
New “Feminisms”: Gender Complementarity In Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo’s Fiction

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Abstract

The cultural, social, economic, political and religious diversity of the world has resulted in different varieties of feminism. While Adimora-Ezeigbo is not rejecting the concept of feminism *per se*, she, however, does not believe that confrontation as in radical Western feminism can solve the problems of women. To address the problem of gender imbalance in the society, Adimora-Ezeigbo calls for a closer relationship between man and woman. She stresses the need for husbands and wives to evolve truly inter-dependent relationships based on love, respect and understanding for one another, for it is in so-doing that the survival and wholeness of society can be guaranteed. She, thus, advocates complementarity in the man-woman relationship. This gender complementarity, which seems to be Adimora-Ezeigbo’s “brand” of feminism, as depicted in her published fiction is, therefore, discussed in this paper.

Key Words/Concepts: New Feminisms, Gender Complementarity, Adimora-Ezeigbo “Brands”, Women

Introduction

There have been various literary and critical responses by women to what they perceive as the marginalized position of the woman in society. Diverse theories have been formulated and various positions taken. While some writers are unapologetic about being called “feminists”, others prefer to be viewed as “feminists with a small ‘f’”, “womanists”, “stiwaniists”, “humanists”, “motherists”, “accommodationists”, or “African feminists”. However, despite the differences in terminology, what seems to unite all these scholars is their concern for the woman’s condition, as they draw attention to the continued subjugation of the woman in society and the need for a change of attitude.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, joining forces with her fellow women, calls for a closer relationship between men and women in society. She advocates gender complementarity in the man-woman relationship. To her, the secret of a progressive society and peaceful living rests on the need for men and women to complement and build one another up. And so, gender complementarity, an obvious offshoot of the feminist theory, forms the thrust of Adimora-Ezeigbo’s understanding of feminism, as she once said in an interview: “I call myself a feminist. This does not mean that I hate men or men are bad. It is just that the situation of women in society has to be changed (1994, 3). She, however, adds: “I don’t believe that confrontation as you have in Western radical feminism will solve the problems of women. I believe in complementarity between men and women for the good of all” (2008, 41).

This “brand” of feminism – gender complementarity – seems to echo the accomodationist theory which Charles Nnolim gives full elucidation to in his monumental work, *Issues in African Literature*. According to Nnolim, in accomodationism, it is:

reconciliation, not separation; convergence, not divergence;
love, not hatred; affection, not mere passion; a pooling together
of resources, not a scattering; a building together, not destruction
of the latent love between the sexes; an establishment of the family
under patriarchy, not advocacy for a new arrangement (2009,138).

In the same vein, Marie Umeh observes that a womanist novel, where accomodationism seems an offshoot is different in its plot from the feminist concerns; that “whereas feminist plots end with the separation of the man and woman....womanist novels are committed to the survival and unity of males and females (1988, 265).

Gender complementarity, like accomodationism, thus, advocates for a meaningful union and solidarity between men and women, and would want to see men change their sexist stance. While it wants some measure of equality between the man and the woman, it concedes a leadership role to the man so that there is no question of the male’s authority and hegemony in the family under a loving, mutually respectful relationship. This “brand” of feminism – gender complementarity – as depicted in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s fiction is, therefore, the subject of discussion in this paper.

Gender Complementarity in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s Fiction

Starting from her collections of short stories – *Echoes in the Mind* (1994) and *Rituals and Departures* (1994) – to the Umuga trilogy – *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2005) and *Children of the Eagle* (2002) – Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo expresses the need for men and women to evolve truly inter-dependent relationships of love, respect and understanding for one another. She stresses the necessity of the survival of both the male and female sexes in society. To her, it is by so-doing that the survival of society can be guaranteed, as the human society is an organic, holistic reality whose existence is ensured through a positive, harmonious social organization where all the members are relevant and active.

To project this vision, Adimora-Ezeigbo explores issues that are often at the centre of most feminist concerns. These are issues of marriage, motherhood, male chauvinism, women exploitation and empowerment. In this regard, Harry Olufunwa (2008) observes that while fictional representations often point to marriage as an arena for “some of the bitterest battles of gender conflict”, for Adimora-Ezeigbo, marriage, when well “traversed” is a “veritable Canaan land” for both sexes; “a place of refuge” where they may attain security in one another and fully realize themselves as men and women (106–107). However, Adimora-Ezeigbo, according to Olufunwa acknowledges the difficulties and challenges inherent in marriage but re-affirms her faith in its underlying strengths, which is why she advocates negotiation, compromise and reconciliation in marital relationships. It is, therefore, not surprising that we find in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s fiction, senior married women who strive to attain their potentials within the marital union, rather than rejecting the institution. In *House of Symbols* (2005) for instance, we have the successful marital union of Josiah Okwara and Eaglewoman, while in *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), there is the perfect blending of Obiatu and Ejimnaka. Obiatu and Ejimnaka’s marriage is such that people continually say:

“If you want to know how a good marriage works or tastes, go to the home of Obiatu” (127). This is the more significant in the light of the fact that their marriage has not produced any male offspring as the patriarchal society would have wanted.

