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**Rescuing the woman from the Achebean
Periphery: The discourse of gender and power
in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*
and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's
*The last of the strong ones***

There is that great proverb—
that until lions have their own historians,
the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

Chinua Achebe

ABSTRACT. A great majority of African cultures are patriarchal, which is to say that the male members of such societies are responsible for the perpetuation of family/blood lines. Cultural practices such as succession rites, female genital mutilation, hereditary, widowhood rites, polygamy, kinship, etc., aggregate to marginalize African women, thus conferring absolute power on men. The perpetuation of the ruses of patriarchy is also enabled through writing. Since literature is ideologically determined, it is created by/through discourse; writing becomes an avenue through which male writers sustain the status quo. One author whose works have sustained patriarchal values among the Igbo is Chinua Achebe. In *Things fall apart* (1958), Achebe presents a coherent Igbo society whose internal dynamics revolve around an established hierarchical social structure which excludes the woman from the phallic games of power. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) subverts the patriarchal structures which undermine Igbo women. This paper discusses the cultural constructs which confer ultimate power on the men in Achebe's *Umuofia*. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's response to Achebe's male chauvinism is realized through a counter discourse which seeks to reconstruct the battered image of the Igbo woman. Female Self-determination, re-appropriation of the female body, and breaking of silences are all discursive strategies adopted by Adimora-Ezeigbo in her attempt to rescue the woman from the Achebean margins. Textual analysis informs the methodology of this work, while relying on deconstruction and discourse analysis as theoretical frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Kalu, Centre-Periphery, discourse, gender, power, Igbo, patriarchy, Achebe, Akachi-Adimora, woman

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* (1958) and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (first published in 1996) are both set against the background of the colonial occupation of the Igbo hinterland. Chinua Achebe's debut novel was published at a period in the evolution of the novel when it was fashionable for black African writers to engage in anticolonial protest-writing. Almost forty years later, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel takes us back to that same historical conjuncture when the colonialists first set foot in Africa, pillaging and desecrating age-long African traditions in the name of *Pax Britannica*.

The two novelists are both Nigerians of Igbo origin. This is to say that they should ordinarily share the same Igbo *weltanschauung*. But in the treatment of the issues of gender and power, they tend to disagree. Whereas Achebe's women have no real place within what has been termed a 'masculinist hegemonic culture' (Mpalive, 2008, p. iii), Adimora-Ezeigbo, in her work, deconstructs the Centre-Periphery mode of relationship inherent in the pristine Igbo society.

This paper uncovers the discursive dynamics of gender and power in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. If Achebe places his women on the narrative margins, Adimora-Ezeigbo pushes them back to the centre. In the final analysis, writing, as discourse, presupposes an ideological position.

The Centre-Periphery paradigm of the African literary canon

The origin of the Centre-Periphery paradigm dates back to the time of the transatlantic slave trade. According to Michael Manley:

In a little more than one hundred years after Columbus' first voyage, Africans were being captured by mercenary adventurers and sold into slavery for transshipment to the new world [...] It was this labour which was to come to represent a vital component in the growth of the capitalist system; to become involved in the creation of a special relationship between colonial territories and the metropolitan centres of the emerging industrial powers which we now identify as the Centre-Periphery paradigm (Manley, 1991, p. 352).

During the anticolonial period, there was consciously, or unconsciously, a carryover of this paradigm onto African literature whose canon was

inaugurated by male authors. And so issues bordering on the marginalization of women were never thematised. Regarding this situation, Simon Gikandi posits that:

The result was that in many important cultural texts such as Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mt Kenya*, the desires and identities of women were effaced in order to empower African men. And in important nationalist novels such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngũgĩ's *The river between*, the rehabilitation and legitimacy of African culture could only be achieved by repressing the marginalization of women in the Igbo and Gikũyũ cultures respectively (Gikandi, 1991, p. 207).

