

**Reinventing the African Woman:
Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo's *The Last of The Strong Ones***

by

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Abstract

Women in traditional Igbo society were given prominent positions because of the roles they played in the society. they were active participants in the agricultural and economic development of the society because the concept of gender in traditional Igbo culture was that of complementarity between the male and the female genders. The emergence of colonialism disrupted the once vantage position of women in Igbo society because it carried rigid gender ideologies which supported the exclusion of women from public domain. Adopting the feminist theory that argues that the complementarity of the male and female genders enhances the development of the society; using *The Last of the Strong Ones*, this paper examines Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo's advocacy for a harmonious complementarity between men and women in the modern society as it was the practice in the precolonial society. Contrary to the negative image created about the female gender in male authored works cushioned by colonial ethos, Ezeigbo reinvents and recreates active, assertive and self- confident women who play prominent roles in shaping the social, political and economic spheres of the society.

Introduction

The image of the African woman in precolonial Africa was that of an industrious, hardworking and an independent woman. The traditional African woman played a complementary role with her male counterpart and this made her socially relevant. The traditional woman's occupation was farming, trading and other means of livelihood which made her economically independent.

The notion of female dependency, weakness and docility came with colonialism, because the colonialist, armed with the Victorian values and ethos of placing the Victorian woman on the pedestal, transferred the notion to the African woman. Furthermore, since the male gender was first introduced to Western education, the early male writers popularized the distorted image of the African woman and gave her a negative image such as, a devoted mother, a domestic individual whose life revolves around the domestic hearth, an individual who stands aloof from the socio-political issues of her time, a weakling, inferior to the man and totally dependent on the man.

These categorization between man and woman created social differences between the male and the female genders, and they grew and matured into social, political, educational and economic inequality. Although women are late entrants in the literary scene, they have endeavoured to correct the negative and wrong image created about the African woman.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, a post colonial African female writer is one of the African female writers who is out to re-present the image of the African woman in the right perspective. Ezeigbo

does this by creating women who play complementary roles with the men, because she believes that, complementarity does not yet exist, hence her advocacy for it. In Snail-Sense Feminism, Ezeigbo argues that: "The relationship between men and female is, therefore, based on complementarity"(13).

This paper examines the role of Ezeigbo in reinventing the African woman to capture the positive image and attributes she was known for in the pre-colonial era which has been misrepresented, because complementarity is based on mutual and women's co-operation in the society. And to reinvent in the context of this paper means to change something that already exists and give it a different form or purpose. Ezeigbo's stance as a complementarist aligns with Carole Davies's definition of African Feminism which recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African people (8-9).

In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Ezeigbo reinvents her female characters by giving them prominent roles, she gives them a voice in a society that has made them voiceless and empowers them economically, socially and politically.

Oratory Empowerment

Ezeigbo empowers her female characters with the oratory power, she gives the women a voice in the society. Susan Arndt notes that "women's feeling and thoughts now become audible and the women's voice... are heard in dialogues and from the narrative perspective" ("Paradigms of Intertextuality" 48). This reinvention negates male portraiture of the female character in their works. Arndt notes that "Achebe's literary portrait of the history and culture of the Igbo was limited to the extent that he marginalized women and neglected their voice" (44 -45). But in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, the trend has changed as women's voices become audible.

Ezeigbo sues for complementarity between men and women for the good of the society, and not for the woman to be subjugated. She exemplifies this by creating assertive and outspoken women who are members of the Oluada, the inner council committee of the Umuga community. The women are not just passive members, but their opinions and suggestions are implemented. Bhattacharji in "Re-writing History/Re-Writing Women" notes that: "The tribal society is surprisingly democratic and all matters are decided through social consensus. Women have a powerful voice in all matters -social ,economic and political" (140).

Ezeigbo recreates the African woman to be the custodian and historian of the traditions, values and culture of the people. This is against the female portraiture in male-authored works where women are not given prominent roles. "Before the end of the meeting, two women were chosen to take the duty of recording events as well as reconstructing the lives of the four Oluada.... So we became witnesses, custodians and critics of the unfolding events"(3).

