IMAGES OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN FICTION: THE SACRED AND THE NATURAL IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES*

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Abstract

This paper took cognizance of the classical Christian religious notions of women as domestic props or mere appendages to men and the contemporary equality theories to examine the images of women in African literature as 'sacred female and sacred nature'. According to Elinor Gadon, the Catholic dogma proclaims the Virgin as unique of all human beings, Catholic piety venerates her as the mother of Christ, western art images her as a goddess, but all these glory cannot undo the misogyny of Christian theology in which human sexuality and women's bodies are considered evil. Drawing inspiration from the perspectives on African liberal feminist theory, the paper challenged the dominant opinion that women are marginalized and made to exist on the periphery of life or mere appendages to men. The seemingly less domineering portrayal of women in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart rather than indicating a subjugation of women, seem to echo the Palaeolithic conception of women where the image of women as goddess expresses concrete dual realities of sacredness and naturalness, attributes which obviously do not locate them on the periphery of existence. Again, Ezeigbo's The Last of the Strong Ones images a group of women in Umuga society who are not only respected and revered in the general scheme of things but whose powers reach into the realm of the sacred as epitomized in Chibuka, a leader of a masquerade cult. To this end, the study shall deploy textual close reading and theoretical analytical methods to investigate the varying images of women as embodiments of sacred feminine principle and sacred nature. We concluded that contrary to the much orchestrated idea of women subjugation and marginalization in African fiction, African women in traditional societies are highly respected as life-giving and life-sustaining sacred females.

Moreover, traditional African societies accommodate institutional structures for the accommodation of women in Things Fall Apart and women's self-definition and affirmation in The Last of the Strong Ones.

***Keywords**: feminism, literature, women, marginalization, sacred image and empowerment.*

Introduction

Generally, the image of women as portrayed in African literature is tied to gender issues which look at the conditions provided by the society for the existence, survival and fulfillment of both sexes. Feminism and sexism are aspects of these relations, and while sexism frowns at the belief that one sex is weaker and less intelligent than the other, feminism explores opportunities for equal rights and privileges for both sexes. Are these conditions fairly and justly distributed? This paper contends that a critical investigation and clearer understanding of African cultural milieu seems to suggest that our traditional environment rather than subjugate women indeed, accords them a pride of place and makes ample provision for their fulfillment and active participation in societal affairs. What may be argued instead is that this pristine value accorded women in parts of traditional African societies is inexplicably waning in contemporary times as studies on 'Ahebi Ugbabe' indicate (Chuku 7).

Research and experience show that most of our modern day writers claim they drew inspiration from the stories they listened to at the feet of their grandmothers and some distant aunties. This means that grandmothers are indeed vectors for the propagation of our morals, beliefs, precepts and value systems contrary to their depiction in some of our literary texts as witches and weaklings. Grandmothers are an embodiment of traditional wisdom and repertoire of our cultural heritage. Apart from this, they seem to have spiritual connection with the operative potent forces in our environments. It should also be noted that the entire earth in which the entire Igbo existential realism is rooted is linguistically/metaphorically accorded feminine status such as earth goddess, mother-nature, mother-earth, and there are stories in our lore to explain that. When Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* chooses to go into exile, it is to his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta that he heads for succour. Mbanta becomes a symbolic space for cleansing and rejuvenation, therefore sacred. The question is why are these aspects of women's image not emphasized in our examination and discussion of the images of women in our stories or gender issues generally? Prejudice? Appropriation? Chauvinism ?

In marriage, which is the beginning of a meaningful encounter between man and woman, the supposed portrayal of woman as having no choice and as commodity for

sale is not always what it seems and should not be emphasized over and above all other matrimonial concerns. In African societies, the union of man and woman is highly respected and high premium is placed on its institution. Igbo culture, in particular, provides for very elaborate preparations for seeking the hand of a woman in marriage. Apart from immediate material gains to a woman's family, there are stories of how men embarked on hazardous adventures, traversing seven forests, seven rivers and other dangerous and inaccessible terrains to achieve a rare feat or fulfill certain conditions mandatory for securing their women's approval. In Ifite – Ogwari, Anambra state of Nigeria, a story is told of a man, Okedu, who went to Ubulubu in the present Delta state of Nigeria to embark on a paid labour to enable him acquire enough fortune needed for him to marry Adaeze, the highly rated/priced and beautiful daughter of a clan head. He was so single – mindedly devoted to and pre-occupied with this project that he spent a whole fourteen years sweating and labouring that upon his return, he discovered that Adaeze already had a fourteen year old daughter for another man. Okedu mistook the young girl for Adaeze and insisted on marrying her to the amusement of the community. A proverb was subsequently coined for him: "Okedu akpal' aka uta hel' uta n'enu" translating that "Okedu continued preparing for a festival until the festival was over."

