

The Womanist Viewpoint in Contemporary Female African Fiction: *The Example of Adimora Akachi-Ezeigbo's The Last of the Strong Ones and Amma Darko's Not without Flowers*

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Abstract

*This paper has as its focus the feminist theory as it is reflected in the works of contemporary female African novelists, with particular reference to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, a prolific Nigerian novelist, and Amma Darko, an equally prolific Ghanaian novelist. The paper presents an overview of the feminist theory generally, pointing out the various strands of feminism and placing emphasis on Womanism. Using one novel each from the select authors – Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Amma Darko's *Not without Flowers*, the paper assesses the approach to gender issues adopted by both writers and concludes that the authors are womanists as they are particularly concerned with issues that affect women in the African society, and unlike the other more militant brands of feminism, these womanist writers do not advocate an antagonistic posture towards men but explore ways that men and women can work together for a better African society.*

Keywords: Feminism, Culture, Gender, Polygamy

Introduction

Feminism is a social movement that has been in existence since the beginning of civilization. In a more organized way, the movement started due to the need of women and men, who were gender activists, to respond to what they considered as undue victimisation of women by reason of their gender. It is a movement that fights against all bottlenecks to the general progress of women in societies. Around 1970, feminism began to take many forms. Women in the first instance started to organize pockets of resistance against everything that was an impediment to women's development. In its broadest sense, feminism is a movement which rejects the marginalization, subordination and underestimation of women by the patriarchal culture either politics, economics and social life in generally (Ishikawa 4).

Over the years, various sub-types of feminism have evolved with different views and interpretations of the feminist ideology. The more prominent sub-types include radical feminism, Marxist feminism, liberal feminism and womanism, also known as African Feminism. While radical feminism is a feminist ideology which considers the male-controlled capitalist hierarchy as sexist and as the defining feature of women's oppression (Deckard 444), Marxist feminism, otherwise known as socialist feminism, identifies the family as the site of ideological socialization where men and women are groomed into pre-determined roles, thus perpetrating existing gender

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relations (Donovan 83). Liberal feminism, on its part, focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. The important issues in liberal feminism include reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, voting, education, equality of wage, affordable childcare, affordable health care, and the reduction of sexual and domestic violence against women (source?).

While Kristin Switala reports that by the early eighties, European feminists had advanced to a “much more confrontational attack on male hegemony, advocating a complete overthrow of the biased (male) canon of literature” (3), in Africa on the other hand, the period between the 1980's and the early 1990's witnessed the birth of a new strand of feminism known as womanism. Its pioneers were Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie. This form of feminism evolved because the geographical, cultural and social experiences of women worldwide are not the same, and these peculiarities shape their literary works. For this reason, when feminism spread to Africa, it was adapted by African writers to cater for the peculiar challenges of the African woman. Consequently, this form of feminism rejects the claim that the first and most basic form of oppression is gender oppression, arguing that this cannot be so for the African woman who also suffers racial discrimination (Achufusi 104).

Alice Walker, an African American, was the one who coined the word “Womanism” to refer to this strand of feminism. Walker used the term, “womanist” in a short story titled “Coming Apart” in 1979. In another work - *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* - Walker defined a “womanist” as one, “committed to survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female, ... Not separatist” (36). Since Walker's initial use, the term “womanism” has evolved to envelop varied and often opposed interpretations of concepts such as feminism, blackness, a balance between people and nature, etcetera.

Some scholars have tried to analyse the relationship and differences between other strands of feminism and womanism. Commenting on what she considers the distinguishing feature of womanism that sets it apart from other strands of feminism, Nitri (166) says that, “womanism represents an ideology which focuses on the experiences, realities, struggles and needs of all African women”. She explains further that distinguishing itself from other feminisms, womanism operates on the assumption that race is of paramount importance in any discussion related to black women” (164). This is due to the racial antagonisms they suffer in addition to gender discrimination.

Also commenting on the relationship between womanism and other types of feminism, Laura Gilman argues that womanism is family oriented and holds at its core the belief that both femininity and culture are equally important to the woman's existence. This, she says, is similar to third wave feminism which, unlike the racist first wave feminism, embraces the concept of intellectuality – an effort to understand how oppressive structures like racism and classism are inseparable from women's experiences of gender discrimination.