Adimora-Ezeigbo, therefore, does not advocate the dismantling of the marriage institution but wants a fair deal for women, which is in contradistinction to the representations in many other female writings where marriage is often presented as a trap. For instance, in Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough* (1981), Amaka declares: “as a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul.... I don’t want to go back to my wifely days. No, I am through with husbands” (127).

This “rejectionism” is precisely what Adimora-Ezeigbo debates and negotiates in her fiction (Newell 2008, 94). However, where a marriage is not working, the woman, Adimora-Ezeigbo suggests, should have the courage to walk out and get on with life, rather than allow herself to be “slaughtered” on the altar of the “ideal” wife, as Chieme does in *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996).

Marriage for Adimora-Ezeigbo, therefore, is a matter of inter-dependence, rather than of equivalence. This is the more so in the light of the fact that neither sex can produce offspring without the help of the other which is probably what Onuora Nweke means when he talks of marriage as a matter of “equitable complementarity, rather than of mathematical equivalency” (2008, 212).

However, to Adimora-Ezeigbo, marriage as a complementary relationship does not yet exist but could be gained by husbands and wives evolving truly inter-dependent relationships, rather than merely adhering to the dictates of tradition and custom and those other restrictive aspects of social and cultural beliefs which often warp the marital relationship. For instance, Eaglewoman in *The Last of the Strong Ones* is an exceptionally busy woman. She owns a bakery, has a thriving petty-trading business as well as caters to the needs of a large family while at the same time being deeply involved in the community’s affairs. She is, apparently, Adimora-Ezeigbo’s model of the ideal woman who can survive on her own (if need be) and is at the same time prepared to harmoniously and willingly live with her man.

Adimora-Ezeigbo therefore, advocates female industriousness and resourcefulness as the pre-requisites for women’s emancipation. Consequently, we find in her fiction ambitious, hard-working and self-confident women who play active roles in the shaping of social processes. Chieme, for instance, through dint of hard work acquires so much wealth that she is given the title “omesaramaya”, meaning “the one who brought fame to her father” (85), in addition to carving a niche for herself in her profession as a singer.

Adimora-Ezeigbo, thus, challenges and reworks popular gender stereotypes in her fiction. This is perhaps, why Stephanie Newell remarks that Adimora-Ezeigbo’s writing is informed by a “counter-discourse strategy” aimed at “interrogating and attempting to displace the dominant gender stereotypes in popular culture” (2008, 10). Similarly, Femi Osofisan sees it as the desire not only to dismantle and undermine the prevailing male perspective on gender, but also to de-authorize male versions of history and identity politics by substituting a carefully (and equally partisan) anthology of female counter-narratives”, thereby “standing Achebe and Achebeans on their head” (2004, 64).

Thus, in a clear rejection of the “stereotypical or iconographic” presentations of women in the literature of African men, Adimora-Ezeigbo writes African women back into relevance (Arndt 2008, 25). As Patrick Oloko observes, *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), in particular, is the author’s desire to retell the familiar story of the colonial encounter, with particular focus on the generally ignored aspect: women’s support and show of bravery in that resistance struggle (2008, 76). This therefore, accounts for why the author creates in the novel, an array of female characters, who collectively and in their individual marital relationships prove to be strong partners-in-progress to their male counterparts.

In the novel (*The Last of the Strong Ones*) (1996), “Obufo” is the village law-making body. It comprises both men and women drawn from the four villages of Umuga. They are men and women of achievement who deliberate over the affairs of the land. While the number of men in this group is twelve, the women make up the remaining number of this sixteen-member council.