The foregoing preliminary remarks will provide the interpretive paradigm for examining the images of women as sacred female and sacred nature in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Akachi Ezigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Drawing inspiration from the perspectives on African liberal feminist theory, this paper shall deploy both textual and theoretical analytical methods to investigate the varying images of women, especially as sacred female and sacred nature, as portrayed in the two novels. While Achebe has been accused of peripheral portrayal of women in *Things Fall Apart* (Uwakwe 354), Ezigbo, in professing her snail-sense feminism, validates not only their accommodation but entrenchment in the society of Umuga. The ultimate objective of this study, therefore, is to query the interpretive paradigm, mainly anchored on main stream western feminism, which orchestrate the marginalization of women in African literature.

The problem then is that instead of interpreting this story and similar ones in terms of respect and reverence we have for the marriage institution, critics choose to emphasize the economic benefits to the woman's family, and therefore her value as an object of commerce as discernible from the story of Anansewa and her father in Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975).

The study is significant because it is hinged on African-centred approaches to gender studies anchored on "an understanding of African socio-cultural realities,

feminist traditions and philosophies" (Steady 1) which can help African women cope with perceived challenges of coexisting with their male counterpart. An Nsukka proverb, Southeast Nigeria, which says that "ire ji oka nokwuru ize (it is with tact that tongue cohabits with the teeth in the mouth)" applies to both Umuofia women and validates Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. As the study indicates, it will be seen that what operates in African traditional society is gender complementarities with institutional structures for the recognition and protection of women. African women have always had avenues for self-definition, assertion and fulfillment in their societal affairs.

Review of Related Literature

It is the position of many scholars on gender issues that African women suffer all kinds of subjugation and marginalization in the society where they are obviously in the majority. Proponents of this viewpoint believe that this attitude has entered into our literature in terms of how women are recognized as artists and how they are portrayed as subjects of literary texts. Ama Ata Aidoo in an article entitled "To Be an African Woman Writer: an overview and a detail" bemoans the benign neglect of female writers by scholars and artists in the discussion of African literature. She tells a story of how in 1985, Professor Dieter Riemenschneider came to Harare to deliver a lecture on some regional approach to African literature and never mentioned a single woman in his lecture and when this was pointed out to him he cavalierly said it was natural (Aidoo 517). In the same article she discusses Lloyd Brown who wrote that African women writers are "the voice unheard, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and predictably male-oriented studies in the field" (3). Her shock ought to have been cushioned by an earlier charge from Femi Ojo-Ade that "African literature is a male–created, male–oriented chauvinistic art" (158). Even though the present study is not about female writers, these views are expressed probably because women are seen as incapable of sublime thoughts and high creativity. They however give a certain indication in traditional literature where women are seen as 'parroters' of oral pieces and not as artists.

Ruth Finnegan also classifies women into the less professional level of oral artists (98), and for this reason, Mary Modupe Kolawole charges that critics who contend that women are no artists but ulutators or 'parroters' lack complete understanding of African culture (93).

In terms of portrayal of women in our literature, our attitude seems not to be far from what Nawal El Saadawi, an Islamist socialist feminist discusses in an article entitled, "The Heroine in Arab literature." She posits that in Arab literature women are

depicted as agents of destruction and sorrow, the femme fatale, who is imbued with the capacity to engender great suffering and torture to their victim through deceit, cunning, conspiracy, seduction, love and sex (520-5). In her discussion of Taha Hussein's novel, *Do a El Karawan*, she writes:

> Taha Hussein sees woman as helpless once she has lost her virginity, impotent when she decides to take vengeance on those who have wronged her, and reduced to nothing the moment she falls in love. She gravitates inertly within the orbit of man without weapons or power or strength or will to do anything, even fending for herself. She is always a victim, destroyed, annihilated by man, but also by a host of other things: love, hatred and vengeance, and a total subjugation to man that extends to all aspects of her life whether material, psychological, emotional or moral. On occasion Taha Hussein shows some sympathy towards women, but his feeling is always that of the conventional Arab, the condescending mercy of her superior and powerful male who looks down from his heights on the weaker and inferior female. (523)

This particular section has been quoted in detail because it essentially embodies most of the major concerns or areas and manners, in our literatures, whether oral or written, which embody the strongest cases of women subjugation and negative portrayal.