Therefore, when one considers the writing of the first wave of African authors—predominantly male—the image of the woman that is presented is unsavoury. She is defined by patriarchal language through discursive cultural practices such as inheritance rights, 'exchange in marriage transactions' (Lerner, 1986, p. 214), initiation, and other rites of passage, etc. And the roles of men and women in these societies are not defined by biology, but by gender. These gendered roles create an opening through discourse for the subjugation of the woman. And so whereas the man assumes positions of traditional authority, the woman is assigned such roles as home-keeping, childbearing, farming (specific kinds of crops), etc.

The discourse of gender and power in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

In the Foucauldian concept, the term "discourse" goes beyond the mere act of talking or speaking, or conversation in its traditional conception. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin explain Foucauld's idea of discourse as:

A strongly bounded area of knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known. The key feature of this is that the world is not simply 'there' to be talked about, rather, it is through discourse itself that the world is brought into being. It is also in such a discourse that speakers and hearers, writers and readers come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (Tiffin, 2000, p. 62–63).

The implication of the above assertion is that the world we see is a constructed and ordered reality. This reality is sustained by 'unspoken rules' which have come to stay as norm. Certainly, these rules are made by someone, and for someone. Those who make the rules are in a position of power; and they have certain knowledge of the world which others do not have. It is this 'link between knowledge and power' (Ashcroft, et al., p. 62) that creates binaries that favour a group to the exclusion of another.

In the traditional Igbo world, patriarchy created modes of speaking and thinking that conferred power on individuals in the society on the basis of gender. Much in the same way as western imperialism established a skewed relationship between the industrial metropolitan centres of Europe and the colonial periphery, patriarchy established a violent structure of binary oppositions which placed the woman outside the sphere of power. Patriarchy is thus an ideology 'because the expression of a male-dominated and dominated society entails the stereotypical repression of the woman as inferior, unintelligent, dependent, emotional' (Lorapuu, 2015, p. 23). These imposed patriarchal frames are thus internalized through discourse, making them move away from the constructed to the natural, and ultimately accepted as the "truth".

As 'an authentic native document' ("The New York Herald Tribune", 1958, quoted in James Currey, 2008, p. 28), *Things fall apart* clearly paints a composite, homogeneous society whose values are constructed by patriarchy. In other words, Umuofia which represents the Igbo society fixed frames of meaning that marginalized the woman. In such a society only the male members are conferred with titles which confirm them as sources of traditional authority. Little wonder Okonkwo's 'life had been ruled by a great passion—to become one of the lords of the clan' (Achebe, 2008, p. 104).

Okonkwo is the undisputed hero of the novel; a great wrestler and farmer who has many wives and children. He had taken a few titles which made him one of the decision makers of the clan. His warrior-like disposition, his fiery temper, and high-handedness in still fear in his wives and children. Here, it is important to note that women and children belong to the same class. It is therefore the duty of the man to exert absolute control over them. This is evident in the novel as the narrator informs the reader that 'no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man' (Achebe, 2008, p. 42).

Apart from Okonkwo, the reader of *Things Fall Apart* comes across men of substance who are revered in Umuofia because of their wealth which in turn bestows social recognition on them. They are titled men: Ogbuefi Ezeugo, Obierika, Ezeudu, Nwakibie, Uchendu, etc. The opinion of these men must be considered when serious issues arise. In Umuofia for example, during a gathering of the clan to decide what line of action should be followed when Ogbuefi Udo's wife was killed by the people of Mbaino, Ogbuefi Ezeugo was chosen to speak. The narrator acknowledges him as a great orator, but goes on to say that the gift of oratory was not why he 'was always chosen to speak on such occasions' (Achebe, 2008, p. 9). Nwodo expatiates thus:

Even his name shows he was a man of substance. Ogbuefi literally means "cow killer". He probably used a bull as part of his title-taking ceremonies when he could have satisfied the same requirement with a he-goat or a ram. He could easily afford it. His second name Ezeugo, is sometimes given in full as Eze Kwugo—the king who wears eagle feather—a symbol of dignity and wealth among the Igbo. If Ogbuefi Ezeugo had been a wretch, a debtor like Okonkwo's father who also had the gift of speech, he would never have been chosen to speak in the assembly of Umuofia (Nwodo, 2004, p. 10–11).

