginalized and constructed indigenous African/Igbo woman as subservient “Other”. It then highlights modes of this representation which is self-emanating from Western psychology’s notion of “self”. The later part of the


paper discusses postcolonial feminist methodology as it concerns the insider/outsider positionality of the researcher, particularly, his/her reflexive stance.

**Postcolonial feminist research and the location of epistemological critique**

In line with postcolonial feminist research, the first step when focusing on representation of Third World subjects is locating the epistemological critique around where and how such “Third World” subjects have been represented. What has constituted the central initial criticism focusing on representations of Third World women’s productivity was the Cold War modernization approach which was integral to the promotion of US economic and geostrategic interests in the global South. Prominent in this initial criticism was Esther Boserup’s seminal study *Women’s Role in Economic Development*[^56] which questioned the way development theory, policy and practice ignored and marginalized women’s role as producers. She singled out the context of sub-Saharan African farming system where women played central part in cultivation and argued that colonial and postcolonial administrators assumed women’s place was in the home. These preconceptions have been criticized as “promoting the productivity of male labour” while excluding women because they (women) are not considered in those policies relating to the introduction of cash crops and the promotion of new technology in agriculture.

Taking Nigeria as an example, representations, in contemporary development-initiative, have found a commonplace under the rubric of “International development studies” (IDS)^[57]. In addition, the neoliberal practices and discourses of gender and development are seen as deeply racialized in their production of hyper-industrious, altruistic, entrepreneurial female subjects and, now represented alongside ‘third world women’ as the passive recipient of development, devoid of agency[^58].

[^58]: Chua, Bhavnani & Foran, “Women, culture, development, 821; Wilson, “Towards a radical re-appropriation”, 807.
Another location of critique has been the literature on Western feminism with its rhetoric of universality erected by the discourses stemming from Western humanism that, consequently, excludes differences among non-Western people. By confining their theories to their own particular history and culture, white feminists have denied the history and culture of women of color and have objectively excluded them from equal participation in the women’s movement. Speaking from African context, postcolonial feminist perspective focuses their critique on how ‘African woman’ is caricatured as a limited series of stereotypes in many cases of social thought, with repetitive and oversimplified images underlying social science, much as they persist in literature.

Southern perspective of postcolonial feminist studies critique the invisibility of women in most writings on global and international development, arguing that the labour, cultures and histories of women in the global South are rarely taken into account, or, when they do, women are most often seen as lacking agency; as merely victims in a system of cruel and unjust inequalities. Thus, much work which focuses on the Third World either operates with a conception of women as beings without agency, or does not analyse the roles played by women in both the public and private domains. The focus of this criticism is on how ‘third world women’ are constructed within gender and development discourses as “a homogenous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victims of particular socio-economic systems”, waiting to be liberated by Western feminist, in a reiteration of missionary women’s narratives of rescue and salvation. The pertinent question in this case is: how do we conceptualize such

62. This view can be attested by development community’s self-questioning of its agenda through what has been evident to its major planner, UN First Decade of Development (1960-1970) that a “trickle-down” approach to development had not been effective. (See for example, Braidotti et. al, *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development Toward a Theoretical Synthesis,* (London: Zed Press, 1994; Gardner, Katy and Lewis, David *Anthropology, Development and the Post-Modern Challenge,* (London: Pluto press, 1996).
International Development Organizations, when, as promoters of social change, their scholars and theories represent the people they want to study?

A postcolonial research agenda highlights the lack of debate over the theoretical frameworks guiding feminist research and their epistemological assumptions particularly in representations of non-Western development practices, cultures, and peoples. Acting like “plaintiffs” in an internationally-based feminist conference, postcolonial feminists often speak in a “communal voice” with an emphasis that Western feminist theorizing is “empty” precisely because of its inability to connect with or refer to the realities and environments which the plaintiffs identify. These social and epistemological exclusions are more noticeable in information gathering and knowledge construction, the question of accountability, legitimacy, or who has the right to speak for whom. Postcolonial feminists ask whether social change with which feminist concern is directed depend more on the theoretical “pursuit of status” and the worship of celebrity (such as postmodernists, poststructuralists) or “building on the indigenous.” Moreover, local gender, ethnicity, and class relations (in the sense of Kirin Narayan’s “Native Anthropologist”, or Linda Smith’s “indigenous researchers”, working in postcolonial contexts) may produce novel concepts and practices related to understanding identity and development activities. These concepts and practices may be rendered invisible and marginalized by the very IDS and MNCs that aim to “integrate” and value them and by feminist approaches that assume gender, ethnicity, and class relations in Third World settings to exist in the same form as those in the West.

