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**The Dynamics of Female Bonding and Liberation in Akachi
Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols***

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Abstract

Earlier writings on female liberation have centred on a one-sided reactionary approach to patriarchy with little or no attention to indexes of female liberation that exudes solidarity, friendship and concern. This paper examines female friendship, solidarity, concern and support as valid notions of female bonding and viable tools for the woman's educational, political and economic independence in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* (2001). The study adopts some aspects of Alice Walker's "Womanism" and Ezeigbo's "Snail Sense Feminism" as critical models in reviewing Ezeigbo mode of counter-hegemony discourse. Ezeigbo's narrative promotes the idea of sisterhood in a way that transits traditional patriarchal dominance to educative and viable gender roles. A close-reading of the text indicates the impact of bonding on female characterization and reveals that education and economic independence constitute tools for liberation. The paper concludes that aspects of awareness and recognition are conscious steps in achieving female liberation.

Key words: Womanism, Snail Sense Feminism, Akachi Ezeigbo, Patriarchal dominance, Counter-hegemony

Introduction

Literature mirrors and reflects society and cultures and, in the process, informs, educate and shape it. This is why literature is studied from thematic point of views; some of which concentrate on political, socio-economic, cultural and gender issues in the society. It could be

said, therefore, that the impact of literature on society includes but not limited to the way literature affects society and how literary strategies shape the field of politics, gender discourses, and increase collective and individual awareness on identity formation. Thus, the idea of female liberation, female consciousness and female empowerment constitute part of redefining the woman's place in their society and this is achievable through female bonding, collective consciousness of the place of womanhood in African society.

African literature highlights a plethora of identity crisis for women resulting from perceived stereotypical portrayal of women, especially in male-authored literatures. Since African novel is the mirror through which African societal values and beliefs are brought to the fore, writers create characters that reflect the socio-historical determinant of real-life situations. (Bamidele, 76). Literary discourses on sex and gender in African creative writings have exposed the wrongs done to women by the patriarchal African society on basis of sex discrimination and specifying the social construct that gives rise to them.

The African traditional culture is now widely regarded as the source of stereotyping of the African woman. African women and their views are adjudged to have been relegated to nothingness because of patriarchal socio-cultural assumptions about male superiority. According to Catherine Clinton, a feminist historian, in her book, *The Plantation Mistress*, a "woman is, in part, a cultural creation" (2). This implies that culture creates a woman and gives her stereotypical roles that make her subject to male counterpart. Peculiar experiences which predominate the life of the African woman and writer is traceable to the African culture and tradition the role it has apportioned to the African woman as wife and mother; an appendage to the man, to whom no form of opposition is expected. This makes Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo amongst other African female writers' upswing revisionist approaches in characterization in order to appropriate a new African female identity. Prominent African female writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, amongst others, have written works filled with women issues and have further tried to recreate the image of the African woman in their respective literary works. Thus, developing strong female characters who assert themselves by debunking patriarchal standards inform these female writers' artistry.

Equally, feminist writers have done a great deal in raising female consciousness through their works, subverting patriarchal culture which fuels male hegemony and reconstructing the African female image by making her valuable and indispensable in the society. By so doing, creates a new image for the African woman. African feminism is therefore an innovation by African women that specifically address the conditions and needs of continental African women. This type of feminism involves many strands like Motherism, Snail-Sense feminism, Womanism/Woman Palavering, Negro-Feminism, Stiwanism and African Womanism. (Kolawole, 8). Besides, in her 2015 interview with *Encomium Magazine*, Ezeigbo specifically state that her brand of feminism is snail sense or womanism:

It 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 rough edges and thorns without getting hurt because it has the lubricating tongue that allows it to do that. I believe a woman should be like that. (Ezeigbo, 1-2).

Her narrative thrust in *House of Symbols* exemplifies the above conviction and positions the text as a record of the lives of the next generation of women.