The titled men of Umuofia acquire wealth through hard work; they are great farmers who own large barns with thousands of yams and yam seedlings for subsequent planting seasons. We learn in the novel that the yam crop is the "king of crops", and is considered a man's affair. If the percipient reader understands *Things fall apart* to be a product of the Igbo subtext, he will surely decipher the social relevance of the yam crop. Udumukwu provides a considered explanation for the premium placed on the yam crop:

In other words, yam functions as a sign of transforming an axiological entity, which accounts for its significance in the social system of a culture. Thus, yam is used in the novel as a trope for personal power and strength. As such, we are told that the strength of a man's hand is measured by the size of his barn and yam is described as "the king of the crops", and a man's crop (Udumukwu, 2007, p. 66 cited by Njoku, 2016, p. 38).

This is also true of the Ogoni ethnic group of south-southern Nigeria (formerly a part of the old Eastern Region) where yam is the chief crop. Among these people, there is a belief that yam is a superior crop to cassava. And when crops are harvested, the tubers of the two crops are

separated by fresh leaves when put in the same basket. And the chief priest of the Ogoni does not eat cassava because it is a woman's crop. He eats only yam since it is considered superior to other crops. This further serves to reinforce the patriarchal structuration of the societies of the Lower Niger.

Among the Igbo yam is considered the major income earner, and since only men indulge in yam production, they are able to gather enough money to take titles and become powerful and relevant in society. The ideological implicature here is that the women will never achieve economic independence or social relevance since they are not allowed to cultivate the yam crop or own yam barns.

Achebe's woman as metaphor for weakness and failure

Metaphor is that which according to Akwanya 'extends to all deviant uses of words, including symbols, synecdoches, personifications, images...' (Akwanya, 2015, p. 328). It has been argued that metaphor itself is not accounted for by the science of semantics (Akwanya, 2015, p. 316). For this same scholar, semantics 'knows the simple word alone—at most a syntagma, as long as it has a conventionally fixed information value' (Akwanya, 2015, p. 316). This implies that the metaphorical use of language is context-dependent. Ricoeur corroborates this when he avers that 'a metaphorical use must be solely contextual, that is, a meaning which emerges as the unique and fleeting result of a certain contextual action' (Ricoeur, 1981, quoted in Akwanya, 2015, p. 317).

But beyond a shift from the literal to the figurative, context-dependent meaning of the sign "woman", patriarchy has internalized this metaphor as literal, true, and permanent. Thus the signifier "woman" is not intended to create any 'implicit comparison' (Thorne, 1997, p. 77) between the woman and the object or abstract idea which she represents culturally; the woman has come to be, through the discursive cultural text, the object or abstract idea itself.

In the clan of Umuofia, not only are women considered inferior to men, but also used as qualifiers for weak and unsuccessful men, especially those men who have taken no titles. A case in point is Unoka, Okonkwo's father. He had taken no titles in his life time, and so was considered a woman. Okonkwo was afraid of becoming a failure like his father. The narrator says of him that:

Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was an agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that agbala was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title (Achebe, 2008, p. 11).

Okonkwo participated in the killing of Ikemefuna even though Ogbuefi Ezeudu had warned him: 'That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death' (Achebe, 2008, p. 45). And so in his blind pursuit of valour and glory, Okonkwo broke an age-long moral injunction. The thought of Ikemefuna's death tormented him day and night, and he could not eat for two days (p. 50). But Okonkwo, in his characteristic manly disposition is not one to brood over the death of a mere boy. After all he had brought home several human heads during wars between Umuofia and other clans. Okonkwo's interior monologue is quite instructive here:

'When did you become a shivering old woman?' Okonkwo asked himself, 'you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a mere boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed' (Achebe, 2008, p. 51).

But beyond the individual, a clan could also be qualified as effeminate or womanly. When Okonkwo killed a kinsman inadvertently, he was forced into exile by Umuofia. He fled to Mbanta, his maternal home, and remained there for a period of seven years. He was there when the white missionaries first set foot in Mbanta. The new church in Mbanta was despised for killing the sacred python which the people worshipped. The clan did not go to war, and depended on their gods to avenge the sacrilege. Okonkwo felt that his motherland should have reacted violently against the church. As the narrator puts it, 'Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia' (Achebe, 2008, p. 127).

