

**CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND PATRIARCHY:
A WOMANIST READING OF AKACHI
ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S TRILOGY**

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Abstract

The need to correct the misrepresentation and distortion of the image of women gave impetus to women's writing. However, with the emergence of women's writings arises a major challenge of finding an acceptable theory for analysing these writings. There are many epistemological positions in which these women's writings may be situated, these include, feminism, African feminism, Black feminism, Stiwanism, Motherism, Africana womanism and so on. While the application of feminism makes these African women works far removed from their socio-cultural milieu, others like Black feminism has failed to adequately address the need for an African-centred framework for these works. Africana Womanism appears to be a more appropriate paradigm from which these works may be theorized. The womanist theory as expounded by Clenora Hudson-Weems showcases the unique African qualities of the African woman. This paper explores the relevance and suitability of the Africana womanist theory to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle*. It argues that the projection and exaltation of these womanist ethics through her female characters enables the author to reconstruct the image of the African women. It is also a strategy for challenging and subverting those stereotypical perceptions about the African woman that had held sway in male authored works.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes, Patriarchy, Womanism, Feminism

Introduction

Gender stereotype is the attribution of character traits, behaviours and social roles to men and women in society. Women suffer most as a result of gender stereotypes, because often time positive characteristics are attributed to men whereas negative ones are attributed to women and this implies subtle gender inequality, sexism, and discrimination against women. Defining gender stereotypes, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for women and Men: Opinion on "Breaking gender stereotypes in the media" states:

It is important to address the fact that gender stereotypes not only contribute to the *status quo* in terms of women's and men's roles, but also promote an asymmetrical vision of women and men in society.

Furthermore, they are one of the most persistent causes of inequality between women and men in all spheres and at all stages of life, influencing their choices in education, professional and private life. (6)

Gender stereotyping is the frame on which patriarchal ideas are perpetuated and for long it has informed the portrayal of male and female characters in literary works. Writers, especially male authors, portray the African society from a patriarchal perspective where women are in subordination. By so doing, these male writers try to conform to patriarchal ideologies as well as the old and stale traditional gender roles which perceive men as superior and women inferior. Chinyere Grace Okafor succinctly notes, “When male-centred views of society are projected on to literature, and imbibed by the readership, the ideas become endemic...” (83). These ideas become internalized by even women. O. Ogede rightly points out, “some women have come to accept the male stereotypical assumptions about themselves”(107). In the same vein Shamaila Haleem argues: “The way characters are portrayed in a story matters a lot in the sense that the traits associated with these characters become generalizations afterwards and these characters are then always seen from that specified angle” (56). Such depiction of men and women often results in continual denigration and discrimination against women. Haleem argues further: “The portrayal of a male character as a brave, courageous, bold, reserve, confident and rational being, and whereas of a female character as a weak, expressive, shy, submissive, emotional, and irrational beings, sets mind for gender discrimination and division of human characteristics into two separate categories” (56).

The need to correct and negate the misrepresentation and distortion of the female personality gave impetus to female writers to produce literary narratives. They have in their concerted efforts challenged stereotypical assumptions about females in a patriarchal society through writing. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi avers,

The women writers address those areas male counterparts left out in pursuing their version of nation and the fight for its realization; remarkably they present their female characters as daughters with inalienable rights to participate in reconstructing the nation as partners, not mere dependents. (4)

These women writers place African women experiences at the centre of their narratives. Moreover, they realize the need to tell their own story themselves and to establish dignity for womanhood which is very important if the tarnished image of the woman must be restored. Modupe Kolawole explains this point with a Yoruba proverb: “Owo l’afi ntun iwa ara enise (meaning, You have to establish your dignity yourself and not leave it to others)” (26). To these female writers, writing becomes a tool for self-liberation, self-

preservation, self-expression, self-assertion, self-naming and for presenting their feminist's/womanist's ideologies. Through their writings they disprove the negative perception of the women folk. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is one of the female writers who have picked up the challenge to reconstruct the image of the African woman through writing.