On the whole, this paper agrees with Alice Walker's widely accepted and much quoted submission that, “Womanism is to feminism what purple is to lavender,” meaning the two are only different shades of the same colour. The difference between womanism and other strands of feminism lies mainly in their approaches to gender issues. Womanists recognise the need to work hand in hand with African men in order for the African race to survive. They envisage a society where, while actively involved in caring for the family, women can still take part in meaningful activities in the wider society. This strand of feminism is the theoretical underpinning for the analysis of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Darko's *Not without Flowers* in this paper. The choice of these books is based on the fact that the experiences of women in different parts of Africa may be similar, but they are not identical. It is, therefore, important to explore how these women capture their experiences in their fiction using the African feminist approach.

Methodology

The paper adopted the library research method. Both primary and secondary texts were used. The primary texts are Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Amma Darko's *Not without Flowers* while critical works on the texts and other materials on the theory of feminism and womanism were consulted.

Womanism in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Amma Darko's *Not without Flowers*

The womanist inclinations of Adimora-Ezeigbo and Amma Darko are seen clearly in the themes of their works and their handling of characterization. The two authors in the select novels have dwelt on themes which

are the major preoccupations of womanism notably that women can deliver effective and efficient leadership alongside their male counterparts, preference for the male child and stereotyping of elderly women, scorn for childless women and polygamy, among others.

One of the most prominent themes of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Last of the Strong Ones* is the ability of women to deliver effective leadership alongside men for the progress of the society. This theme is seen in the centrality of women at the core of Umuga traditional existence where they worked hand in hand with the men in the society before the coming of the white man. At this time, four daughters of Umuga – Ejinmaka, Onyekaozuru, Chieme and Chibuka- known as the *Oluada* (top women representatives), through their activism become members of *Obufo* (Custodians of the ancestral staff – *Ofo*) which is largely a male prerogative. These four women, in line with the womanist perspective, flourish alongside their male counterparts in the leadership of their community. Adimora-Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones* undertakes a re-evaluation and redefinition of womanhood in the context of the Igbo culture. This view of women as put forward in the novel is suggested right from the title of the book in the expression, “strong ones”, which obviously refers to the formidable force of the *Oluada* – Ejinmaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka. Indeed, right from the prologue, Ezeigbo presents the woman as being decisive and being at the forefront of taking important decisions. This is the impression that is created when the narrator who is a woman says:

At the memorable meeting of the Umuga, I stood up and spoke on the need to possess an uncluttered memory of the change taking place in Umuga. The truth of that change would be passed on to our people and to generations yet unborn before its contamination with the distorted account the *kosiri* and his agents were bound to present at some future date.(2)

The fact that the idea of recording the history of *Umuga* Community is raised by a woman at a meeting where women (*Umuada*) are included in decision making is a clear testimony of the readiness of women to take initiatives and make their mark in the social order, despite being outnumbered by men.

In Darko's *Not without Flowers*, the theme of women functioning in leadership positions is not given prominence as the author is more preoccupied with problems women face in the home. In terms of theme, *Not without Flowers* digs into some cultural practices that Ghanaian women have grappled with over the centuries, one of which is polygamy. Even though polygamy is an acceptable practice in many African societies, Darko, like other African feminist writers, shows her distaste for the practice. Through Kakraba's reaction to the visits of 'Teacher', Ma's reaction to Pa, and Flower's Relationship as well as Aggie's opposition to the relationship between Idan and Randa, it is clear that the practice of polygamy is not cherished by Ghanaian women and the new breed of women, unlike the older women, who will go all out to fight it. The agony women go through when they have to accept this practice is depicted in the detailed description of First Wife's reaction when she gets to know about Second Wife: “It was her faith that gave her strength... The first time Pesewa retired to his bedroom with his second wife, who for that moment was his favourite and more desired wife, it was the faith of first wife that got her down on her knees in front of her bed to pray to God to expand her vessel of endurance. She prayed to God as if she was talking to him face to face” (271).