The Igbo society is at once presented as one in which the fear of failure is ontologized. Every male member of that society must live up to a certain expectation. This expectation is not limited to the taking of titles. In the cosmology of *Ndi Igbo* (the Igbo race) there are other considerations which make the Igbo a complete being in the world of humans. According to Ichie P. A. Ezikeojiaku:

The *Ndi Igbo* recognize the world of human beings which can be called the world of man—*uwa mmadu*, as opposed to the world of spirits—*uwammuo*.

Man, as perceived in this world view, ought to be intelligent, strong in body and spirit; hence the proverbial expression, *isi ike na mmadu sie na mmuo*. To the Igbo, man is supposed to be of 'half iron and half wood' [...] In other words, man is conceived as one who is even ready to face all odds of life (Ezikeojiaku, 2008, p. 53).

Perhaps, Unoka's weakness was both in body and spirit. He was lazy and lacked the strong will to succeed come what may. Perhaps too the people of Abame and Mbanta are weak in body and spirit. They lacked the will to fight back in the face of external aggression. Towards the end of the novel, we find that the people of Umuofia have become weak in body and spirit for allowing the Whiteman to subdue them, a situation which also killed Okonkwo's body and spirit. What is striking here is that man is at the centre of the Igbo universe. The woman is invisible and voiceless. Achebe can therefore be said to have written under the impulse of a society whose vision of the world is defined by male dominance. The depiction of the woman as a metaphor for weakness and failure reduces her to a mere semantic category, an object without humanity. In feminist parlance, this is called the "objectification" of women.

The role of the folk tradition in the marginalization of women

The folk tradition by way of oral literature also plays an integral part in the grand narratives of the dominant group in a society which seeks to perpetually exert control over a group that is considered weak and inferior. Folktales for example serve to reproduce 'the preferences of a dominant group' (Ropo, 2008, p. 14). The themes treated by folktales further accentuate the binary opposition inherent in the society that produces the tales. In African societies generally, tales are of two kinds; the first category is meant for all (men, women, and children) whose aim is to entertain and to teach. The second kind is that which is considered sacred, and of high esoteric value. These tales are exclusively told by men and are reserved for those men who are initiates of certain cults or associations.

These tales, whether they are profane or sacred are patriarchal constructs. They are intended to further the interest of patriarchy. Through these narratives, we observe that male dominance is transmitted from one generation to another. In *Things Fall Apart*, we find Okonkwo telling manly stories of war and violence. His wives on the other hand tell the

children mild and tender stories of the birds and the tortoise. Even though we do not find Okonkwo telling folktales, the stories he tells are part of the ruses of patriarchy in order to instill manly qualities in his sons.

Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, was considered worthless by his father because the young lad had shown no interest in the ways of warlike and courageous men. He was, thus, considered effeminate just like his grandfather, Unoka. The lad preferred stories told by women, especially 'stories of the tortoise and his wily ways[...]' (Achebe, 2008, p. 43). But the coming of Ikemefuna into the Okonkwo household helped Nwoye to wean himself gradually from maternal influence. Okonkwo was happy about the development, and, to please his father, Nwoye 'feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories' (Achebe, 2008, p. 43).

Folklore is considered one of the pillars of patriarchy; through folklore (myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, fables, etc.) cultural practices are perpetuated and sustained. These practices also include the interiorization of the woman, and her exclusion from the source of power.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*: towards a feminist discourse of subversion

Women writers have taken up the challenge to deconstruct the narrative of dominance which male authors have sustained for decades. These women find expression in and through the emergence of the post-colonial feminist discourse. The pioneering efforts of Flora Nwapa (*Efuru*, 1966; *Idu*, 1970) have given rise to unprecedented feminist writing which seeks the total liberation of woman. In her novels, this doyen of feminism in Nigerian literature, according to Killam and Howe "reverses the usual positions of men and women, making women central" in a bid to "liberate women from all forms of fetters" (Killam & Howe, 2000, p. 190). Other female writers like Buchi Emecheta (*Second-Class Citizen*, 1974) Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (*The Last of the Strong Ones*, 1999) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2006) have all taken a cue from Nwapa in their quest for the emancipation of the African woman.