The emergence of these female writings brought about the need for an appropriate and acceptable theoretical framework for their analysis. There are many varying epistemological positions in which these writings maybe situated. Feminism, a Western paradigm is one of the pioneering paradigm to which these works have been subjected. But this feminist criticism with its varying strands (liberal feminism, radical feminism, social feminism and so on) tends to be too aggressive, confrontational and antagonistic. For these reasons most African women in general do not identify with the concept in its entirety nor accept the tag, 'feminist'. It appears to have been formed by White women for their specific needs and desires. Africa has her own peculiar norms and traditions which are entirely different from the Western culture. The need for African-centred paradigm and theoretical framework led to the emergence of different faces of feminism. Terms like Womanism, Motherism, Stiwanism, and so on were coined by those who dissociated themselves from the feminist tag. Amongst these conceptual frameworks Africana Womanism as expounded by Clenora Hudson-Weems seems to be an appropriate theory for the analysis of the Nigerian women writings. This paper attempts to explore the relevance and suitability of Africana Womanist theory to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle*. It argues that consciously or unconsciously, Adimora-Ezeigbo has projected Africana Womanist qualities through her female characters as strategy for challenging patriarchal notions, gender stereotypes, and stereotypical perceptions about the African woman.

Africana Womanism

Womanism is an Afro centric concept and ideology which focuses on the experiences and the emancipation of, not just Black women, but all people from all forms of oppression. Womanism shares with feminism the feature of emancipation of the woman from oppression but it centres on seeking identity for the African woman's consciousness. It is a platform from which black women and other women of colour, who dissociate themselves from Western feminism, are able to express themselves and create their own movement. From its platform, womanist writers call attention to the multiple layer of oppression experienced by black women and women of colour. Modupe Kolawole enunciates that womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways (24). In Ogunyemi Okonjo's view, "womanism is a global ideology for African women which embraces and celebrates racial, gender, class and cultural

consciousness” (qtd in Kolawole, 24). Womanism is therefore a new paradigm which offers an alternative model to all forms of feminism. According to Clenora Hudson-Weems “Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women” (24). She aptly summarises this brand of womanism thus:

Critical to understanding and appreciating the Africana woman is recognizing her common 18 features: (1) a self-namer (2) a self-definer, (3) family-centered, (4) genuine in sisterhood, (5) strong, (6) in concert with male in struggle, (7) whole, (8) authentic, (9) a flexible role player, (10) respected, (11) recognized, (12) spiritual, (13) male compatible, (14) respectful of elders, (15) adaptable, (16) ambitious, (17) mothering and (18) nurturing. (143)

Hudson-Weems by these tenets demonstrates a valid portrait of the African woman. The theory challenges the preconceived ideas about African women and their lives.

Adimora-Ezeigbo, in her novels, dismantles stereotypes and rewrites women into relevant and prominent positions in society. She does not reject the feminist tag *per se* rather she accepts it with reluctance. She does not agree with the confrontational nature of the radical Western brand of feminism. In a conversation with Henry Akubuiro she states, “I don’t believe in confrontation and unnecessary aggression or one being opinionated about everything”. She explains further that feminism in the Africa sense, is not aggressive, quarrelling or fighting for superiority – it just wants women to rise and be empowered. In another discussion with Isiguzo Destiny, she notes, “My kind of feminism is Nigeria centred. It is different from feminism as it operates in the West and therefore our own brand of feminism is inclusive.” All these add up to reveal that although she does not reject the ‘feminist’ tag, because feminism is a theoretical and methodological legitimacy in the academy, and also because it is the starting point for theorizing the female discourse, but she rejects most of its tenets as they do not appeal to the African culture.

She proposes her own brand of feminism which she calls “snail-sense feminism”. This brand of feminism she argues, “is not the sluggishness that is being emphasized in this theory, but the snail’s sense (intelligence) to live with its environment with negotiation; it is another way of saying complementarity.” It is clear that this brand of feminism echoes male compatibility, one of the eighteen descriptors, Hudson-Weems presents in her explication of Africana Womanism. Adimora-Ezeigbo sees womanism as a more embracive theory than feminism. According to her,

That's a more popular brand of feminism because womanism is all embracive. It includes both men and women and children. It advocates for the wellbeing of men, women and children. It is not exclusive. You see Nigerian women believe that we need our men just as they need us. (An interview with Isiguzo Destiny, March 27, 2015)

The novels, *The Last of the Strong Ones* (LSO), *House of Symbols* (HoS) and *Children of the Eagle* (CoE) are interrelated. A survey of the characters reveals that the author gives much space to female characters' experiences. Contrary to the stereotypical portrayal of women as docile, inactive, passive and mute, she re-writes the stories of women by exhibiting and exalting those distinctive features of the African woman through her female characters.