However, although the number of women, when compared with that of the men is insignificant, it is remarkable that they are represented at all. They are the notable specimen of womanhood, known as the “Oluada”. Adimora-Ezeigbo pictures them in both physical and moral beauty. Highly intelligent and dynamic, they provide as well, the leadership of the “Alutaradi” (association of wives). It is noteworthy that these progressive women always plan ahead of the men, while unanimity of voices remains as intrinsic part of their decisions. For instance, a meeting of the “Obufo” has been scheduled for the next day to discuss the recent problem of the alien invasion of the land. But ahead of this all-important gathering, the “Oluada” we are told, has already met to take a common stand. As Ejimnaka puts it: “Obufo will meet tomorrow to discuss....This is why we are meeting this morning to agree on a common view-point. In our meeting with the men tomorrow, we shall muster one voice. Oluada will stand together” (7). And the writer tells us that before this group of progressive women dispersed, they promised to participate more intensely in “Obufo” and to continue to represent the women even more actively.

And so, contrary to being merely decorative at “Obufo”, these women rival the men by their intelligent contributions to discussions. Many a time, they even take the lead in discussions, and we are also told that although many notable men of the land, have, in the wake of the colonial intrusion, turned traitors to their fatherland, no woman has yet been led astray. This, Onyekoruzu points out when she says: “A good thing this medicine has caught no woman yet....Only the men are reeling under its influence, like drunkards” (13).

It is also noticed that in the aftermath of the war with these alien intruders, both male and female leaders are forced into exile, thus indicating shared responsibility and illustrating the point that women are not just interested in contributing to leadership with men but are also willing to share the pains and traumas of that alliance. It is equally noteworthy that the people who are to be the custodians and critics of the history of Umuga are all women, with not even one male person among them. Adimora-Ezeigbo, obviously gives centre stage to women.

This centrality given to women continues in the short stories as women are still seen playing active roles alongside their men. For instance, in “The Missing Hammer Head” (1994), the three women pool together their resources in order to break down the barrier of male dominance in politics. Thus, even though Fola was rich before she married her husband, Prince Babatunde Adeniran, we are told that the couple fared better when they got their businesses together in a joint venture, with the result that they now have a business

empire under their control. Similarly, Ejimnaka in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, at a certain point helped her husband, Obiatu, out of a critical financial situation. According to her: “I gave him all my savings, and even my capital” (146).

Thus, far from being passive victims of male power, Adimora-Ezeigbo’s female characters are strong, courageous and determined: traits that are usually ascribed to the male gender. They are “actors”, participating actively in the social process, in contrast to being mere passive “reactors” in a man’s world or limited to the sexual roles of wife, mother, mistress or other appendages of patriarchy. And so, in the novels, especially, *House of Symbols* (2005) and *Children of the Eagle* (2002), girl-children are portrayed as being just as useful as the boys, with the absence of either sex having no adverse effect on the marriage. This is in addition to the powerful all-women organizations that we have in the novels, like the “Umuada” (association of daughters) who cater to the physical, emotional and familial well-being of women and are also the “guardians of tradition” who lend support to the society in moments of crisis: “If war broke out, Umuada would give total support to Obuofa and would take charge of the purchase of food for the fighters” (148). These works, thus, challenge the patriarchal myth of the African woman as lazy, unambitious, unintelligent and unprogressive.

However, in *Children of the eagle* (2002), the writer questions yet another of those myths surrounding the woman, this time, the myth of the supposed passivity of women in sexual matters. Here, the author makes Nnena tell her colleagues in the Aluturadi (association of wives) that sex should be a mutually enjoyable exercise between husband and wife: “the pleasure is not all his. You have a right to some of it or there should be no business at all” (113).

Undoubtedly, the portraits and roles of women in these works are at variance with what obtains in many male writings, dictated by the patriarchal society. As pontificated by Francis in Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* (1980):

A woman is a second-class human, to be slept with at any time, even during the day, and if she refused, to have sense beaten into her until she gave in, to be ordered out of bed after he had done with her; to make sure she washed his clothes and get his meals ready at the right time. There was no need to have an intelligent conversation with his wife, because, you see, she might start getting ideas (181).

In the same vein, Badua in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Anowa* (1981) declares that a woman’s roles are “marrying, bearing children and tending a farm” and that in order for her man to be man, a woman must not think or talk (85).

However, Lloyd Brown points out that the point here is not that the roles as outlined by Badua above are oppressive or limiting in themselves but that the real issue is the need for more freedom on the part of women to elect, to adopt or reject such roles (1981, 85). Conflict usually arises when women challenge this *status-quo*, as is the case in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Anowa*, or even in Buchi Emecheta’s novels. But this hardly seems to be the case in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s fiction, as the depiction of gender relations in her works is not “conflictual” but complementary. This seems to agree with Adimora-Ezeigbo’s observation that in traditional Igbo thought, gender interaction is regarded as “being complementary and balanced...rather than being conflictual or competing for the same positions of social and

political power” (Newell 1997,3). Zulu Sofola also appears to buttress this point when she notes that the world-view of the African is “rooted in a philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism, rather than in the individualistic isolationism characteristic of European thought” (2001, 54).

