

**SNAIL-SENSE SHEROES: RECONFIGURING
WOMANHOOD IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S
HOUSE OF SYMBOLS**

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Abstract

The African woman remains a multiplicity of identities. In ventilating her image, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo has been consistent in her portrayal of the African woman, her roles, placement and the gender bias within cultural and social systems that have been asphyxiating for the woman in her narratives. Adimora-Ezeigbo sets out to reconfigure womanhood in House of Symbols by creating sheroes: unconventional women in Umuga society. These formidable and dynamic female characters are admired for their resilience, courage and unrivalled accomplishments in the narrative. This paper adopts Adimora-Ezeigbo's Snail-Sense ideology in investigating the author's strategy in reconfiguring womanhood in House of Symbols. To achieve this objective, the paper examines the lives, experiences and achievements of the author's major female characters. The paper reveals that Adimora-Ezeigbo's subversive stance against patriarchy in House of symbols is strategic. She projects an empowered female protagonist, vibrant female characters and moves away from silencing antagonistic patriarchal forces to projecting a rather significant image of the African woman that achieves the agenda of reconfiguring womanhood within the context of an evolving traditional African society. The paper concludes that, the African woman must be proactive in adopting strategic alternatives for achieving self-actualisation and rejuvenation.

Key words: *Shero, Snail-sense, Womanhood, Gender-bias, African feminism.*

Introduction

Feminists have attempted to reorder our society in diverse ways, subverting systems which are arguably perceived to overtly enhance and emphasise male supremacy over the women folk. Attempting to reorder and subvert this order with new alternatives are perhaps efforts at righting and writing perceived wrongs against the female gender in literature and other spheres of endeavour. Also feminists in Africa, it would seem, have made several attempts to devise and propagate suitable alternatives to the seemingly prevailing system of male dominance in the continent over the years considering the seemingly intemperate and disruptive perspectives adopted by Western feminist, and imbibed by some African women and feminist to the chagrin of many African men and women alike. Ezenwa-Ohaeto however points that feminism as a movement is operational both nationally and internationally and irrespective of the difference in ideologies, western feminist and African feminist “share a common point of convergence in the models they project: cultural rebirth as it concerns patriarchal practices” (61).

Perhaps, if we must take advantage of the wins and positive potential of the feminist movement, consideration should always be given to the context of the African woman's struggle and her identity as a woman in Africa; a context complicated by traditional, cultural and social practices that form and determine significantly the holistic identity of the woman. Thus, Western modes and strands of feminism remain potential tools that have generated and are still capable of generating suspicion in modern times considering the African woman's reality, worldview, culture and unique experiences (Mary Kolawole, 7).

According to Josephine Akhire, "feminism in Africa has been a boiling pot of diverse discourses and courses of action" and conveys more significance than a mere opposite of Western feminism (7). Naomi Nkealah however states that "the definition and use of the term *feminism* in African literature poses a number of problems for African women writers and critics, many of whom tend to deny any affiliation to the feminist movement, even though their writings espouse feminist aspirations. Their detachment perhaps accrues from the misconceptions that surround the concept of feminism. Feminism is often interpreted as being anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion in its theoretical framework" (133). It would be difficult it seems, to refute entirely that Western feminism among other factors has not been responsible for the growth and development of women's resistance to patriarchy and the systems that have encouraged male supremacy.

Considering the complexities that shroud the African woman's existence in modern times, Ada Azodo posits that African feminism as a movement caters for the unique needs of the women in the continent of Africa. She states that African feminism as a political movement does not only raise the issues of sex and gender but also goes ahead to question race and the presentations and perspectives from which the African woman is seen and read (202). African Feminism according to Naomi Nkealah therefore "strives to create a new, liberal, productive and self-reliant African woman within the heterogeneous cultures of Africa. Feminism in Africa ultimately aims at modifying culture as it affects women in different societies" (133). This suggests that this social movement and framework caters distinctively for the African woman, and takes cognizance of the peculiarities of her identity and experiences. Also important to this framework is the need to accommodate the variants and strands of feminisms on the continent that strive to attend to the peculiarities of the African woman in her society given the possibility of cultural and social disruption that come with Europe's Eurocentric feminism. This framework emphasises the importance of female roles, self and bodies in African societies. It also advocates the inclusion and accommodation of the male folk in the gender discourse in African to ensure that they are stakeholders in improving the lot of women on the continent.