Coming down to Nigerian literature, Chikwenye Ogunyemi who Charles Nnolim likes to refer to as the female Aristotle, accuses male writers of regaling the reading public with such negative image as" "the witch, the faithless woman, the prostitute, the femme fatale, the virago, and those male writers with a romantic disposition dangled women as goddess or as a helpless victim" (61). Also in an article entitled "Women in Igbo Language Videos: The Virtuous and the Villainous", J.O.J. Nwachukwu–Agbada is convinced that the number of villainous women as portrayed in Igbo films quite outnumber the virtuous ones and he goes ahead to assert that in Igbo oral and written literatures especially folk tales and proverbs, women are largely portrayed as sexual objects, prostitutes, wicked, lazy and weak, and that "such women end up miserably, especially when they challenge family life or seek personal independence" (77).

The foregoing observations are what have shaped the discursive pattern and temper of gender relations in general and feminism, in particular, in African literature. It is a great divide that pitches our female writers and critics against their male counterparts and allegations and counter allegations are unceasingly traded. It is in this

regard that Achebe has been unceasingly accused of marginally portraying women in *Things Fall Apart* to the extent that Uche Uwakwe has suggested that Achebe's portrayal of women in *Anthills of the Savannah* can be read as an emendation for his chauvinistic art practice (354). Again, Frank Salamore, in a paper entitled "The Depiction of Masculinity in Classic Nigerian Literature", argues that Achebe marginalizes women in the novel when he "uses the opposition of masculinity and femininity to encapsulate the conflict between the British and Igbo, between the mission and traditional religion" (141).However, Ousseynou Traore exonerates Achebe by arguing that Okonkwo's suicide is connected to his attempt to suppress the 'mother is supreme' principle (50). In a paper entitled "Why the Snake-Lizard Killed his Mother: Inscribing and decentering "Nneka" in *Things Fall Apart*", he emphasizes the sacredness of the female principle and argues that it is Okonkwo's "excessive warped expression of the male principle" and obsession with repressing feminine principle "embodied at the spiritual level by *Ani*, the earth goddess, and by woman at the social level" that precipitate his downfall (51).

On the other hand, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* is seen as an ascendance and enthronement of the feminine principle even when the author has clearly "neither rejected nor adorned the feminist garb" (Obafemi 28). Adimora-Ezeigbo, however, prefers what she calls snail-sense intervention in the condition of African women. According to her, "this theory derives from the habit of snails which most African women adopt in their relationship with men. Women here often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards their men" (29). This is what she exactly demonstrates in the novel where a group of Umuga women exploited the sacred cult of *Obuofo* to formidably entrench themselves in the community's affairs.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is a major literary current in the discourse of women writings in African literature. Ever since the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's revolutionary book entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) followed by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), gender issue has remained one of the most recurrent and celebrated human struggles in global affairs with dichotomous discursive history. According to Ann Dobie, while Wollstonecraft's work was a political treatise "which depicted women as an oppressed class regardless of social hierarchy" and pushed for a recognition of the political and educational rights of women, Woolf's work, which "questions the absence" of women in literary production, signaled its inauguration as a literary practice (105).

Gender issue continues to agitate the minds of people probably because the issue of man and woman relations is assumed to have crucial implication for peace and stability in the family, and therefore the growth and development of the society at large. Specifically, gender issue represents the kinds of distinction made between man and woman involving the ideas and problems of being male and female in society. It looks at conditions provided by the society for the existence, survival and fulfillment of both sexes. Are these conditions fairly and justly distributed? In literature, it examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. Feminism and sexism are aspects of this concern. While sexism frowns on the belief that one sex is weaker and less intelligent than the other, feminism explores opportunities for equal rights and privileges between men and women.