Contrary to the portrayal of the African women in male-authored works as passive, docile and unreasonable, Ezeigbo presents the traditional African women, though not educated, with a rich retentive memory where all the events of the past, present and the future are recorded. "We, the observers, listened and recorded, in our cavernous memory, all that was said at the meeting" (12).

Speaking in proverbs which has been the prerogative of men in male-authored works has been transferred to women. Ezeigbo's female characters speak in proverbs without feeling that they have exceeded their bounds, because silence is seen as a female virtue in African Society. "Vocality is a male prerogative and silence a female virtue" (133). Vocality as a male preserve and silence as a female virtue inherent in patriarchal societies have been transposed into literature by male authors, but Ezeigbo reverses the trend by creating female characters who are vocal in voicing out their views. And vocality is expressed through the medium of language; language helps people to create their identity and gender.

Chieme, a female character and a member of the Oluada and Obuofa in *The Last of the Strong Ones* is Ezeigbo's reinvention of an African woman orator. Chieme possesses the power of oratory and her fame is known all over Umuga and beyond. Chieme uses her gift of oratory and chanting to pass a moral message to the society, in other words, she uses her gift towards the growth and betterment of the society. The failure of her marriage does not prevent her from contributing positively to the growth of the society. "Who, in Umuga, was not acquainted with the skills of Chieme's prowess of oratory and poetry? She knew how to string up words to praise, chastise or vilify. Chieme, the voice that had conquered strange lands"(8).

Weighty words that Achebe puts in the mouth of his male characters, Ezeigbo now imbues them in her female characters. Ejimnaka speaking in proverbs notes that: "Those who bring home ant-ridden faggots must be prepared for the visit of lizards"(11) Chieme who suffers from betrayal and abandonment from her husband because she could not menstruate is empowered by Ezeigbo to make life useful for herself and the society. Bhattacharji notes that Chieme is "a single woman who relentlessly pursues an uncommon profession and dares to carve out a niche for herself in the patriarchy"(146).

Ezeigbo empowers her female characters with a voice in the society, and this empowerment enables them to contribute meaningfully to the development of their society because their views are heard and implemented.

Economic Empowerment

Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones* reinvents the African woman with the ability to manage her time effectively in performing her roles as well as gaining economic expansion. Although her female characters are traditional women, they are uneducated, she empowers them economically, and this empowerment gives them social status. They become prominent members of the highest decision-making body of the Umuga community. In recognition of the important need to empower the woman, Nkechi Okoli in "Women Empowerment" notes that "for Africa to wriggle out of its

present status of the poorest of the poor, the women who constitute the larger population must be empowered" (61).

Ejinnaka is very enterprising, she sells kolanut as well as weaves mat which she sells and make money to support her husband Obiatu, and saves his name from public ridicule. Ezeigbo's women are those who refuse to depend on men for their survival. Ejinnaka tells us that: "I hated being any man's appendage. I could not entertain having to eat out of any man's hand or being under his heel all my life, as my mother and my father's other wives had been to Ezeukwu. My independence meant everything to me. Indeed, my very life, and I guarded it fiercely"(27).

Ezeigbo bestows on Ejinnaka the skills of craftsmanship that is unprecedented in Umuga community. She uses this skill to decorate her husband's Obi to the admiration of visitors to the Obi. "It was not usual for our women to decorate objects with animal or human motifs.... The more our admiration, the more our conviction that Ejinnaka was behind the unique mural art" (13-12). Ejinnaka's multiple business enterprises enables her to save her husband's name from shame, she relinquishes all her savings to her husband. She tells us: "I gave him all my savings and even my capital" (32). This complementarity between man and woman is what Ezeigbo advocates, because it is for the good of the society. Ezeigbo affirms her portrayal of female character in an interview thus: "When I create strong and assertive women in my fiction, I am only doing what is natural to me because I know that there are such women in my family and among my ancestors" (qtd in Arndt 31).