Africana Womanism in Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trilogy

The tenets that Africana womanist is a self-namer and self-definer are demonstrated by Adimora-Ezeigbo through the naming of her central character. Names are very significant in the African society because they confer on individuals distinct identities. Kolawole observes, "Self-naming is very central to African world-view. In many African cultures, naming almost assumes a sacred status... a stranger cannot be allowed to name the child" (26). The central character in *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle* is "Eaglewoman" or "Eagle" as her husband fondly calls her. By ascribing such significant name to her female character Adimora-Ezeigbo equates her with the eagle bird notable for strength, wisdom, and sharp sightedness. James Tsaaior rightly observes: "Eaglewoman has the strength and courage of the eagle that enables her to confront the retrogressive, oppressive and repressive traditional practices of male-dominated Umuga society that is exploitative and discriminatory against women" (170). She names and defines her African woman who she presents as a model in the novels. Right from the onset, this character exhibits the qualities of the eagle which are in tandem with the Africana womanist unique characteristics. Again Tsaaior argues, "In the novel, the eagle iconology writes woman into prominence within social structures and appropriates the agency of eagle which is exclusively associated with men" (171). Thus to be named "Eaglewoman", which accords females with dignity, courage and greatness within a patriarchal system, Adimora-Ezeigbo deliberately transfers these male attributes, to her female and shows that these traits are not gender-specific. She confirms Hudson-Weems' tenet that the African woman is a self-namer.

In the course of characterisation she uses affirmative and attributive adjectives to project the womanist characteristics of her heroine. She also employs stylistic techniques, such as apposition and figurative language, to reconstruct the image and identity of the African woman and to dismantle chauvinistic ideology which has held sway in some male authors' writing in the past. For

instance in the novels she uses Igbo appositives or praise names to eulogise her heroines. Below are examples:

Ejinnaka, you are the graceful palm tree of Umuga. (LSO, 77)

Ejinnaka, ... Lioness that leads the pack. (LSO, 7)

Daughter of Ezeukwu – the wise one, the thundering tigress of Umuga. (LSO, 7)

Enyiwayi - Elephantwoman (HoS, 103)

“Agunwayi-Leopardess” (CoE, 45)

Eaglewoman is a solid rock that gathers moss. (HoS, 99)

She chooses avian metaphors to name her heroines. The terms ‘lioness’, ‘leopardess’, ‘tigress’, ‘eagle’, and ‘elephantwoman’ as used in these narratives are avian metaphors. With these, she metaphorically equates the strength of her heroines with that of these animals that are of great significance in the Igbo society.

As mentioned above, Adimora-Ezeigbo’s complementarity echoes Hudson-Weems’ tenet that the Africana womanist is male compatible. Whereas feminism advocates separation of man and woman, if marriage is not working out, complementarity and compatibility are committed to the survival and unity of man and woman. The depiction of stable relationships like that of Obiatu and Ejinnaka, Josaih (Osai) and Eaglewoman, Afam and Nnenna are examples. Adimora-Ezeigbo expresses the need for men and women to work toward an interdependent relationship. She acknowledges the fact that there are difficulties and challenges inherent in marriages but maintains that through negotiation, compromise and reconciliation in marital relationships the union can be kept stable.

In African society lesbianism, homosexuality, and divorce are never options as obtained in Western feminism. Marriage is an important institution that is highly esteemed. Men are not regarded as problems that must be outsmart rather it is believed that a woman needs a man to be complete and vice versa. Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto notes that in Igbo land “it (marriage) is an avenue instituted by culture for self-fulfilment and actualization for women. It is the only source of prestige and honour for them” (24). She argues further that some Igbo proverbs “makes it explicitly clear that the woman cannot be appreciated in isolation from her husband, her achievement in the society notwithstanding” (25). Adimora-Ezeigbo depicts an example of a typical African woman in the character, Ogonna in *Children of the Eagle*. She rejects the suggestion of a divorce in the face of serious challenges in her marriage rather she chooses to stay and make the marriage work for the sake of the children.

Mothering and nurturing are other ethics that Africana womanist is committed to. Safoura Salami-Boukari notes that in African society in general having a child is so significant that it determines a married woman's real womanhood as a child bearer and the degree of her social status (120). In Contrast to Western feminist paradigm that views motherhood as enslavement, the African woman does not dread the responsibility of mothering and nurturing children. She sees herself as a mother to her children and to all humanity. This is why she accommodates, mothers, and nurtures not only her biological children but other children kept in her care. In the African context, mothering is dissociated from purely biological connotation. It extends to include anyone, whether female or male, old or young, with or without children who can act as or engage in mothering of a child.