Since Africa is not a monolithic society, these strands of feminism are not all reflective of the experiences African women have but relate to specific or certain groups of African women. Closely connected to the idea of specificity is the idea that African strands of feminism emerged and became necessary in response to perceived feeling of western feminism's exclusion of the experiences of the black and continental African women. African feminism voices the varying realities of African women's backgrounds and experiences; therefore, these women's needs, reality, oppression and empowerment are best described by an inclusive and accommodating model. As such, Naomi Nkealah opines that African feminism "strives to create a new, liberal, productive and self-reliant African woman within the heterogeneous cultures of Africa" (18). She unequivocally admits that "feminisms in Africa, ultimately aim at modifying culture as it affects women in different societies" (18). The above assertion acknowledges the difference in the conceptualization of the varying cultures and its adaptation to African women experience. However, the focus of this research is to examine Akachi Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* in relation to aspects of female bonding and liberation, paying attention to the relevance of education and gender bonding as viable tools of female liberation and self-identity.

Female Bonding and Liberation in Akachi Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols*

House of Symbols is the second text in Ezeigbo's trilogy of fictions "centered on the generations of Umuga women spanning over a hundred years" (J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, 87). In *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), Ezeigbo depicts the centrality of women -Ejimnaka, Onyekaozuru, Chieme and Chibuka – in the apex of Umuga traditional existence before the coming of the white man. The second trilogy, *House of Symbols* has a daughter of one of the four 'strong ones' as "both the matriarch and the protagonist" in the person of Ugonwanyi –Eaglewoman (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 87). Eaglewoman still features in *Children of the Eagle* (2002) as the older matriarch who empowers her four daughters to continue in activism. One can infact say that Ezeigbo's choice of daughters/females characters as active precursors of change in the society is deliberate in the sense that female bonding is effectively and efficiently used as a consciousness-raising tool. In addition, Nwachukwu-Agbada affirms that "whether as *umuada* or *alutaradi*, they (**women**) can exert sufficient force as a pressure group when they bunch together and confront improprieties or msdeeds being perpetuated by the men. It is the efficacy of this potential that Ezeigbo discovers and explores in each of her novels" (Emphasis mine 88)

Female bonding is expression used extensively by female scholars, activists and writers to describe types of friendship and love that exist between individual women and/or groups of women which enable them support each other for a common good. In other literary spaces like comics writing, K. L. Pereira notes the contribution of comics writers like Maston and Olive Byrne in their effort to illustrate “the creation of a strong, dominant, self-sufficient woman” who not only overcomes “series of physical challenges” but becomes the ‘Wonder Woman’ “encouraging other women to prove their strength to themselves” (2-3). Comics stories highlight the strength of Wonder Woman in partnership with other female friends. This corroborates the validity of female friendships and bonding in not only African literary fiction but within the comics’ spectrum as well. It is believed that the struggle for women’s liberation can be easily championed by the formation of female friends and allies. Osita Ezenwanebe observes that Ezeigbo articulates liberating ideologies for gender discourse capable of ensuring a sustainable, context friendly strategy for women’s emancipation (Ezenwanebe, 18). This attitude is exemplified in *House of Symbols* as female characters operate within a communal setting that allows for strong social ties among them. For instance, the friendship between Titi Odeyemi and Eaglewoman, Eaglewoman and Mgboli/Ekeamam, Eaglewoman and her mother illustrates the author’s evocation for female collective consciousness unity.

However, female bonding expands to include aspects of solidarity, support and concern. In her interview with *Encomium*, Ezeigbo postulates the importance bonding and integration as relevant to the woman’s self-expression. Thus, “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” (2). Taken together, solidarity and bonding places a demand of unity of purpose, interest and sympathy on the part of the women folk. It incorporates an acceptance of unity based on common interests, objectives, standards and sympathies. *House of Symbols* chronicles women showing individual and collective solidarity as well as the ties that bind to specific shared values. The excerpt below is an expression of consolation to Eaglewoman by her friends during her fertility crisis:

The wise matriarchs who surround her and cushioned her from pain and suffering, whenever it was possible, told her she would have all the babies her chi (god) planted in her womb, for the water that the creator God reserved for her would, surely, wet her throat and regale her body. . . These matriarchs who were her friends also told her that, like the elephant, she was destined to conceive after long intervals. It was her destiny, the wise ones intoned and there was nothing she could do to alter it, even if she took all the fertility medicines all doctors in the land could muster. And so, it was that the Eaglewoman garnered another name Enyi: Elephant. The wise matriarchs called her Enyinwayi – Elephant woman (*House of Symbols*, 103).