In the specific case of feminist movements in Nigeria, including Igbo women’s grassroots organizations, hegemonic concepts of development studies (DS) and liberal feminist theories still guide much of their cross-cultural and transnational research and activism, even when

65. Mohanty T. Chandra. “Under Western eyes”.
directed by indigenous scholars and activists. For example, research and programmes undertaken to study development and change in Nigeria have relied on concepts appropriated from Western psychology and liberal feminist’s rational individual exercising “free will” and maximizing self-interest within Gender and Development (GAD). My aim here is not to involve in an extensive critique of these indigenous literatures, rather my focus is to demonstrate how and why these literatures are relevant vis-à-vis postcolonial feminist critique and the relation of this critique to the issue of social change.

**Critique of international development literature**

Dating back to the 1990s, a lot of inspiration has been drawn from postcolonial feminist literature, pointing out amongst other things, the dangers of simply replicating metropolitan frames and imposing western feminist ideas and analyses. For example, the concept of international development shaped by modernization theory posits that global inequality exists “due to technological and cultural differences between nations” rather than historic and present structural inequalities. Ironically, the theory puts forth the idea that every country can achieve the level of development seen today in the global North through a free market economy tailored to the culture of that country. But, funny enough and in consistent with its marginalizing policies, this theory is not without the conditionalities that aligned Third World countries to those of the West once and for all.

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provision and utilization of this theory in the Third World and, consequently their dependence on this development aid, especially by non-government organisations (NGOs) hinders the pursuit of broad critiques of structural inequality.

Similar cautions are contained in work that engages with development literature focusing on realizing gender justice in the name of alien human rights to the history and culture of those Third World contexts. Human rights discourse is understood in this case as based in concepts of individual rights rather than community and cultural rights, used selectively by the West as justification to intervene in other countries when it benefits Western interests. Whether in the form of development or human rights discourse, postcolonial feminist emphasis on global structural inequalities merits attention. For Southern perspective of postcolonial feminism, a lack of attention to the global inequalities that shape the lives of those that International Development Planners and human rights activists seek to help can compromise their honorable intentions. For instance, campaigns with the slogan “Bring Back Our Girls” against the unlawful abduction of more than 270 Chibok girls by Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria for two long year and counting, must take into account the realities of religious, ethnic, and cultural bastardization and conflicts as well as sectional marginalization, poverty, and the reasons the Chibok girls were abducted.

In this sense, mainstream human rights and development discourse are coming under attack as paternalistic extensions of civilizing mission of colonialism, reinforcing the narrative of Western saviour to passive Third World victims. In keeping with postcolonial feminist critique, the concern is expressed that ‘development’ driven by northern, industrial economic interests or global agencies, will always marginalize women unless local states and actors are able to take control of the processes and develop indigenous framings, approaches and solutions.

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Contextually speaking, while acknowledging the usefulness of my positionality as a “native” researcher working in postcolonial feminist areas, it does not guarantee that those Western tools, theories or concepts will not be deployed to study Igbo society and represent Igbo women in the context of their grassroots organisations. After all, research originating as an “imperial tool” has been used to construct the colonized in ways that their identities, realities, and ways of knowing were marginalized. But research in postcolonial feminist context provides a site of agency for decentering colonial knowledge. It is like “working the hyphens” which arises from the cautioning voice inside, warning the researcher to take heed in a reflexive, ethical, and respectful manner. By so doing, it has the potential for ultimately strengthening the participants by giving them voice as previously silenced perspectives and questioning the basis of their taken-for-granted assumptions. It also involves utilizing researcher’s acquired or learned Western education, knowledge, languages, and theories to produce and legitimize research from inside perspectives. In other words, researcher’s hybridized selves (roles as both insider and outsider) do not intend to produce “authentic” accounts of participants’ (i.e., Igbo women’s) identity and social change pursuit by virtue of being native or indigenous researcher. Rather, the critique here focuses on the epistemological assumptions guiding theories and feminists’ change-oriented organisations purported to be “international” or “exogenous” approaches to studying the same social change orientation in the Third World. To this end, the adoption of postcolonial feminist positions critique and redirects notions of the “native” to help the “native anthropologist” understand the relation between knowledge and power, researchers and researched as well as enabling the transformation of research activities.