Over the years, the African woman has endured a generic representation of her image and self against the backdrop of feminism. It is against this standpoint that Obiageli Okolocha interrogates the nature and concept of heroism in traditional Nigerian society. Okolocha's essay highlights the fact that, the rather typical representation of Nigerian women overlooks a significant reality that attests to the existence of powerful women and female figures within the trado-cultural sphere of Nigeria, for example. The scholar insists that female power within this context usually lies in, and is activated by "the performance of duty to the society, a fact that feminist arguments often ignore" (96). Also, Azodo argues that male and female roles in

pre-colonial African communities were complementary, and that since the advent of colonization, the African woman has had to grapple with her fall from a position of power and self-sovereignty to becoming man's helper" (201); a stance Oyeronke Oyewumi seems to corroborate when she states that the colonial situation produced "a hierarchy of four, not two, categories. Beginning at the top, these were: men (European), women (European), native (African men), and Other (African women). Native women occupied the residual and unspecified category of the other" (122). This has remained the lingering determinant of the African woman's status in every space of being even in modern times.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's narratives and imaginative presentation of African women in both traditional and modernising society project her stance on gender discourse (bias, marginalisation, wars and inclusion) in Africa. Her representation of women in pre-colonial and the modernising Igbo society have been a deliberate attempt at repositioning and reconfiguring the woman's image; drawing impetus from historical times and traditional society where women's roles were accorded due relevance. Thus in her narrative, the woman strives to tell us *her story*, highlighting her relevance in traditional and modern society in spite of male dominance and antagonism. Also, we find a representation and construction of unconventional women in Adimora-Ezeigbo's narrative. We posit that these women are sheroes: a concept which seems to capture the intention and deliberate effort of Adimora-Ezeigbo in reconfiguring the image of women in social, traditional, economic and religious dimensions of existence. According to the *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, Shero is a word that has been in existence since 1839. The word which is a blend of "she" and "hero", means "a woman regarded as a hero" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shero>), could be used to describe unconventional women in society who are so admired for their quality, courage and unrivalled accomplishments. While heroine could be a suitable synonym, the word, shero seems to derive its relevance and significance from gender discourse and perhaps the deliberate attempt at asserting the female gender; also, with the intent of emphasising and highlighting woman and her unrivalled achievements in society. The implication of this seems to outweigh "heroine" as a word in this context. Our purpose is therefore to show essentially, the dismantling of patriarchy and western feminist's contraptions that seem to deny the African woman and her achievements prominence.

Snail-Sense Feminism as a Theoretical Anchor

Snail-sense feminism is Adimora-Ezeigbo's contribution to the gender discourse, African feminism and diverse attempts at its theorisation. While Adimora-Ezeigbo does not necessarily refer to herself as a feminist, she acknowledges that she is very passionate and concerned about the treatment and empowerment of women. According to the author and scholar, in an interview with *Ecomium*, snail-sense feminism is:

a variant of the womanist principle that does not promote aggression in women and in their relationship with men. It seeks to promote a kind of balance in women's lives and their relationship with men but at the same time, demands that women have an independent mind and do what they want to do but not to the detriment of other people around them. I call it snail sense because a snail moves over very rough edges and thorns without getting hurt because it has their lubricating tongue

that allows it to do that. I believe a woman should be like that. In Igbo, we say, *ire oma ka eju ji aga n ogwu*. In a society, a woman should be able to tolerate others, work with others and maintain a very humble attitude towards others but at the same time be herself (<http://encomium.ng/professor-akachi-ezeigbo-talks-about-her-works/>).

Adimora-Ezeigbo proposes an accommodating strategy through which women would manoeuvre, survive and excel above male dominance as a result of principles and attitudes which are self-enhancing, protective and devoid of overt conflict even in the face of stiff patriarchal confrontation. So, we find Adimora-Ezeigbo's protagonist and female characters represented as sheroes strategising, surviving and succeeding against all patriarchal odds. The African woman remains a multiplicity of identities. In ventilating her image, Adimora-Ezeigbo has been consistent in her portrayal of the African woman, her roles, placement and the gender bias within cultural and social systems that have been asphyxiating for the woman in her narratives. Adimora-Ezeigbo sets out to reconfigure womanhood in *House of Symbols* by creating sheroes: unconventional women in Umuga society. These formidable and dynamic female characters are admired for their resilience, courage and unrivalled accomplishments in the narrative. This paper adopts Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Snail-Sense* ideology in investigating *the author's strategy in reconfiguring womanhood in House of Symbols*. To achieve this objective, the paper examines the lives, experiences and achievements of the author's major female characters. The significance of *Snail-sense* feminism as a critical model lies in its proposition of accommodation and tolerance as a reaction to the challenge of patriarchy, while emphasising the independence and ingenuity of the woman. The characters and characterisation in *House of Symbols* are therefore premised on this conciliatory strategy that Adimora-Ezeigbo proposes.