Female writers question patriarchal orthodoxies, and feminine writing, succinctly captured in French as *écriture féminine* becomes an ideological weapon which 'should then enable women to divulge the repressive order that silenced them' (Siwoku-Awi, 2010, p. 52). This

'repressive order' is the discourse of patriarchy which traditional African societies employ to marginalize women. When Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel appeared in 1996, the African literary public was awakened to a revolutionary prose that queried the very essence of patriarchy. Her work deconstructs the Igbo notions of authority and power. The female characters in her novel are not pushovers, as the author imbues them with essential humanity, reinstitute their dignity, and above all, recovers their stolen voices.

Characterization in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The last of the strong ones*

Characterization is one of the features of a literary text, especially the novel. This is so because the story of the novel is that of characters who play various roles in the unfolding of the plot. Without characters, setting and plot and all other elements that make up the literary edifice will crumble. Characters are carefully chosen by authors in order to show their thematic intention.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's abundant use of female characters is not fortuitous. They are strong and portray the woman in a positive light. Thus, in *The last of the strong ones*, we find women of valour who pervade the entire universe of the text. These women are part of the traditional custodians of Umuga. They are Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme, and Chibuka. These women were elected into the Obufo which was exclusively reserved for men in the pristine Igbo world. People who are elected into the Obufo are thus custodians of the *ofo* or what could be termed the ancestral staff of authority. Nwodo throws some more light on the concept of *ofo* among the Igbo:

The concept of *ofo* is difficult to explain. It combines justice, truth, moral authority and benevolence. *Ofo* as a staff proclaims the justice that validates the exercise of its authority. Among the Igbo authority is different from physical force. As a moral power, authority always goes with justice. The holder of *ofo* represents truth of utterance [...] (Nwodo, 2004, p. 41).

By being members of the Obufo, these worthy daughters of Umuga are automatically entrusted with leadership at a higher level. They sit in council with their male counterparts to make decisions that affect the clan. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Charles Nnolim, the foremost Ni-

gerian literary critic, in reviewing female character portrayal in the works of Nigerian female writers, thinks very highly of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo because in the words of Chibuzor Orié, 'he rates Ezeigbo as one who emerges to remedy female character portrayal' (Orié, 2009, p. 27).

Ejinnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka, apart from being members of the *Obufo*, are also the four *oluada*. They are carefully chosen, each one of them, to represent the four villages that make up Umuga. They belong to a larger group of women called *Umuada* which literally translates as a "gathering of daughters". As *Oluada*, they are the 'voice of the women, among the sixteen inner council committee' (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 3). In Igbo *Oluada* can be broken down thus: *olu* means "voice", while *ada* means daughter. Therefore *Oluada* is a group of four women chosen to represent the womenfolk in the gathering of the community. The designation *Oluada* is carefully chosen by the author as a way of breaking the silence for which women were known in the traditional Igbo society.

Assigning epic and leadership roles to the women in her novel is not fortuitous. It is a deliberate attempt to subvert the grand narratives of patriarchy. What the author has done therefore in the words of Ezechi Onyerionwu is to:

'De-authorize' the chauvinistic versions of history and identity politics that African male authors alongside their imperialistic overlords have 'regaled' the continental leadership with. She executes this 'de-authorization' by bringing women to the fore of communal leadership through figures like Ejinnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka. She highlights the social visions of these women which have been developed to the optimum, far above what previous colonial narrators were prepared to oblige the traditional African woman (Onyerionwu, 2017, p. 225).

The point which Onyerionwu has raised here concerning the focalization of women in African texts corroborates Simon Gikandi's earlier position which we have already noted. From the above assertion, one can then appreciate Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's attempt at reinventing the African, nay the Igbo woman. The reader is also aware that unlike what obtains in male-authored works, the novelist (Akachi) uses the female narrative voice. This is evident when the narrator of *The last of the strong ones* reveals herself:

Before the end of the meeting, two women were chosen to take up the duty of recording events as well as reconstructing the lives of the four *oluada*.