Here, on the African continent, the discourse of feminism assumes different dynamics as captured by Josephine Ahikire who contends: "As a movement, feminism in Africa is made up of multiple currents and undercurrents that defy simple, homogenizing descriptions" (9). Male writers and critics are accused of chauvinistic art practice by deliberately subjugating and marginalizing women in their writings while the males, on the other hand, respond by accusing them of rabble – rousing and importing foreign feminist ideological concepts quite strange to our hitherto serene and stable African cultural environment; they maintain that African women in our traditional settings are very much fulfilled and at peace with themselves and the cultures of their various societies and that the clamour for equal rights and privileges is a confused, elitist female preoccupation. In response to this posture, Molara Ogundipe-Leshie in an article entitled "STIWANISM: Feminism in an African context" disagrees by defining feminism as "any body of social philosophy about women", and says that this definition accommodates all feminist perspectives. She therefore raises such important conceptual questions as:

1. What is feminism for you?
2. Do you have an ideology of women in society and life?
3. Is your feminism about the rights of women in society?
4. What is the total conception of women as agents in human society – her conditions, roles, and statuses – her recognition and acknowledgment? (542–550).

The above questions were posed in response to the charge earlier mentioned, that feminism is a foreign ideology which does not apply to African women. She maintains that as long as the above conditions apply to African women on the African continent in an African context, those who argue to the contrary are either misguided or mischievous. Ogundipe-Leslie therefore advises that we should not "immobilize

culture" by selfishly sticking to certain unprogressive practices and worn-out values provided and protected by both traditional and the orthodox Christian religions especially certain sexist ideas in the Old Testament and the Pauline sections of the Bible. She asks:

> Should culture be placed in a museum of minds or should we take authority over culture as a product of human intelligence and consciousness to be used to improve our existential conditions? Should we preach cultural fidelity only when it does not affect us negatively, which is usually the position of African men who wish to keep only those aspects of culture which keep them dominant? (548)

She contends that conditions do exist for the propagation of African feminist ideology and that African culture recognizes such an ideology and even makes ample provision for avenues and channels of women's opposition and resistance to injustice within their societies. She says there are indigenous patterns and strategies within traditional African societies for addressing the oppressions and injustices to women. In regards to the foregoing, this study is convinced that African liberal feminist perspective is most suited to the comparative analysis of the position of women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. This is because of the theory's focus on the socio-cultural realities of African women within the architecture of pre-colonial and early colonial universe of the two novels. Again, it pays close attention to the structures of power and social dynamics by focalizing the lived experiences of women within these structures. It is within these structures that the images of women as dual sacredness and naturalness are negotiated.

Depiction of Women as Sacred Female and Sacred Nature in *Things Fall Apart* and *The Last of the Strong Ones*

Ogundipe-Leslie's position on African feminist temper which acknowledges indigenous mechanisms for gender collaboration will provide the theoretical thrust for this paper because it echoes what Elinor Gadon says, "from the beginning male and female symbols complement each other, and both were depicted as necessary for the renewal of life" (20). Elinor further states that in Palaeolithic period, the image of women as goddess expresses concrete dual reality as both the sacred female and sacred nature. It is these attributes that confirm them as special and important members of the society. Such episodes as Unoka's encounter with Chika, the former priestess of Agbala, the Earth goddess, Ezinma's Iyiuwa, Okonkwo's encounter with Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, and finally, Okonkwo's exile to Mbanta,

his mother's place, will be used to show the sanctity of women and the pride of place they occupy in African cosmology.

Encounter between Unoka and Chika

The encounter between Unoka and Chika, the priestess of Agbala inaugurates the power of the sacred female and the feminine principle in *Things Fall Apart*. The manner in which the priestess spoke to Unoka rather than portray him as a weakling actually adumbrate the depth of knowledge of Umuofia cosmology available to Chika. If it were otherwise, then Okonkwo would also be assumed a weakling during his encounter with Chielo. In African cosmology, prayer without hard work is discouraged as shown in the priestess's retort to Unoka's narrative: "You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and ancestors, his harvest will be good or according to the strength of his arms….*Go home and work like a man*" (*TFA* 13). The italicized last sentence of the above quotation has been deliberately put into the mouth of the priestess by the author to underscore the centredness of the feminine principle in the novel. Okonkwo's unbridled or warped opposition to that leads him into a number of errors of judgment that ultimately precipitate his downfall.