Clearly then, Adimora-Ezeigbo, as Osofisan puts it, sets out to “pull down some of the gendered structures implicated in many early male writings” (2004, 64). Thus, for instance, while male writers like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi or Leopold Sedar Senghor often define ideal womanhood in terms of motherhood, Adimora-Ezeigbo does not see motherhood as an absolutely unequivocal transfiguring triumph for the woman. This is why Chieme in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, for instance, though unable to have children in marriage, rises above this challenge and becomes the most famous singer in Umuga and its surrounding towns. This is in addition to becoming so wealthy that she is given the title “omesarannaya”, meaning, “the one who brought fame to her father” (85). Buchi Emecheta, in particular questions in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) the wisdom of a woman making child-bearing her sole aim in life and suggests that fulfillment can only come through attending to other concrete goals in life.

In addition to reversing the myth of “ideal” womanhood in her fiction, Adimora-Ezeigbo also re-writes other popular stereotypes surrounding the woman. One of such stereotypes is that of women’s unwavering support for men, encapsulated in the saying: “behind every successful man is a woman” in order to reinforce the traditional, unequal status-quo. This, Adimora-Ezeigbo does, as Chinyere Okafor notes, by making the heroines in “Inspiration Bug” (1994) and “The Missing Hammer Head” (1994) focus on their careers as their major pre-occupations, while their husbands, like the wives and mistresses often represented by male writers understand and accommodate their wives’ “excesses”. These “excesses”, according to Okafor, include the amount of time spent on matters not considered strictly “wifely” and “motherly”. An example is Chinny’s comic disruption of the conjugal “ritual” in “Inspiration Bug” because of her urgent need to make notes, or, Fola’s attending of political meetings at odd times in “The Missing Hammer Head” (Okafor, 1997, 90).

And so, Adimora-Ezeigbo debunks many wrong notions of the woman in society. In particular, by tracing the history of the Umuga community in *The Last of the Strong Ones* through the voices of women, Adimora-Ezeigbo protests the one-sided presentations of gender roles in men’s writings which often overlook the complementary and militant roles played by women in the struggle against colonialism. In so-doing, Adimora-Ezeigbo calls out on the need for men and women to work together in partnership to solve societal problems; a point Okafor seems to agree with when she remarks that character traits are not gender specific and neither are female aspirations limited to sexual roles, but that man and woman should work together to ensure a better society for all (1997, 92). Similarly, Ibiyemi Mojola observes that female subservience is not biologically produced, but culturally imposed and is made worse by the fact that, oftentimes, religious beliefs coincide with cultural practices to keep women down (1997, 134).

As seen in the works discussed above, there is hardly any tension in the homes created by Adimora-Ezeigbo, which is in contradistinction to representations by many other female writers. This is as a result of Adimora-Ezeigbo’s characterization of husbands as partners-in-progress who do not feel jealous or threatened by their wives’ confidence or success because “women need solidarity with men for self-fulfillment” and vice versa”, as Charles Nnolim puts it. The result of such collaboration, according to Nnolim, will always be

wonderful (2009, 143). Perhaps, Mojola puts it more succinctly when she observes that men and women are complementary and that “femininity” in women and “masculinity” in men are not qualities indicating inferiority or superiority but that as husband and wife, man and woman should shoulder responsibilities together and keep out third parties (1997, 134).

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that Adimora-Ezeigbo is concerned with the survival of both the male and female sexes in society. She attempts in her works to pull down those forces and structures which have, over the years kept women down and advocates a closer relationship between men and women. Although she acknowledges the difficulties inherent in marriage, Adimora-Ezeigbo sees marriage as an important cultural institution and a veritable “Canaan land” for both parties, if well “traversed”(Olufunwa 2008, 106-107) which is why she advocates complementarity, since it thrives on co-dependence and undermines the authority of the dominant gender. Married couples, Adimora-Ezeigbo also suggests, should transcend the restrictiveness of social and cultural beliefs which often warp the marriage relationship and work together to ensure a better society for all.

On the other hand, Adimora-Ezeigbo advises against male chauvinism and women’s exploitation while encouraging women’s empowerment. She creates the prototype of the ideal women in Eaglewoman and Ejimmaka who are fully empowered in all respects: they can survive on their own (if need be) and can also harmoniously and willingly live with their men.

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