This treatment of polygamy by Darko is not peculiar to her. As stated earlier, most African feminists including Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Adimora-Ezeigbo, among others, present polygamy negatively with respect to women. Darko, however, does not present polygamy as a practice carried out entirely by men to make women miserable. She, also, depicts women using polygamy to their own advantage, emotionally and financially. For example, Fifth Wife agrees to a polygamous marriage because she needs to be attached while not being bothered to have children as her husband already has children from his other wives. In her words, “I mentioned emotional security as one of my reasons for marrying my late husband” (Darko 95). Darko's treatment of polygamy is also not one sided as she brings up some 'positive' aspects of the practice. For example, in the Ghanaian culture where she lives and writes, the children in a polygamous home are considered to belong to all the wives. Thus, Ntifor's marriage to five wives solves the problem of childlessness for both him and his other wives who have not conceived. The strand of feminism adopted by Darko is clearly not militant as she does not show the first wife leaving the marriage in protest. Rather, she prays for endurance to enable her bear the pains of sharing her husband with other women. In this wise, Darko is different from Adimora-Ezeigbo

whose major characters, particularly Ejinmaka, show a strong opposition to polygamy. This is perhaps a reflection of the general treatment of polygamy in the Ghanaian and Nigerian culture.

This brings us to another major theme of interest to womanists, which is the theme of preference for male children in the African society. Discrimination against female children and the feeling that one must have a male child - what one might call the male child syndrome - is a prominent theme in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. In the African society, a woman may give birth to only male children and be applauded, but a woman who gives birth to only female children is scorned. She is also not considered to be rooted in the husband's family yet as she has failed to provide him with a heir. This is the situation in which Ejinmaka finds herself in her second marriage. When she bears two daughters with no son, Obiatu's people are unhappy. They want him to marry another wife but he refuses. This contention continues and one can hardly say what would have been the result if Aziagba, their first daughter, did not come to their aid. Perhaps because of how indispensable a male child is considered to be in the Igbo society, the people have a tradition which allows a female child to remain at home, perform a ceremony known as *nluikwa*, choose a male and bear a child by him for her father where a family has only daughters. This is what Aziagba, the first daughter of Ejinmaka and Obiatu, does to save her parents' marriage. Ejinmaka recounts that: "It was Aziagba who solved the problem and saved all of us from slow death. She was willing to *remain at home* with us to produce male children for her father" (37). The fact that Ejinmaka, the protagonist of *The Last of the Strong Ones*, accepts this debasing custom just to preserve her marriage shows the womanist inclinations of Adimora-Ezeigbo clearly.

This theme of preference and greater regard for males in the Nigerian society as explored by Ezeigbo is related to the theme of stereotyping of aged women, which Darko treats in some detail in *Not without Flowers*. In this novel, one sees elderly women being scorned as witches once they express their fears or dislike for something. This is what happens when Idan's grandmother has a premonition concerning her grandson's marriage (166). Similarly, when Kabraaka tries to feel Ntfor's boil in order to diagnose what it could be, she is branded a witch (pg. 161). Darko is clearly concerned that instead of being appreciated for their often timely contributions, elderly women in the Ghanaian society are misunderstood and seen as witches or insane. The worst scenario seems to be where Sisi Efe's mother is branded a bad omen by her husband's family who accuse her of trying to transfer the witchcraft to Efe's daughters who are born disabled (202). One wonders why it is always women who are accused whenever something goes wrong in the Ghanaian society. Darko expresses this concern sarcastically: "No male in the family had been declared a wizard, so it had to be the females who inherit it (202).

Conclusion

Feminism is a literary theory that is concerned with issues that affect women in the society and preferring ways to address those issues. Over the years, various strands of feminism evolved, including liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, eco feminism, womanism, among others. The analysis of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Amma Darko's *Not without Flowers* in this paper has shown that both authors are African feminists as they concern themselves mainly with problems that affect African women generally. In handling these problems, the authors are not antagonistic to men but rather, they are objective, showing that both men and women need to work together to make the society a better place.

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NOTES: The paper is publishable, though there is no clear methodology, especially data analysis technique. Although, some surface errors have been taken care of, a little more editing will enrich it.