Sheroes: Reconfiguring Womanhood in House of Symbols

The second in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's trilogy (*The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle*), *House of Symbols* is the story of the Eaglewoman's life and experiences in post-colonial Umuga where the people have accepted the ways and practices of the colonial masters owing to the success of colonial intrusion and influence. Eaglewoman also known as Ugonwayi is the granddaughter of Ejimnaka, the matriarch of Umuga, who resisted British colonial rule alongside her husband, Obiatu in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. This trilogy reconstructs history and life in Uga, Adimora-Ezeigbo's indigenous home in Eastern Nigeria in pre-colonial times up until modern times in the 21st century.

The narrative captures the changed socio-cultural atmosphere of Umuga, a fictional community in pre-colonial Eastern Nigeria where women are perhaps presented as just being themselves and not necessarily asserting themselves from a background defined by traditional myths about the person and ability of the African woman. Devoid of the intolerance perceived as a defining pattern of overt feminist narratives, Adimora-Ezeigbo's female characters are patterned after an evolving traditional society in which traditional beliefs and powers are questioned covertly. This is achieved through her reconfiguration and representation of these traditional and religious sheroes as custodians of the very essence of traditional and social life

in this Igbo community. The possibilities she highlights in these characters such as Eaglewoman, Okwudiba and the prophetess, Ezenwanyi seem to subvert the perceived roles that attest to gender marginalisation and male dominance. These women thwart portrayals and notions of dominant patriarchal structures even in traditional society. Expectedly, these women seem to defy the stereotypes and image of traditional African women, some of which still hold sway in modern times. Nevertheless, these female characters remain unassuming and fair in their relationship with others. It is significant that while they strive to remain independent, they tolerate their male partners and successfully negotiate the cultural balance for their meaningful existence.

Eaglewoman, the protagonist of the novel, is faced with a rather difficult decision. At two years, Nnenna, who is believed to be a reincarnation of her grandmother, Ejimnaka cannot walk. As a Christian, she finds it difficult to accept the call of Ezenwanyi, who summons her and the child. She makes up her mind with Osai (Josiah Okwara), her husband's intervention to visit the prophetess as part of her quest to unravel the mystery behind Nnenna's state. She does not visit the prophetess alone; she goes with Osai who supports her till the solution to their daughter's state is found. This visit reveals to Eaglewoman and her husband significant aspects of their tradition, culture and modern life.

During this visit, Ezenwanyi demands that the couple take the child to see Okwudiba, the old woman who "was the greatest storyteller and historian of Umuga before the white people's culture and religion cast their shadow over Umuga..." (*House of Symbols* 37). Okwudiba is not only a wordsmith but a historian and custodian of the people's indigenous heritage. Her knowledge of the past is unrivalled by men and women alike. This also seems to be her motivation for holding tenaciously to the trado-cultural practices of the pre-colonial Umuga community even when most of the people including her son, Joel and his wife, Regina desert them. In fact, Okwudiba is astonished at the people of Umuga for embracing Christianity, a religion brought by the people who killed their forefathers, and took some away into slavery. She swears to have nothing to do with Christianity and western ways of living, which is responsible for the distortion of the peace, culture, and tradition of Umuga. She refuses to call her son and daughter-in-law by their Christian names but is sensible not hurt her immediate family by causing conflict or tension to assert her position and displeasure with western ways. In fact, when Okwudiba dies, Joel affirms, "even though we are church people, we will give her the full funeral rites she deserves as a great daughter of Umuga and a renowned *Amaala*. Just the way she would want it" (*House of Symbols* 105).

Okwudiba is Ejimnaka's inseparable friend in life and death. Transition to death remains impossible till she receives the reincarnated form of her friend in Nnenna. This visit immediately restores Nnenna's legs and eventually eases Okwudiba, one of Adimora-Ezeigbo's shero's passages to the world of her ancestors.

Ezenwanyi, the female seer is another force to reckon with. She summons and receives guests from far and wide; and from all works of life. People travel from distant lands seeking her trade, knowledge and spiritual expertise. Ezenwanyi successfully establishes spiritual relevance, integrity and success in her hybrid spiritual trade and thus, her patronage remains unlimited. She describes her work in Umuga thus:

I stand in the middle of these two religions, building bridges. Only bridges can save the world from itself. From disconnection and

destruction. Two religions co-exist here without ease. My destiny is to bridge them, pull them together and nurture something new which draws strength from both” (*House of Symbols* 49).