Adimora-Ezeigbo demonstrates this cherished responsibility through her female characters. For instance in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Aziagba, a woman of great courage, defies the tradition of Umuga, in the face of much condemnations and abuses, to save, shelter and raise her twin children. In *House of Symbols*, Eaglewoman sacrifices her time and resources to bring up her children. Her mothering extends to other children kept in her care. She brings up Lois like her own daughter. The narrator tells: "Lois occupies a special place in her heart... Eaglewoman loves her as if she were her flesh and blood" (121). As a mother, she exudes genuine love to all her children such that Obioma refuses to go on with an abortion plan when she was impregnated by an unknown soldier. Instead she shares the burden with her mother and as expected, abortion is never contemplated; rather Eaglewoman becomes surrogate mother to the baby.

The African society sees the loss of motherhood as loss of womanhood because of the value it places on mothering/motherhood. If a married woman is unfortunate to be childless or has only female children she faces a lot of criticism, trouble and trauma both in her home and in the society as if she is the maker of children. Ezenwa-Ohaeto observes that the case of such woman is worse and that she "stands to lose her prestige, because she has failed in her all-important obligations: reproduction" (25). In the words of Charles Fouchingong "a barren woman is stigmatized, considered a social misfit and invites the wrath of her family and society" (135). Barrenness and its untold consequences are common themes in Nigerian female writers' narratives. Adimora-Ezeigbo narrates how Eaglewoman's marriage comes closely to a collapse because of delay in childbearing. She is referred to as an 'okenkwu', meaning 'a male palm tree which is sterile.' In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Iwuchukwu, Chieme's husband blatantly tells her "**You are not a woman**", because she could not bear children. Similarly, in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna's mother-in-law tells her, "He (Odenigbo) will not marry an abnormal woman, unless you kill me first." (124). Olanna here is

referred to as an ‘abnormal woman’ because she could not bear a child for Odenigbo. In Emecheta’s *The Joy of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego suffers in her first marriage which eventually collapses because she could not bear any child for Amatokwu while she remains married to Nnaife and puts up with ‘his crude ways and ugly appearance’ for just one reason - she could bear him children. Family centeredness is another quality of Africana womanist. One of the characteristics of family centeredness in African society is mutual sharing in the joy and pain of one another. Contrary to Western belief in individuality, the African woman believes in oneness in the family both nuclear and extended. Adimora-Ezeigbo exemplifies this centrality of the family as the bedrock for societal survival in the African culture. For instance, when Eaglewoman had her son, members of the extended family were around to celebrate and share their joy. When she loses the child and mourns her mother and other members of the extended family mourn with her. Another instance is when Obioma reports that she has been impregnated. Every member of the family shares the problem with her. The narrator notes that the sound of Eaglewoman’s cry when she heard the news reverberated in the whole house, drawing almost the entire family to the room. She tells further: **“Soon everyone was infected with weeping”**. Eaglewoman is intelligent enough to come up with a secret plan which the family adopts and **“were all of one mind”** (*House of Symbols*, 241-242). Adimora-Ezeigbo also reveals Eaglewoman’s commitment to the survival of her family even in the face of many challenges. The triumph of the Okwara family over patriarchy hinges on the oneness they share.

The narrative in *The Last of the Strong Ones* clearly illustrates the tenet that African women are in concert with male in their struggle. In this narrative Adimora-Ezeigbo depicts the centrality of women in the core of Umuga traditional existence before the coming of *kosiri* (the white man). The narrator tells how four daughters of Umuga – Ejimnaka, Onyekaozuru, Chieme and Chibuka – through their activism become members of “Obufo” (custodians of the ancestral staff, *ofa*), which is largely a male prerogative. These women fully participate in the struggle against *kosiri* and later share in the pains and sufferings of their men as both men and women are forced into exile after the war. The narrator reveals the various challenges these women have to confront in their struggle against patriarchal system before the coming of *kosiri*. When strangers invade their land they are not passive observers; rather they actively join forces with men in the struggle. Ejimnaka supports her husband, Obiatu, when he is indebted. She sacrifices her business capital to save him from embarrassment. Eaglewoman also supports the husband, Osai, to acquire wealth.