The ideas I present above demonstrate the complexities inherent to postcolonial feminist engagement with representation. These complexities include how to define the research field, locate the critique, and how to choose which epistemological assumptions to examine. Despite these complexities, there is more to produce in a postcolonial feminist research project, which aims at critique and social change impact. One way to effect social change is to conduct fieldwork in order to “see” representation through grounded postcolonial feminist

79. See Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, Decolonizing methodologies.
concerns and strategies. Next, I problematize on the feminist methodology as a gateway to making meaning what postcolonial feminist research recognizes and considers in ethnographic fieldwork. This will enable me and other postcolonial feminist researchers to reflect on our positionality, especially, as it concerns self-reflexivity. Retrospectively, when engaging on the process of this research in the physical field, it makes sense to me that reflexivity and cultural alterity would fully guide my data collection. Cultural alterity comes next in the line of consideration. As a native, male-feminist researcher, who recently went to my “native home” Igboland in Nigeria, to conduct interviews (focus group) in the context of Igbo women’s grassroots autonomous organisation, my positionality as a researcher speaks volume.

**Feminist versus Postcolonial Feminist Methodology**

From the early ideas of second wave feminism to the contemporary position, feminist research practice has chosen methods guided by its epistemological positions and research aims. This position provided a methodology or theorizing (about research practice) which methods (i.e., particular tools for research) will best accomplish research project in terms of theoretical commitments, feminist praxis and activist goals. Their attraction for interview and ethnographic research is partly because these methods offer possibilities for direct interactions with participants. That would mean, the researcher herself (as it was conceived) is never “outside” the research process or separated from the research participants as “objective” observer. However, from a postcolonial perspective, studying representation (i.e., identity formation) discursively requires an explicit focus on language and texts as these variables are integrally linked to colonialism, power, and gender. That is, postcolonial feminist positions are concerned on how “the researcher”, the actual writing of the research and audience for whom it is written, are implicated in the very research process. In effect, postcolonial feminist methodological considerations are twofold: recognition of constructivist

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82. See Mohanty T. Chandra. “Under Western eyes”.
83. Haraway, Dona. “Situated knowledges
critical epistemology guiding the research and addressing questions “who has right in speaking for others” and of particular places. Researching in a postcolonial context as in my project, these consideration, in addition to concerns over representation, requires me to pay attention to language and texts in order to uncover how identity formation happens while at the same time being reflexive. To accomplish this task, I rely on the combination of ethnography and auto-ethnography to engage in in-depth fieldwork (e.g., participant observations, interviews, and collection of artifacts). Using participants’ experiences and “working back” as Dorothy Smith suggests, the postcolonial feminist researcher illuminates subjectivities that would otherwise be silenced through the use of positivist and postpositivist paradigms. The methodology is informed through the conceptual lens of histories of colonialism that have structured notions of “race”, gender and class relations and can no longer be sifted out from these historical forces. This lens, beginning with people’s experiences and working back to explicate those context of marginalization might imply the privileging of qualitative methodologies in a postcolonial context.

Furthermore, it offered postcolonial feminist research a conceptual tool that is used to excavate or do the “looking” including: the analytic explication of the intersection of gender, “race”, and class relations as historicized and contextualized; the interpretation of data within this framework; and, the reconstruction of theory from this angle. That is what characterizes postcolonial feminist methodology.