Ezinma's Iyiuwa

This episode interrogates the personality of Ezinma as a mystical child within the concept of death and reincarnation but which, in African cosmology, is interpreted as a spirit-child. In Igbo world-view of Achebe's Umuofia, such a child is an *Ogbanje*, an evil child who dies prematurely and returns to her mother's womb to be born again in an unceasing cyclic order. Her mystical life and her relationship with Chielo, the priestess of Agbala obviously mark her out and subsequently define her relationship with her mother, her father, and of course other members of her society. Her assertiveness and independent-mindedness in her physical relationships subverts the basic code of patriarchal society of Umuofia. Though an Ogbanje could be a male or female, that of Ezinma, especially her relationship with Chielo, inaugurates patriarchal panic evident in Okonkwo's attitude towards both during the search for her Iyiuwa and her abduction to the cave.

It is this mystical background to her birth that would define her relationship with Chielo who, for inexplicable reason, abducts her to the cave and the hills in a seeming ritual enactment of spiritual ties between mother and daughter. Ezinma features very prominently in the novel on the basis of the stories she shares with her mother but which Okonkwo considers to be "women's stories". This may be why Simon Gikandi

accuses Achebe of marginalizing the feminine principle when he writes, "In the culture represented in *Things Fall Apart*, the proverbs and the masculine stories have more authority than songs and feminine stories" (47-8). But, as the stories of Ikemefuna, Ezinma and her mother, and Uchendu indicate, the world of the novel clearly shows that such stories are more widely accepted and philosophically valued than that Okonkwo's so–called manly stories. It therefore shows that the author never intended to suppress the feminine principle.

Okonkwo's/Ekwefi's Encounter with Chielo

This encounter questions what portent force could account for the power of Chielo, who could make Okonkwo fearfully follow from a safe distance to avert unpleasant consequence to him. Yet, we know that Chielo, an ordinary woman who, we are told, operates a small business in front of her house to make ends meet. Her authoritative intrusion into Okonkwo's household and ritual adoption/abduction of Ezinma define her as a powerful female enjoying high profile traditional institutional protection and powers. For Ekwefi, her resolute pursuit of Chielo, in spite of the obvious danger to her life, also inaugurates a subversion of patriarchal role in the context of Umuofia society and that is why Ato Quayson thinks of the "potential inherent in Ezinma and Ekwefi's characterization for subverting the patriarchal discourse of the text" (*Research* 131). Kwadwo Osei-Nyame captures the heroic proportion of that encounter thus:

> The journey with Chielo intimates a positive and epic heroic venture in which Ekwefi's bravery accords her an important status. Throughout the whole traumatic journey, Ekwefi's life is endangered and the particular threats for her are intensified by the ever-threatening possibility of encountering the itinerant spirits of the wild and also by the possibility of very severe retribution from Agbala, who as Chielo had warned earlier could "strike" Ekwefi. Bearing in mind the sexual difference and gendered politics of the novel that are articulated especially within the overt masculinist ideological framework that contextualizes the assertions of Okonkwo and the patriarchs of Umuofia society, we must look beyond the surface interpretation of the episode as journey and attempt a theoretical reflection that extends the surface meaning of the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter to locate it as an alternative Igbo nationalist tradition within which

> we can construct a specifically female-centred paradigm of resistance. (Writing Culture 16)

If anything else, this encounter exonerates Achebe from gender bias; rather, it confirms that Okonkwo's attempt to challenge the sacred female was vehemently resisted.

Okonkwo's Exile to Mbanta

Okonkwo's exile marks the ultimate return to the power of the sacred female. The exile confirms the role of women as life-giving, purifying and regenerating force. The supremacy of motherhood in human affairs is inaugurated and affirmed. The symbolic and metaphoric implication of Mbanta as a geographic enclave and its role in the life of Okonkwo curiously escape the interpretive lenses of many feminist apologists like Gikandi and Salamore, among several others. As Ousseyou Traore confirms, the series of questions Uchendu posed to Okonkwo regarding the supremacy of the principle validate women as sacred nature (123):

> "Why is it that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or Mother is Supreme"? We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to his mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka – mother is Supreme". Why is that?" (TFA 94)

Okonkwo's inability to answer them signals the humbling of the masculine aggressiveness and the ultimate triumph of the feminine principle. Philosophically speaking, it is quite ironic that a man of Okonkwo's position and fame in his clan is unable to answer such simple questions. It underscores the author's treatment of the mystical dimension of womanhood away from Okonkwo's singular and personal aggressive responses to the feminine principle; and it is possible that his downfall was precipitated by this flaw, his excessive suppression of the feminine principle. It is somehow curious that his dislocation, disorientation, and subsequent destruction were actually inaugurated with matricide, a female *ochu*.