Chieme's profession as an orator and chanter brings her fame and wealth, these successes are what eluded her in marriage because in marriage she had a deficiency which is no fault of hers but outside marriage she excels. She tells us:

This profession has taken me everywhere and brought me popularity and prosperity. I have travelled extensively to perform at funerals and on other cultural occasions. My performance as everyone in Umuga knows, is not limited to funeral laments; marriages and title-taking ceremonies (116).

Ezeigbo's portrayal of her female characters contradicts Helen Chaste's argument in *Sexual Metaphor* that: "The caring and serving function of the male is to provide financial support and protection (both physical and psychological) which she could not provide for herself but needs in order to perform her particular domestic functions" (67). This is contradictory, because Ezeigbo reinvents and recreates the African (Igbo) woman by empowering her financially to be a formidable pillar and a source of support to her husband. This reinvention is contrary to the image created about women in male-authored works where women are created as passive, docile and dependent on the men for survival.

Ezeigbo also reinvents the modern African woman after the image of the traditional Igbo woman in the society where woman-woman marriage was practiced. This form of marriage is made possible through the economic expansion of the women. This marriage affords the woman who is

the husband an equal opportunity and privileges like her male counterpart. Egodi Uchendu in "Woman-woman marriage in Igboland" notes that. "Woman-woman marriage was contracted for social and economic reasons.... Others were wealthy and influential woman who married fellow women as a means of celebrating their wealth and for economic gains"(14).

Uchendu argues that this privilege of marrying a wife gave the wealthy Igbo women equal opportunities like the men in the society. Uchendu argues that:

in a society where gender inequality prevailed and women lacked the political and social powers men enjoyed, woman-woman marriage was an avenue for appropriating certain masculine privileges. It was an arrangement that had economic, social and political benefits for women (146).

Ezeigbo reinvents the modern traditional woman after the precolonial traditional woman in woman-woman marriage to buttress the point that what raises one's social status is economic expansion and not gender. In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Ezeigbo through her character Chieme, informs the readers about the existence of this form of marriage thus: "Once, I performed in the home of a powerful woman who had three wives in the land of Umulobia. It was at her father's funeral. I was amazed. Yes, a woman who had other women as wives" (16). This form of acquire chieftaincy titles in their own right, and not a title that is an appendage to that of a man. In this era that polygamy is de-emphasized, in place of woman-woman marriage, adoption is the appropriate option towards solving the problem of childlessness in the society. Ezeigbo in *Snail-Sense Feminism* notes that "Nowadays, adoption is seen as a viable option by some childless couples in Nigeria"(32).

Social Empowerment

Ezeigbo empowers and equips her female characters by making them the watch-dogs of the society. Their roles enable them to resist exploitation, oppression, marginalization and the violation of woman's right by the man. Those who violate women's right are made to suffer the consequences. Patricia Abourdene and John Naisbitt note that "women are highly visible in the quest for justice and the search for solutions"(265).

Ezeigbo's advocacy for complementarity is based on the conviction that the society will be the better for it if men and women complement each other. In a reaction to the general belief that female writers are fighting for equality, Aburdene and Naisbitt note that:

We are so used to thinking of women being minimized, of women fighting for liberation, that we are incapable of the next step: envisioning what the world will look like when women create institutions, collaborate as equal partners with the men, when women change the male-dominated structure they can no longer live in and then build a new world. There is a whole world out there that needs to be totally transformed so that women and men can create, desire, build and play (xxiv).

Ezeigbo believes that the involvement of women in shaping the society will create a better society. Oluada, top women representatives in Umuga enforce law and order in the community. They placed a sanction on Abazu who attempted to kill Onyekozuru, a member of Oluada and Obuajo. This shows the social relevance of women.

They were on the verge of marching to Abazu's compound to sit on him and his household until he reappeared from his hiding place. If after two days he was not seen, Umuda would burn down his compound in retaliation for his attack on Onyekozuru

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(167).

This reinvention of women by Ezeigbo makes them agents of social change and a negation of the stereotyped roles they were given by male authors. Susan Arndt in "Paradigms of Intersexuality" notes that:

In a clear rejection of the stereotypical or iconographic presentation of women in the literature of African men, female authors write African women back into history, culture and society. Here one finds active, self-confident women who have ambitions and play a decisive role in shaping social processes. Space is given to women's thoughts and feelings, experiences and perspectives (25).