The above, while expressing solidarity also communicates the author’s message of oneness, love and unity among women. Folasade Hunsu adds that “the representation of female

subjects . . . is therefore central to the author's attempt to portray positive images of her female characters (172).

According to Adenuga Olufemi, "Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* successfully captures the African traditional society; the roles of women in the home and in the society are clearly espoused" (24). Olufemi adds that women are seen as contributors to the growth of the society. Apart from highlighting the centrality of women, the novel re-echoes the reciprocal role of women in impacting each other's lives through female solidarity. The concept of solidarity in the context of the novel aspires to consolidate, strengthen and generate concern between and among women of varying ages. Essentially, it creates a sense of communality, friendship and concern among women. Eaglewoman on the other hand, embraces the yearnings of reciprocating the kind gestures of other women by becoming "anxious as well about her old friends, the matriarchs, who are poor and have no wood to warm themselves" and "notes mentally that the old women will receive wood from her before the end of the day" (*House Of Symbols*, 113). Ezeigbo recreates a "female" communal society where interactions and support among women are valid markers for resistance to oppressive tendencies. Throughout the novel, women are seen strengthening their bonds and ties by supporting each other. The relationship between Eaglewoman and Titi Odeyemi exemplify this, especially where such support translates to great economic independence.

One of the offshoots of female bonding and liberation is the impact such relationships have on women's educational attainment. In contemporary African society, women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming are very vital in workforce and education. Traditional gender roles in Africa have equally been influenced by modernization. Contrary to traditional beliefs that the role of the woman should be restricted to domestic borders, contemporary society accentuates the woman's educational development as the bedrock of female liberation. This is justified in Akachi Ezeigbo's characters like Eaglewoman, who not only develops herself mentally but also academically. Thus,

In the distance beckons the CMS Central School where she had all formal education that Umuga could give her. After grasping all the education the school boasted of, she spent two years learning dressmaking and housewifery at training institute in Onitsha where young women bethrothed to priests, headmasters, catechists, teachers, and church agents of the Anglican Church were given a final polish before being delivered into the waiting arms of their patient husband-to-be in solemn and holy wedlock (*House Of Symbols*, 54).

Even as it appears that education in the above instance suits the prerequisite of a God-fearing wife, Ezeigbo seems to suggest that education is more beneficial for self-emancipation. This is because education is the medium through which women can gain economic independence, self-awareness and self-consciousness and the point of interaction with other women helps build up others who are yet to be educationally liberated.

The contribution of women to the progress of the society cannot be underestimated. Traditional society recommends silence and economic dependence for women and breaking such silence becomes the target of women if change and reconstruction must be achieved. The position of this paper is the recognition of the relevance of female bonding in creating potentials for women which inadvertently yields positive impact on the societal output. By retelling Eaglewoman's story, the author expresses the necessity for economic empowerment through female bonding. Eberechukwu Odoemelam asserts that Eaglewoman "is imbued with a lot of charm and nobility of the soul, which attract people, friends and associates to her" (32). Little wonder that in the novel, she is described as "a solid rock that gathers moss. Around her, green and yellow moss blossoms in a thick furry mass at all seasons . . . she knows ways to burrow into people's skin like a mole, without irritating or annoying them" (*House of Symbols*, 99 -100).