The Last of the Strong Ones is the first of the trilogy which deals with the generations of Umuga women spanning over one hundred years. It is followed by *House of Symbols* (2001) and *Children of the Eagle* (2002), all centred largely on female characters who adopt different strategies to triumphantly navigate the precarious terrain of their patriarchal societies. In Akachi's trilogy, we find evidence of alternative

and subversive representation of women as well as a critique of the aggressive phallic aggrandizement through which men seek to degrade women as submissive sexual object. One of the chief concerns of feminism which Akachi Ezeigbo keys into is the use of literary works to do justice to female point of view, concerns and values. Second, is to identify recurrent and distorting images of women as portrayed mostly in male-authored works. Though, Nwachukwu-Agbada, in an article entitled "Daughteronomy: Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, domestic amazons and patriarchal assumptions in *Children of the Eagle*", has suggested that the role of women group in Ezeigbo's trilogy is a plot to dismantle patriarchy or male supremacy in Igbo land (86), one may be inclined to read *The Last of the Strong Ones* in the light of the ample space and opportunities for self-expression afforded women within the institutional framework of traditional patriarchal society. The point being made here is that, in the novel, the author rather than aiming for the jugulars of patriarchy, simply responded to Elaine Showalter's advocacy of exclusive reflection of the reality of the female situation in fiction. Gynocritcism as a critical stance that chiefly deploy strictly "female framework for dealing with works written by women, in all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis, and interpretation, and in all literary forms…." (Abrams 123) has been favoured to explain Akachi's major preoccupations. A notable model for her must have been Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), for Akachi's trilogy indeed reads very much like a literature of their own in which the women protagonists take control of their lives and destinies, inscribing and defining themselves within the framework of patriarchal society.

Though *The Last of the Strong Ones* is about the heavy colonial influence in the cultural, social, and political life of Umuga, an Igbo village in South-eastern Nigeria, between the later part of the nineteenth century and earlier part of the twentieth century, the lives and role of four women (Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme, and Chibuka) during this transition period dominate the story. They tell the stories of their matriarchal struggles from the crucibles of their childhood through the trajectory of patriarchal society to the enviable membership of the cult of *Obuofo* ruling Council of Umuga. Their membership of Obuofo marks them out as special and sacred female, judging by the sanctity of the cult.

As stated earlier, Kolawole contends that critics who suggest that women lack the capacity for artistic creations are ignorant of African culture and art. Though, this charge may not be exclusive to male-authored narratives, given Achebe's derogatory treatment of Unoka's artistic skills, one is inclined to believe that it is in Akachi's works that the role of women as professional artists is given prominent portrayal and societal recognition. In the novel, we find evidence of the female poetic genre during the

profuse poetic praises of the women-leader, Ejimnaka, by the village bard, Chieme: "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." (*Strong Ones* 8) So, contrary to the claim that women are mere ululators, Chieme demonstrates that the women poetic genre is rich in thematic and stylistic contents. Their songs and chants constitute oratorical tools for praising, chastising, and vilifying, depending on contingent occasions. In the novel, Chieme's thematic preoccupations include, respect for the gods and goddesses, veneration of the ancestors as well as praises for the dead during funerals, love and trust in marriage, children upbringing, respect for customs and tradition, condemnation of vices such as stealing, homicide and criminality (*Strong Ones* 117). Ejimnaka, we are told, is an artist of high beauty who makes patters on the wall and professionally weaves beautiful mats in commercial quantity to be marketed at Eke Ututu. It should also be remembered that it was her melodious songs that attracted her to her husband, Obiatu. The author has, through these characters, proved that contrary to the much orchestrated denigration of women orature and creativity, African women are highly respected both as composers and subjects of our traditional literature. As to their oral artistry, Micere Mugo affirms that "within the world of Orature the woman had a lot of power, she spoke the word. She created the word. She was instrumental to defining the ethics and aesthetics around which the world operated…" (19). The study also agrees with Kolawole who argues that "contrary to some existing myths and theories, African women have an immeasurable creative force" that could be a source of empowerment, and that such women orature needs to be re-inscribed to provide inspiration for women writers (93).