The African woman is ambitious as Hudson-Weems notes in her tenets. Adimora-Ezeigbo buttresses this fact by the depiction of female characters

that are hard-working, self-confident, and industrious. They play active roles that contribute to the shaping of social processes. Through their industriousness these characters set themselves free from patriarchal domination. They are socially and economically empowered such that they assist the less privileged in their communities. For instance, Eaglewoman pays hospital bills for Diribe to have his scrotum disease removed. She also helps a woman, Akuchukwu, with a loan to start a trade. In *Efuru*, the author depicts a similar act of benevolence as Efuru pays hospital bill for Ogea's father and an old woman in her community. The character, Chieme is another example of an ambitious African woman. She suffers rejection from her husband because she is childless. When she realizes that her childlessness is no fault of hers she puts the challenge behind her and forges ahead with her life. The narrator tells us of her ambition thus: **"My desire was to be the best chanter not only in Umuga but also in the towns far and near"** (*The Last of the Strong Ones*, 82). She accumulates much wealth and makes a name in her profession. She is also conferred with the title, *Omesarannaya* – the one who brought fame to her father.

The African woman is of a great strength. Carrying pregnancy and birthing children are few situations where she showcases her strength. Contrary to the Western ideas of avoidance of childbirth, she prides herself on her ability to birth children with little or no assistance. For instance, Eaglewoman, in labour pains dashes to a nearby maternity without a hint to her husband. She is delivered of a baby boy and few minutes afterwards she tells the midwife: **"I feel strong enough to go home tomorrow"** (191). Buchi Emecheta in *The Joy of Motherhood* gives similar accounts of Nnu Ego birthing children with the assistance of a friend or a neighbour in her house. The vivid depiction of these scenes illustrates the fact that the African woman possesses an inherent strength which helps her go through childbearing over and over again. Her strength is also exhibited in her ability to cater for the family, does the household chores, and goes to farm or market with baby strapped on her back. Adimora-Ezeigbo narrates how Eaglewoman rises up early to attend to her businesses as well as the household chores daily. Unfortunately these responsibilities are usually invisible or considered insignificant.

The actions of the daughters of Eaglewoman, in *Children of the Eagle*, disprove the notion that only men are courageous or strong to defend the family. Ogunano Ezeala commends the action of these women and notes that **"They acted like men."** Their action being compared to that of "men" stems from the belief that only men are courageous. But it is a known fact that they actually act as women because these women use their sense to negotiate for peace, which according Ezeala: **"is much better than strive."** Men would have resorted to exchange of blows. Before now Pa Joel tells Eaglewoman: **"You should rejoice, for your daughters are men. Everyone in Umuga**

knows this. They are cutting-edge children and pillars in the family.” (50) Such metaphorical description of these women reveals that they are really brave. They defy fear, the popular female stereotype, and bravely confront headlong the strange creature that visits their house at night. They soon discover that the creature is a bull from a shrine in another village and not the spirit of their father as alleged by the community.

The relationship between Eaglewoman and Titi Odeyemi exemplifies the belief that Africana womanist is genuine in sisterhood. Titi did not only teach Eaglewoman how to bake bread and run a business outfit but she is always there to help her in her difficult times. The bond among the daughters of Eaglewoman also attests to the fact that the African woman is genuine in sisterhood.

Adimora-Ezeigbo also demonstrates that the Africa woman is spiritual as claimed by Hudson-Weems. This idea is evident in the character of Chieme who seeks help from Idemmiri in her predicament. She only becomes satisfied and accepts her fate after she heard from the priest of Idemmiri. The depiction of the characters Obioma, a church leader, pastor and an evangelist and Ezenwayi, a spiritualist and a prophetess also exemplifies this tenet. Ezenwayi plays a significant role in the family of Eaglewoman. It is her summons, guidance and counsel to Osai and Eaglewoman that lead to Nnenne walking at the age of two. At another time Eaglewoman seeks her help when Osai is seriously ill. Through these characters Adimora-Ezeigbo reveals the spirituality of the modern African woman. However, she warns against extremity as observed in Osai's encounter with a man who calls himself Jesus of Ikot Abasi, an encounter that almost broke his marriage.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the theory of Africana Womanism in relation to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's trilogy - *The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle*. It has proved that most of the tenets of the theory apply to the female characters in the novels. The female characters exude such qualities as family centeredness, male compatibility, in concert with males in their struggle, spirituality, ambitious, genuine in sisterhood, mothering and nurturing. This shows that the theory of Africana Womanism is highly suitable to the study of most Nigerian female writings in general and these novels in particular. This paper has also revealed that Adimora-Ezeigbo reconstructed the image of the African woman by exalting the qualities of the Africana womanist in her female characters. This is a strategy for subverting stereotypes and patriarchal notions that had held sway in male authored works and in society.

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