While acknowledging the potential of ethnographic method to offer possibilities for direct interaction with participants, ethnography is not without its feminist critics. In light of the close relationships that form through ethnographic approaches (e.g. ethnography and phenomenology on the basis of the assumptions of the researcher), there is greater potential for exploiting research subjects through collaborative approaches that feminist researchers strive to achieve. Stacey writes that ethnographic approaches commodify narrators and their lived texts. She writes, “No matter how welcome, even enjoyable, the fieldworker’s presence

88. See Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, Decolonizing methodologies.
89. Ibid.
may appear to the ‘natives’”, ethnographic fieldwork “represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships”. She argues that “the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship is inescapable”91. Even more recent reflexive and critical ethnographic approaches like mainstream feminism92 still position the “omnipotent” researcher as the voice of ethnographic authority without regard to the ways privilege is reproduced through research93.

Nevertheless, postcoloniality challenges and complicates ethnographic approaches in that it recognizes the complicity of Western anthropologists in enabling colonial rule94 and the hegemonic and universalizing notion of culture95 which ethnography embodies. As such, postcolonial feminist approaches to ethnography highlight that systems of inequality can remain unchanged when First World scholars research Third World women96 and demonstrate that reciprocity and collaboration under conditions of power asymmetries are not necessarily possible. Their emphasis on the intersection of gender, race, and class as context-related factors suggests they can hardly be universalized into predictive and prescriptive theories without the risk of committing theoretical imposition97.

Interrogating feminist Ethnography: A Methodological Concern

Despite the above enumerated criticism of traditional ethnography by mainstream feminist movement and scholars, feminist methodology complicates further ethnographic method by its emphasis on “insider” perspective. Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, Western or mainstream feminism drew its methodology out of its hostility to “objective knowledge”98.

Stimulated by questions raised by the initial feminist movement, women activists, not only called into question the phenomenon of “objective” research, it challenged the very ethical structure of it, especially, the practice of “studying down” or conducting research only on groups of lesser status than the ethnographer. Building particularly on women’s experience, feminist scholars began to discover fallacies of “objectivity” and the many other devices constructed exclusively for males. The presumption was that whether or not a woman had chosen to study women, and whether or not she considered herself a feminist, most women activist then came to associate their identity with research relationship. It is this attempt to produce a ‘hygienic research’\textsuperscript{99} in feminist ethnography that led a number of feminist academics and theorists to dub a research, where gender “difference” is perceived to exist between researcher and researched, as “questionable”\textsuperscript{100}. Writing from this methodological point of view, Oakley\textsuperscript{101} claimed that “a feminist interviewing women is by definition inside the culture and participating in that which she is observing”\textsuperscript{102}. Among other individual biography in shaping feminist qualitative research, Oakley emphasized gender, ethnicity or some other aspects of women’s identity as prerequisites to developing social rapport when both the researcher and researched are engaged in fieldwork. This idea of shared characteristics also resonate in the work of Finch\textsuperscript{103}, who maintains that the reason why women are more enthusiastic about talking to a female researcher lies in their expectation that the researcher shares their social experience of subordination. Indeed, Gray et al.\textsuperscript{104} write that “it is much less likely that they [men] can produce research based on women’s experience, simply because it’s not their experience”.

The question arises: How does a postcolonial feminist researcher work within this unequal relationship if he/she is to understand research field as, no longer dependent upon rapport over shared gender, but on the recognition of the complex social structures within which men


\textsuperscript{102} See Marjorie L. DeVault, “Talking and listening from a woman’s standpoint” Social problems 37, (1990) 96-116.

\textsuperscript{103} Finch, Janet. “It’s great to have someone to talk to: The ethics and politics of interviewing women”. In Social Researching: Politics, problems, Practice, Ed. C. Bell and H. Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

and women live? In view of “a situated engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects”\(^\text{105}\) and the contemporary complex and multifaceted power dynamics that influence the social interaction of the interview situation, does feminist assumption of “insider knowledge” still hold sway in a postcolonial context?