The choice fell on me and another of the other younger women who was a gifted singer and story-teller. So we became witnesses, custodians and critics of the unfolding events (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 3).

The two women who have been chosen to chronicle the lives of the four *Oluada* lead us into the secret lives of the four great women around whom the narrative is woven. The author adopts the multiple narrative voices as a technique of verisimilitude. The main narrative voice is occasionally, momentarily suspended to allow the reader enter the world of the *Oluada*. From their narratives, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's project metamorphoses into a feminist ideology aimed at rescuing the woman from the periphery created by patriarchy.

Female self-determination

In most traditional male-authored works, the woman's destiny is determined for her; she is not allowed to choose the course of her life. In such a situation, her roles are imposed by the corresponding culture. She has no choice in matters regarding her partner. However, there is a tendency in feminine writing to create independent female characters that are no longer willing to act as mere appendages to men. These (female characters) are self-assertive since they are responsible for their actions, and their destinies lie in their own hands.

Chieme's marriage to Iwuchukwu ended as a result of her barrenness; but this does not deter her from moving on with her life. Determined to succeed against all odds, she engages in the selling of kola nuts. She also learns the profession of chanting/praise-singing during funerals and sundry other ceremonies. She made so much money and became liberated and self-sufficient. According to her: "Having accumulated wealth and made a name in my profession, I became *Loolo* and chose the title *Omesarannaya*—the one who brought fame to her father" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 118). Traditionally, in Igboland, a woman assumes the title of *Loolo* by being the wife of a titled man or traditional male ruler. It is the equivalent of the *Lady* of a knighted man. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo makes a serious point here: a woman can take a title if she works hard for it. This is a deliberate subversion of patriarchy.

Chibuka's ordeal in the hands of her husband is better imagined than experienced by any woman. She is a classic example of the patience of

the woman stretched beyond imaginable limits; but she stays on until his demise. She says of her ordeal: "I emerged from that period of my life a stronger person, determined to carry on with my activities in the home" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 149). Her character summarizes the author's position on marriage; for her marriage is dignifying even when it is polygamous. She however discourages abusive marriages where the woman has no dignity.

The character of Aziagba also comes to mind when female self-determination is discussed. When Ejimnaka could not bear her husband any male child, the whole family was agitated; her mother-in-law put pressure on her (Ejimnaka's) husband to take another wife. It was Aziagba, Ejimnaka's daughter who offered herself as a sacrificial lamb to save the family from insipient disintegration. According to Ejimnaka herself: "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" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 45). The author's emphasis, *remain at home* says a lot about the importance attached to marriage and the male child among the Igbo, and to drive home the weight of Aziagba's sacrifice in a bid to perpetuate the family name.

But for Aziagba to stay in her father's house as progenitor, a ceremony called *nliukwa* is performed so that a mate is chosen for her. On the contrary, she chooses for herself because, according to her mother 'Aziagba is not the kind of woman who would allow anyone to choose for her in a matter like this' (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 45). It is against this backdrop that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo foregrounds female characters in the face of the sterilizing effect of patriarchy on the development of the woman.

Re-appropriation of the body

Traditional African practices include the reification of the female body. The practice of dowry encouraged by patriarchy allowed for the woman to be considered as property owned by her possessor. Aduke Adebayo is right in saying that:

In the traditional African context, the female body is an object, purchased with the dowry. Virginity is demanded to ascertain the integrity of the bought item. Besides, there are several sexual mutilations [...] to prepare

the woman for her roles as a receptive and passive receptacle of the man's pleasure (Adebayo, 2000, p. 288).