Through this visit, Ezenwayi's unique role as a medium between the dead and living, and a bridge between Umuga tradition and Western ways is revealed. Thus, we hear from Ezenwayi that Chukwu is man and woman, father and mother; whereas divinity in Christianity is represented as masculine and traditional Umuga religious allegiance lies with the woman of the lake. Also, Ezenwayi's house of symbols where she consults as a seer is crammed with feminine and masculine symbols; she believes that Chukwu, Almighty God is a good combination of mother and father (*House of Symbols* 52). These metaphoric attempts at tolerance do not only heighten the significance and spiritual relevance of women in the traditional African society as it were, but project's Adimora-Ezeigbo's stance: balance in the lingering gender war and discourse through this tolerance and accommodation.

As a mother of four, Ezenwayi enjoyed the support and help of her husband until he died. She is a powerful woman no doubt, but she is able to contain the influence her access to insight from the world beyond confers on her. She does a good job of taking care of her family and minding her trade as a prophetess. For over a year, she patiently summoned Eaglewoman with a message from the world beyond without getting offended at her indifference. Ezenwayi gives Eaglewoman her personal statement thus, “the work may be tasking as you say, but it is not a burden. It is my destiny. I have a call: it is a work that I do with humility and with joy” (*House of Symbols* 44). Here again, Adimora-Ezeigbo's ideology is highlighted. We find resilient Ezenwayi being both successful and humble as she brings succour to her clients, garners spiritual power and fulfils her destiny without seemingly upsetting people and socio-cultural norms.

The novel which primarily narrates the experiences of Eaglewoman, projects a changing traditional society with practises and perspectives that trouble women's fulfilment. For instance, Eaglewoman is betrothed at eight years old to a man she knows nothing about and does not like. Through this, Adimora-Ezeigbo however highlights the significance of the bride-price in the Igbo society and its implication on the woman. The bride-price is usually money and/or property given by the bridegroom to the family of his bride to legalise the marriage traditionally. If for any reason the marriage is terminated, the family of the bride is expected to return the bride-price to the groom. If this is not done, the woman remains an 'unused property' of the bride-groom. The bride-price could be paid in advance to the family of a betrothed wife and as such, the betrothed girl or woman is considered a wife of the intending groom already.

Thus, Aziagba is destabilised when her daughter, Eaglewoman refuses to marry the man, to whom she is betrothed. She meets another man, Josiah as she grows older and breaks her engagement to Nathaniel Okeke; an act which makes Eaglewoman and her mother objects of scorn and mockery in Umuga. While she considers the severity and cultural implication of what this broken engagement entails, Aziagba laments, “who will pay back the bride price and who will restore the gifts Okeke showered on my child?” (*House of Symbols* 7). She objects to her daughter marrying another man because, Nathaniel Okeke, has spent enormous material resources on her. Traditionally speaking, those materials are said to be a cord, binding the would-be couple. Eaglewoman resists her own commodification and insists that Josiah (Osai),

the man she loves and intends to marry must “cut the cord”. He does this by paying back everything given by Nathaniel Okeke to Eaglewoman in cash and kind, before officially getting married to her.

Even though Eaglewoman successfully marries Josiah, she lives with these memories and Nathaniel Okeke's occasional harassment of her family. Her marriage to Osai notwithstanding is not without its challenges: bareness for five years after marriage, having a daughter lame in the leg, the death of her son few months after birth and Osai's near-death illness. She however surmounts all of these.

Eaglewoman manages a large extended family with the children of poor relations, friends, men, women and admirers looking up to her for guidance and livelihood. They join her in the work in her bakery as apprentices and labourers which have not only brought her fame but the envy of rivals who wonder at her success and seemingly easy life. Even when Soronje, her friend becomes a self-imposed rival out of envy, Eaglewoman treats her with kindness. She applies wisdom and caution in relating with her. Eaglewoman is a conscientious business woman, politician and philanthropist who assist the people of Atagu and Umuga in solving their problems. She assists Diribe in getting medical attention at the hospital at Iyenu, where the growth in his scrotum is surgically removed. Also, Ezekeke Agu receives free loaves of bread from Eaglewoman's bakery. The workers who are involved in the smooth running of her business and household also enjoy her kindness.