In the light of above questions, the vulnerability of my research women participants as rural ethnic learners with little or no voice\(^\text{106}\), as well as their literacy level, was considered in the choice of qualitative research design, nature and technique of data gathering. The choice of my research field is not only epistemological and ontological task but also a political one relevant for reflexivity from a postcolonial feminist perspective against the backdrop of “science that has been used against the marginalised”\(^\text{107}\). In considering these, I assumed a subject position parallel to and in interaction with that of the other participants while adopting a reflexive stance. This entails taking further recourse through auto-ethnography\(^\text{108}\) and ethnonarrative\(^\text{109}\) both of which refer to a reflexive practice. In this case, I considered myself as part of the context both materially and textually. Now, while indicating the limits of traditional ethnography and mainstream feminism, postcolonial feminist concerns (re)conceptualized my positionality through the intersections of epistemological concerns, ethical practices and political commitments in relation to my research context – Third World or indigenous women.

This method recognizes the intersections of my voice, place, and privilege (autobiography) as a researcher when considering encounters with participants (i.e. observations, interviews) and in the writing of the research (i.e. informing, reporting). They allow me to consider what I pay attention to and how I pay attention to it in terms of what becomes called data\(^\text{110}\).

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\(^\text{105}\) Quayson, Ato. Postcolonialism.
\(^\text{110}\) Denzin, K. Norman and Giardina, M.D. Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence, (Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2008).
Problematizing Researcher’s position and Reflexivity

My recent concluded PhD empirical research in Igboland, Nigeria, constitute the cornerstone of my inquiry into how Igbo women mobilize for social change because the success of what becomes data collection depends on the positionality of the researcher working in a postcolonial context. As a male researcher doing feminist research\textsuperscript{111}, the challenges I encountered was the manner in which I was positioned in dual, often conflicting roles as both an insider and an outsider to the lives and “discursively constituted experiences”\textsuperscript{112} of the research participants. This double consciousness\textsuperscript{113}, on one hand, could be equated to images of a native ethnographer\textsuperscript{114} or indigenous researcher\textsuperscript{115} researching in a context I was an insider to. On the other hand, it involved researching as a male-feminist in a context I was outsider to. For example, my position as a “native”, fluent in the “cultural” knowledge of Igbo society required me to look at and problematize the lives, experiences, or culture in which I was researching through the eyes of the participants themselves. But I could do this without drawing on my own images and multiple identities, such as being male, acquired or learned Western education, knowledge, languages, and theories to produce and legitimate research knowledge from inside perspectives. Bearing these in mind, the general question that confronted me were: “Can researchers only conduct research on an experience or social location from which they already have intimacy and experience?” To address this question, I reflected on the following sub-questions: What do I represent in the eyes of the participants? Am I part of them? Am I an outsider? Do I have one foot in Igbo community and another outside as a student and researcher belonging to a community of knowledge producers and researchers beyond this indigenous Igbo social context? Within this context, am I going to be seen as an outsider doing insider research? I came to this issue of insider/outsider regarding my positionality as a researcher in efforts to decolonize the research process.

Observing Cultural Alterity in Postcolonial Research field

\textsuperscript{114} Kirin Narayan, “How native is a ‘native’ anthropologist?”
\textsuperscript{115} Linda T. Smith, Decolonizing methodologies.
Cultural alterity and reflexivity are heuristic means that researchers must use to deconstruct the crystalized Cartesian insider/outsider identity and the researcher/participant dualisms that are experienced in the field. Part of my research field focuses on highlighting postcolonial feminist critique of Western development practices and discourses of Western feminism that rhetorically has used universality to exclude *cultural expressions* among Third World women. In this sense, I find as convenient the terms “humanity” and “materiality” connotatively derived from the French word globalization (*la mondialisation*) in the issue I wish to raise here, namely, the everyday world of Third World, indigenous, African, or Igbo women. *La mondialisation* derived from *le monde* with double meaning of the physical world (materiality) and people (humanity) captures both the materiality and humanity of globalization. Though, at best minimized and at worst ignored in the discourses and practices taking place in Africa, “humanity” commands center stage in postcolonial feminist research, particularly in Africa. For African feminist writers, the West has used and still using colonialism, development theories, and even the recent globalization to supplant indigenous cultures, particularly Africa with its humanism embedded with gendered power dynamics. Unfortunately, the agents of these processes of unequal power relations have used “weird regimes” to portray as “unacceptable” cultures in many parts of the so-called third world in order to justify the demoting of the practitioners of these cultures below human level. Assuming the moral responsibility to intervene in rescuing women victims from the “weird regimes”, Western feminism became complicit with colonial project and, using its privileged social location, unilaterally brought about the conception of good and social justice from which, unfortunately, the humanity of those to be rescued is relegated to the background. Thus, the goal of contemporary “developmental” activities among postcolonial feminist theory and mobilization in the global South is geared toward an honest effort to humanize development processes and not assume that economic growth guarantees development.