Ezeigbo recreates the modern traditional African woman to resist cultural practices which tends to silence her and make her to acquiesce. Onyekozuru resists the traditional marriage by levirate, she refuses to be inherited by her late husband's relation and basks in her new found freedom which peeves members of her late husband's family. "Some of Umeezo's people were not pleased with my new-found freedom and initiative"(58).

Contrary to the African traditional belief that the man should woo a woman, Ezeigbo reinvent Ejimnaka as an iconoclast who rebuffs the popular belief by wooing Obiatu. Ejimnaka is a goal-getter as she tells us that: "Ejimnaka was not one to desire anything and not go in search of it"(32).

Political Empowerment

Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, reinvents the African woman to be politically relevant in the Umuga community. Before now, important decisions that affect the development of the society were made by the men, while those that are related to domestics are considered feminine. Female children are expected to grow up to know how to be care-givers, while male children are socialized into believing that they will grow up to become important decision-makers of their societies. These socialized gender roles, Haste in *Sexual Metaphor* notes that: "There are a number of universal behaviours, and there are certain necessary functions in any society: child care, fighting, hunting, disposal of waste, care of the elderly, decision- making in the community.... In some cultures, they are gender- linked" (22). But in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Ezeigbo reverses the case by

reinventing and recreating women who are members of the decision-making body of the community.

The recreation of women by Ezeigbo is modelled after precolonial Igbo system where women and men complemented each other. In Gender Issues, Ezeigbo argues that:

The Igbo, for instance, operated a type of democratic system in which men and women had equal access to political participation. This type of power distribution and the concept of role differentiation in terms of gender and sex were a feature of Igbo society. Though the society was highly patriarchal, different political and social systems and mechanisms existed for women to exercise and manage their affairs (67 -68).

Bhattacharji also notes that "Adimora-Ezeigbo's women come across as vibrant, vocal, politically conscious individuals, with powerful female genealogies, immersed in independent professions"(143).

Ezeigbo recreates her women to be politically relevant as they join forces with the men to fight the Kosiri (white colonialists) in a war: "Umuda reviewed the part women were playing in the preparations for war and made plans on their expected role if war broke out"(182). These four Oluadas are stakeholders in the decision-making body of the Umuga community. They make useful contributions on how to drive away the Kosiri (whites) from their community, and their suggestions are implemented. Through Ejimnaka, the female strong-will is highlighted even in the face of confrontation with the colonialist. "It is the men who are afraid, not the women"(20). Ejimnaka also suggests: "let us write a letter to Kosiri and tell him what our people want"(21); and a letter was written, although the letter-writer takes advantage of the Umuga people's ignorance of the white man's language and mis- represents their intentions.

Conclusion

Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* has interrupted and deconstructed the dominant gender stereotype in African (Igbo) society. She achieves this by creating space and freedom for women as it was in precolonial Igbo society. For Ifi Amadiume has argued that Igbo traditional system enjoyed a flexible gender system but that: "This was not the case with the Victorian ideology transported to Igboland by the British Missionaries and educationists. It was from their ideologies that the expression 'woman's place is in the home' was derived" (136). Ezeigbo reinvents the African woman to reflect the traditional precolonial Igbo women who were traditional title holders, griots and husbands to other women, thereby enjoying the status of male gender in that context. These positions Amadiume argue "are indications of formal political power and authority for women, sometimes, based upon the idea of achievement and reward"(140-141).

Ezeigbo in advocating for complementarity brings her feminist instinct to bear. Haste argues that the common agenda of feminist theories is "relocating the definition of self-out of a male perspectives into a female perspective. It is a claim for the right to authentic self-definition, wresting both a male conception of female Otherness, and the narrow boundaries of cultural

conceptions of female roles" (101). Ezeigbo as a feminist achieves this by reinventing the African to repudiate the conventional traditional woman who is passive, docile and dependent. Rather she recreates woman to be self-assertive, vocal and enterprising who transcend the male conception of female Otherness, and achieves, molds/adapts through her contribution towards the social, political and economic development of the society.

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