Eaglewoman is portrayed as a woman of resilience who would stop at nothing to succeed and corresponds to the resilience of the snail in Ezeigbo's brand of feminism – Snail Sense Feminism. From another perspective, the Eagle is symbolic of strength. Ima Emmanuel avers that "the eagle is noted for its strength, foresight, homeliness, and care; its monogamist nature represents peace and harmonious relationship" (4). Emmanuel further adds that "through the image of the eagle the author also endows the women with extraordinary strength and the ability of soaring high in all spheres of life" (4-5). Little wonder then the role given to the character, Eaglewoman in the novel. This same trend of economic resilience is also seen in the character of Titi Odeyemi and validates our position that female bonding positively impacts the general wellbeing of women.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo rewrites history to include the female presence and essence. She counters and displaces the dominant gender/female stereotype in the African society. She recreates through her novels, strong women characters, not just role models alone, but as women who have existed in the past and still do exist in our world today. She therefore rewrites self and identity of African woman by making references to actual people, events and socio-political developments. There is no doubt that Ezeigbo advocates for women as active participants in both socio-economic space and the political space as she explores feminine themes within political and national struggles in modern African novels. Eaglewoman enjoys the assistance of her housemaids and other workers in running her conglomerate of businesses which includes bakery, sewing and snuff trading. Her effort to give both moral and financial support to the poor and needy does not only end with women, as takes Diribe, the man with large scrotum to Iyieniu hospital to have his "unnatural growth surgically removed and his organ repaired" (*House of Symbols*, 303).

In the novel, Eaglewoman's participation in politics is a giant stride towards women liberation and empowerment. Odoemelam agrees that "the issue of political empowerment and emancipation is seen in Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* (28). By supporting his wife, Osai corresponds to "Ezeigbo's idea of womanism" that "does not seek to eradicate men or fight for leadership with men". The novel shows that "her female characters seek dialogue and

interaction with the male folk” (28). Osai shows an agreeable posture towards her participation in politics to the extent of encouraging her to register as a member of NCNC political party. Her subsequent election into the office of Vice Chairperson of the party’s working committee in Umuga encourages infallible interactions with associations of Umuga women. Thus, when she returned to Akaju county headquarter late that day, she told Osai that “she made up her mind to register as a member of the NCNC ... unknown to her, Osai had himself been nursing the desire to persuade her to register as a member of the NCNC – a strategy he has to influence the forthcoming election into the Eastern House of Assembly in Umuga (*House of Symbols*, 354)”. The above excerpt admits that Eaglewoman’s enrolment in politics is beneficial to both the female and male folk. At the end of the novel, the successes of Osai and Clement Umeudu in politics attest to the phenomenal role Eaglewoman in the political space of Umuga and the nation at large.

Again, politics serve as a driving force to women’s liberation. A case in point of political influence on women is the merging of the Umuada “Association of Daughters” and the Alutaradi “Association of Wives” as one body as captured in Eaglewoman’s address; “she has just finished preparing a speech to be delivered at a joint section of Umuga women – the daughters and wives in the town. The Umuada (association of daughters) and the Alutaradi (association of wives) will mingle with strength and act together as one body” (354). It is worth noting that Eaglewoman’s image in *House of Symbols* is reminiscent of the image of the Nigerian women politicians in the early 1950s and 1960s that fought vehemently alongside their male counterparts for Nigeria’s independence (Odoemelam, 35). Women such as Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Lady Yinka Abayomi, Chief Mrs Janet Mokelu among others, and their contribution to the Nigerian political independence come to mind when reviewing the impact of political consciousness as a liberating tool among female characters in *House of Symbols*.

Conclusion

The focus of this work has been to access female bonding, awareness, economic independence, education and political influence as indexes of female liberation in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* as attempt to re-write the African woman’s story by destroying stereotypes. A close-reading of the text reveal that African women have risen to the challenges of confrontation, oppression, gender biases and inequality through the various forms of bonding like solidarity, help, support, concern among others. This show of bonding in areas of educational attainment, economic independence and political influence all constitute the compelling task of achieving female liberation. Ezeigbo aims at the creation of some form of equality between men and women in bid to revoke traditional gender roles. It is therefore our position that women liberation comes various feminist impulses and assertion especially through bonding. This liberation is achieved through education, economic independence and political empowerment.

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