Contemporary female authors liberate their female characters from the total domination by men. The women in their *oeuvre* re-appropriate their body in order to reclaim their stolen identity. In francophone Africa, Calixthe Beyala stands out as the most militant in the fight for the recovery of female sexuality. We find Letitia, her character in *Seul le diable le savait* (Beyala, 1990, p. 115) reclaiming her body with the words, '*Je veux mon corps*' (I want my body). Beyala's characterization may have influenced female authors of the later period, especially Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's female characters in *The last of the strong ones* can be described as women who evolve from a state of total ignorance to that of consciousness and self-realisation. The author, through the flashback technique, presents characters that were once subdued either in marriage or never allowed to be in charge of their body. A case in point is Onyekozuru. She was given out in marriage to a man old enough to be her father as a second wife. The marriage was never consummated in the real sense of the term as her body was "stolen" from her, denaturing her in the process. But, at the demise of her husband she regains her freedom, as she tells the reader:

My life changed in many ways after the death of Umeozo [...] I took care of my body to make it look beautiful again. It gave me pleasure to wear my jigida and have my skin adorned with Uhie and uri. A pleasant sensation would spread all over me as I would lie or sit up on a mat, as one of my friends would tenderly touch up my body with uri (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 59-60).

Gendered roles attributed to members of the community made it impossible for the woman to realize the potentials of her body, the beauty of sexuality, and the sublimity of giving in to the desired partner. Onyekoruzu thus rejects the advances of men she does not like at the death of her imposed, aged husband. Later in the novel, the reader sees Onyekoruzu fall in love for the first time. The man who has catches her fancy is Obiatu, and she explains her experience with him thus:

Obiatu took my hand, gently and I led the way to my bed. My heart somersaulted many times like an acrobat and I was filled with wonder at these unfamiliar sensations which, nevertheless, brought indescribable pleasure.

I felt moist all over and my body spoke a new language I never knew existed (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 67).

Although Obiatu does not marry her (he marries Ejimnaka instead), Onyekozuru's satisfaction comes from the fact that she has broken the patriarchal shackles of sexual enslavement.

Verbal expression of authority

In *The last of the strong ones*, direct authorial intervention imbues female characters with an idiom of self-assertion aimed at the recovery of the woman's the stolen, thus breaking the chain of silence with which patriarchy held her. The reader who is conversant with male-authored African texts is taken aback by the temerity of language of the women of Umuga. Thus, in *The last of the strong ones*, during a discussion bordering on the Whiteman's excesses, some elders were condemned for allowing themselves to be willing tools in the hands of the white intruder. Onyekaozuru spoke without mincing words: 'a good thing this medicine has caught no woman yet... only men are reeling under its influence, like drunkards' (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 16). Some male members of *Obu-fofo* find this scathing remark rather outrageous. Abazu, unable to hide his indignation at the woman's comment bursts out in the characteristic chauvinistic manner, 'woman, shut your insolent mouth and watch your words' (p. 16). The woman's response is immediate and carries with it the whole weight of matriarchal authority, 'Abazu, I hope it is not me you are addressing like that?' (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 16).

The women in *obufofo*, as we have seen, do not play subservient roles like the women in Achebe's *Umuofa*; their opinions are considered. They possess such qualities as bravery and outspokenness; qualities which are considered *sine qua non* for authority and leadership. When Ezeogu asserts that Kosiri has put fear into the hearts of the people of the surrounding towns, Ejimnaka, one of the matriarchs of Umuga speaks out in a monologue suffused with rhetorical questions:

Fear! [...] so fear now rules every heart in this and other lands? For how long shall we allow fear to cripple us? Are we going to wait until Kosiri picks us all up like snails? [...] Power? [...] His power feeds fat on people's weakness and on our disunity. It is the men who are afraid, not the women. Why can't all these towns come together to fight him? (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006, p. 20).

True to her words, during the war with Kosiri (the Whiteman), the women of Umuga join in the war effort to protect their community from total annihilation. Some men indeed prove to be weaklings and exhibited cowardice.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's obsession with female characterization is just one aspect of her craft that stands her out. Others include her mastery of the Igbo speech act. Just as we find in *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo Proverbs in her novel remind us of the *palm oil* with which according to Achebe, "words are eaten". The use of Igbo names suggests the author's intention to remain close to her background, and serves to add local colour. Overall, the author achieves a blend of oral literary forms and western canons of literature. The traditional griotic mode of narration gives her novel a touch that is unmistakably African.