These practices echo the basic lesson underlying Appadurai’s anthropological research on the *cultural* dimension of globalization. It acknowledges that “the transnational flow of universalizing signs

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demands their domestication; that they be made meaningful and salient to homespun realities.” He therefore focuses on the production of locality and neighborhood in a globalizing world, viewing the locality as an “inherently fragile social achievement […], ephemeral unless hard and regular work is undertaken to produce and maintain its materiality.” Stuart Hall claims that culture cannot be limited to exploring people’s subjective experiences but must encompass an examination of the historic, social and material conditions with which subjectivities are constructed. Based on these views, I claim that the experiences, voice of Igbo women as well as their search to humanize society in the context of their grassroots autonomous organisations must be studied. While doing this, the research draws on the ontological, epistemological and methodological strengths of postcolonialism within which social change activities unfold in their everyday lives. Informed by women’s agency embedded in “cultural” (issues of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and livelihood), my argument is that gender issues can neither be essentialized nor universalized but embedded in diversity, in cultural expression as well as in social and political expression. Postcolonial feminist research is laying emphasis on the retrieval and recognition of difference as well as the preservation of this heterogeneity as cultural alterity.

Schutte contends that cultural alterity “demands that the other be heard in her difference and that the self give itself the time, the space, and the opportunity to appreciate the stranger without and within”. Minh-ha’s reference of cultural alterity as the blurring of insider/outsider identity occurring in the field thrills me and I strive to develop what she calls hybrid identity in the sense that I am neither quite an outsider nor quite an insider. In this way, Minh-ha linked cultural alterity to introspection in the field as she explained that “she who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows she cannot make a gesture without activating the to

122. Hall, Stuart. “Cultural studies: two paradigms”. In Dirks NB, Eley G. Ortner SB, (Eds.). Culture/Power/History: A Reader in the contemporary Social Theory
123. Heterogeneity is a key concept of postcolonial feminists referred by Spivak (1994: 25, 38, 185, and 195) as subaltern agency or a form of “negotiation”. It means that postcolonial feminist agency are not directed toward reclaiming precolonial or pre-orientalist women’s discourse, nor in search of an “authentic” identity of lost origin (Spivak, 1988: 291). It means using diversity promoted by cultural hybridity to “decolonize gender” or research (Mohanty, 1991, 2003) through marginalizing colonial reading and writing of gender in a non-colonial context.
and fro movement of life”\textsuperscript{126}. Cultural alterity means that the researcher goes through unsettling experiences in the field by opening new ways of seeing participants’ lived experiences and to reconceptualize Otherness from a decentered position. In the following words, Schutte explains the conception of “Other” through the operation of cultural alterity in the field:

\begin{quote}
The other is that person or experience which makes it possible for the self to recognize its own limited horizons in the light of asymmetrically given relations marked by sexual, social, cultural and other differences. The other, the foreigner, the stranger, is that person occupying the space of the subaltern in the culturally asymmetrical power relations, but also those elements or dimensions of the self that unsettle or decenter the ego’s dominant, self-enclosed territorialized identity\textsuperscript{127}.
\end{quote}