Eaglewoman displays snail-sense in her home as seen in her relationship with her husband and domestic staff. Even though she makes more money from her strings of businesses and has a good reputation among her people, she does not lord it over her husband, Osai. The author creates a protagonist whose husband does not feel threatened by her success. The support Osai offers makes their relationship a complementary one.

Eaglewoman's personality and confidence find expression in her family life, business and relationship with Osai, her husband. She is not only loving and respectful to him and the entire household but assertive in her thoughts and actions. This is how she gets things done. Eaglewoman breaks her childhood-engagement; a norm respected in her society and is rewarded with the man of her dreams, Osai. When she marries him, she however makes it clear that she is his companion and not a chattel to be maltreated. Eaglewoman wants to be herself. Osai however hits her on two occasions as a result of his jealous rage. On the first occasion, she returns a day later from a wedding in Onitsha and her explanations do not assuage this jealous rage. Eaglewoman does not react. The second time Osai hits his wife in the feat of jealousy; it is because of the visit of Eaglewoman's old schoolmate. Even though she explains the young man's visit, Osai hits her to assert himself and ownership over her in a rather crude manner.

Eaglewoman reacts swiftly unlike the first time and inflicts injury on his shoulder with the grinding stone she has been working with. She also reminds him:

Osai, this is not what we agreed, is it? All I ask of you is to be given some space to be myself. Is that asking too much? Trust is part of it: trust is love's closest companion. I will not be a beast whose back receives blows without a murmur... (*House of Symbols* 205).

Eaglewoman seems to assert herself physically and verbally to retain her sense and place of freedom and respect as a woman in her husband's house. Osai's shoulder and ego are wounded. As he sits dazed from this injury inflicted by his wife, he seems to console himself with realities

that stem from his cultural background and enforce his seemingly superior position as the man. In his pensive state, Osai reasons that he owns and married Eaglewoman and not the other way round; that he still has the ability to pummel her with blows to teach her place as a woman. Nevertheless, Osai is ashamed and becomes a changed man because of this incident as “he learnt to love without seeming to possess the object of his love since, as he told himself, that is the only path to peace in a relationship such as a marriage” (*House of Symbols* 207). Eaglewoman is remorseful and nurses her husband after the incident to health while he lives with the guilt of his action. Their relationship becomes better with mutual understanding and respect achieved. Adimora-Ezeigbo's feminist posture accounts for the response and reactions between Osai and Eaglewoman and how this incident is resolved. While the author does not seem to propose aggression towards the malefolk, with Eaglewoman's action and plea for space to be herself, she tries to establish a balance between self-assertion, independence and tolerance for mutual respect to be achieved. This accommodating strategy seems to remain a consistent feature of African feminism irrespective of its variant.

The narrative also confirms the determination of the author to highlight women as instruments of change. She projects the place of women in governance in modern African society through Eaglewoman who displays her ability to function beyond the traditionally assigned roles of wife and mother to serve the public in a political office. Eaglewoman registers as an NCNC (The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) member and despite the opposition, she is able to draw membership and influence the success of her party at the polls. Her political strategy is appealing. She pays visits to significant members of the electorate, her immediate community and campaigns significantly with kind words, good reason and gifts at the grassroots. She does not employ violent or divisive means to win the heart of men and women alike.

The author seems to subtly suggest that women may be the answer to the many questions surrounding governance that remain unanswered in the continent. Ima Emmanuel observes that it is invigorating to find Adimora-Ezeigbo projecting her female characters as articulate, proactive and intelligent leaders; this coupled with the intimate and affectionate tone through which she foregrounds these women in complementary relationship with their male counterparts account for her success as a writer (272).

Conclusion

Adimora-Ezeigbo reconfigures the image of womanhood in *House of Symbols* by projecting a world controlled by men but predominantly defined by women. The implication we find, is, the implementation of subtle possibilities associated with perhaps subverting fixed traditional female roles of wife/mother. In achieving this purpose, she presents us with sheroes, women who are resilient and diligent at their task. She progresses in her subversive stance as she projects an empowered protagonist, Eaglewoman and vibrant female characters: Okwudiba, the wordsmith and the prophetess, Ezenwanyi in this narrative. Through these characters, the writer moves from silencing and confronting antagonistic patriarchal forces to reinventing a rather significant image of the African woman. The African woman is potentially independent and is so not to the detriment of others around her. Akachi-Ezeigbo thus creates a balance within the context of an evolving African society. The paper concludes that, the African woman should be proactive in adopting strategic alternatives for achieving self-actualisation and rejuvenation.

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