If the history of the hunt, as Achebe pointed out, should be told by the hunter alone, then we should expect nothing less than a skewed version of the story. Over the ages, women (especially Igbo women), have been deprived of their own version of the story. *Things fall apart* is the history of the hunt as told by the hunter; *The last of the strong ones* is the history of the hunt as told by the lion.

Chinua Achebe and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo are both Igbo, and therefore, partake of the same cultural background. Achebe's novel, a riposte to European ethnocentrism, has thrown up issues bothering on gender and power in the Igbo society. His realist presentation of the Igbo world may have been done out of innocence, but the overwhelming male chauvinistic undertone is what Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo seeks to deconstruct. After all, Achebe should have known better that there are "basic ontological principles guiding the Igbo world and the Igbo society" (Nwodo, 2004, p. 12). One of them according to Nwodo (p. 13) is the principle of duality. According to this scholar of Igbo descent:

This manifests itself in many ways and at various levels from the individual to the community and even to the gods. The individual is complemented by a duality—a strong masculine element and a gentle, feminine side [...]. When the two elements blend together properly, we have a complete and beautiful human being. In the family we have male and female members—father and mother, brothers and sisters. In the extended family, the male side, the *ummunna* is complemented by *umuada*, the female counterpart. In the farm, yam is a man's crop while cassava and cocoyam are female crops (Nwodo, 2004, p. 13–14).

If Nwodo's assertion is anything to go by, why are Achebe's male characters averse to complementarity? Okonkwo, just like patriarchy, in his outward display of masculine rabidity cannot be said to be "a beautiful human being". Where in *Things fall apart* do we find *Umuada* and *Umunna* breaking and eating kola nuts together, and putting their heads together for the good of the clan? How can any kind of complementarity be achieved when Nwodo himself says of Umuofia, that "outwardly, the society is dominated by masculine qualities and activities"? (Nwodo, 2004, p. 14). Achebe's women are at once presented as docile, resigned, and powerless in the face of pervasive male chauvinism. They are products of discourse through the cultural practices that deny them access to the corridors of power.

If Chinua Achebe presents his readers with all-male traditional holders of staff of authority, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo presents the *Obufo* as a democratically elected group of leaders comprising men and women in the society. Her aim therefore is to allow women play a complementary role in the leadership structure of Umuga. This, she carefully does by at least giving numerical strength to the male members of *Obufo*. The author also creates the *Oluada* and *Alutaradi* to protect the interest of the women in Umuga community. These women groups help to checkmate male excesses, and also to caution erring women in the groups. In doing this, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo has created a parallel, utopian Igbo world whose ideals still float within the realm of aspiration. But it is a first step towards female emancipation in a culture where the woman is considered a passive member.

But beyond the discourse of gender in the works of the two authors which we have analysed, is the marginalization of Nigerian women in general. Almost all Nigerian societies are patriarchal. Through the dictates of patriarchy women are shut out from the larger political scene. As Lorapuu puts it:

A common factor that distinguishes patriarchy from matriarchy is sex; the rule of the father versus the rule of the mother. The contest to conquer the nation can be seen to begin from the conquest of the female sex in the family; men seek to conquer and dominate their immediate terrain and extend into the society space (Lorapuu, 2015, p. 159).

The above scenario has continued unabated in Nigeria, making the much-talked about 35% affirmative action for women a mere red herring. The larger Nigerian society is thus, a male—oriented space where political office holders and opinion moulders.

Conclusion

In our analysis of the two novels which form the corpus of this study, we have come to the sad realization that most cultures and people that make up Nigeria are patriarchal to the disadvantage of the womenfolk. This situation must be checked through a female counter discourse which would in turn create the necessary awareness which is required to give back to women their stolen voice. Women authors should be encouraged at all levels to address issues of marginalization, especially of women and girls in rural areas of Nigeria, nay Africa. When this is done, girls will go to school and compete with their male counterparts, women will achieve a higher degree of economic independence, and participate actively in political activities. And, if men and women come together to discuss the future of the continent, the Achebean woman would have shifted considerably from the margins towards the centre of power.

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