Most notably, postcolonial feminist emphasis on “building on the culture and difference”\textsuperscript{128} points to the struggles of indigenous women in Africa including Igbo women to use their African (colonial and postcolonial) contexts of existence and experience to account for the interlocking oppressions in multiple sites. Theoretically, womanist writers and activists in formerly colonized nations, particularly, in Africa are presently casting aside the old lines of dependency on the metropolitan center and reverting to “indigenizing theory” and the use of performative practices. Their texts, as knowledge production, make use of cultural and intellectual traditions of most African societies which do not fit into familiar (Western) literary or textual paradigm. Terms that have been employed in African womanist criticism to explain this conception include “complementarity” (used repeatedly by Igbo womanist writer, Catherine Acholonu in her formulation of “motherism”) and “nego-feminism” by Obioma Nnaemeka which implies the negotiation of feminism and the exclusion of what she calls “no-ego feminism”. Arguing on the importance of culture and difference, Nnaemeka, quite like other African womanist writers, calls on the “the necessity and prudence of building on the indigenous” in the construction of African feminist theory\textsuperscript{129}. Similar reference to cultural specific is employed on the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{126} Ibid. 375.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Schutte, O. “Cultural alterity: cross-cultural communication in feminist theory in North/South contexts”. In Narayan U. Harding S. (Eds.) Decentering the Center, Philosophy for a Multi-cultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist Worlds, (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 48.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Nnaemeka, ‘nego-feminism’, 361.
\end{itemize}
formulations of Kolawole as well as the postulations of Oyeronke Oyewumi\textsuperscript{130} to theorize African gender constructs of womanhood and motherhood as the central concern of African females.

\section*{Conclusion}

Invoking “those who have suffered the sentence of history”\textsuperscript{131} and those still undergoing horrors that mark and continue to mark colonisation and neocolonial practices both in their indigenous home and diaspora, postcolonial feminist concerns could serve as possible interventions with representation, cultural alterity and reflexivity in research. Though embedded with challenges and complexities in relation to researchers in research field, my demonstration using examples from my fieldwork suggest a praxis-oriented and politically conditioned methodology. These interventions and implications for feminist praxis has been voiced by some postcolonial feminist scholars who observed that “third wave’ of democratization sweeping through the global South has generated a large body of literature exploring women’s roles in these processes and illuminating some general patterns”.\textsuperscript{132} In this sense, comparative research on state feminism reveals the importance of broad-based women’s movements in civil society that can display support for goals of gender equality.\textsuperscript{133} From this perspective I conceptualize postcolonial feminist praxis, for this specific project, as redirecting International Development Studies and feminist universalizing theories toward community development groups prevalent in the global South as forces of social change.

By way of redirecting theory, the communal or relational epistemologies of postcolonial feminist positions recontextualizes comparative (i.e., the intention of structural adjustment policies, SAP) and relativist approaches to development and feminist theories. As a result, subjects of IDS and liberal feminist theories are conceptualized on the bases of “community development groups”. They “are casting aside old lines of dependency on the metropolitan centre, particularly through indigenizing theory and through the use of oral and performative practices, in addition to written texts, as sites of knowledge production to the extent that


\textsuperscript{131} Bhabha, Homi. \textit{The Location of Culture}, 172.


these forms of textuality make use of the cultural and intellectual traditions of African societies and do not fit familiar (Western) literary or textual paradigms. These positions highlight contradictions and complexities in how identities form in the engagement between first and third world feminist practices rather than offer a historic cultural comparisons (i.e. Third World/Igbo versus Western).

This said, one might ask, what has been added to the value of postcolonial feminist scholarship and research? It might well be argued that postcolonial feminist scholarship, as discussed above, does little to extend the boundaries of feminist scholarship. I argue, however, that postcolonial feminist scholarship illuminates the historical and cultural location of “racialized” and classed identities, in ways that move beyond mainstream feminist theorizing; a universalist theory that has emanated from a middle-class, white, perspective, which has privileged gender over other analytic categories. As such, for the most part, “mainstream” feminism of the 1980s and 1990s was non-inclusive to Southern or African feminist movements. It excluded these social locations, ignoring their diversity and heterogeneity as well as other issues in their lives.

Moreover, as a discursive marker of historically and culturally grounded criticism of Western representation of Third World women, research guided by postcolonial feminist frameworks address the material oppression and theoretical marginalization relating to different women in different location worldwide. These frameworks require a reflexive praxis that recognizes the connections between research and feminist scholarship in order to challenge gendered capitalist processes and interrogate our understanding of how subjectivities form in West/Third World relations. In sum, postcolonial feminist approaches offer situated engagement with multiple gender, ethnicity, class, etc., relations as part of a research agenda aimed at critique, hybrid mobilization, and social change pursuit.

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