The Last of the Strong Ones also celebrates marriage as a desirable institution. As a matter of fact, in the novel, marriage is seen as a compulsory attainment to avoid stigma. However, the author adopts a somewhat subversive attitude towards the institution, apparently following Ann Dobie's advice on exposing matrimonial practices which inhibit women's potentials (123). Ejimnaka in her determination to make her choice in marriage marries a man old enough to be her father before meeting her present husband, Obiatu. Here women subvert the traditional arrangement which give them out in marriage without their consent. Though she celebrates her parentage, like most feminists do, her idea of marriage, unlike Nwapa's Efuru, is that of a strong and noble partner as a husband. So, there was no attempt at demeaning the image of man as Nwapa did with Gilbert, Adizua, and Adiewere who were cast as ineffectual and irresponsible husbands. On the other hand, the author's attitude towards marriage seems ambiguous. Despite Ejimnaka's assertion that she did not consider any of the young suitors attractive or intelligent enough, and that she did not want to be any man's

appendage, she still ruminates about her inability to secure a husband: "Soon suitors stopped coming. The young men had found wives and settled down. Those who were married were not courageous enough to ask me, Ezeukwu's daughter to be their second wife" (*Strong Ones* 28). Her mother also grieves with unfulfilled hopes of getting her only daughter married as and when due. Again, the centrality of marriage to women is seen in the plight of Ijeoma who had hoped to be inherited by Obiatu as a co-wife to Ejimnaka, all against the backdrop of the author's exposure of marriage as an obstacle to women's economic and social success and independence. Again, there is subtle resistance on the part of Ejimnaka to accommodate co-wife when she is unable to produce male child, to the distress of her mother-in-law. Her first daughter, Aziagba, becomes the scapegoat to produce a male child for her father, Obiatu.

Perhaps, what informs decisions taken by women in marriage, as the author seems to suggest, is the joy of motherhood. According to Onyekozuru, marriage and motherhood are the greatest goal of every woman in Umuga and has no regrets in being given out in marriage at the age of sixteen. We are also told that she has a peaceful marriage with Umeozo, her husband as well as enjoyed cordial, mother-daughter relationship with her co-wife, Idumaga. Much as she finds this contentment in marriage, she however subverts the cultural arrangement that gives her over to any of her husband's sons or extended relations upon her husband's death. Though this traditional practice is intended to ensure the continuity of the bloodline, Onyekozuru's resistance is likely because she finds fulfillment in traditional arrangement that guarantees her economic and social security despite being the second wife, and also given the manner of betrothal. There is also evidence of women's preparedness to defend themselves in marriage. The *Alutaradi* women group, to which Onyekozuru belongs, organizes women against a recalcitrant husband, Egwuagu who unjustly drives his wife away and throws her belongings outside.

Chieme, on her part, has an unhappy marriage. She is given out in marriage without her consent and, during her departure, her father directs the mother to drill her: "Akuba, take your daughter and give her some pieces of advice. Let her not go to her husband's house and prance about like a calf or throw her weight around" (*Strong Ones* 133). This patriarchal proclamation may have been responsible for her resignation to a life of constant beating, drudgery, and insensitivity in Iheme's house. Her sexuality is even used against her and her marriage threatened on that score when her husband tells her: "I do not want to continue to live with a person whom I cannot say is male or female," (*Strong Ones* 107). In the end, she counts herself a great survivor from crippling situations and circumstance. Her husband eventually goes down with stroke, thus making him more bitter and resentful. Chieme emerges from her travails in the

hands of Iheme much stronger and her patience is recommended as a panacea for bad marriage. There lies Akachi's snail-sense posture.

Akachi Ezigbo portrays her women as influential personalities in society, but not as a ploy to dismantle patriarchy, as suggested by feminist criticism of the 1970s (Barry 122). Her strategy is to not only highlight the uniqueness of the female experience, but to entrench them on positions of authority and power, as Dobie has advocates (123). The women of Umuga we find in the novel stand on high moral ground and are ready to collaborate with men to defend the village. Though, the common charge is that, in most male-authored works, women are regarded as mere appendages to men and made to operate peripherally in societal affairs, Gloria Chukwukere concedes that some authors like Sembene Ousmane portray women as: "politically active, morally powerful and contribute immensely to the success of the revolution" (8). This is exactly what Akachi focalizes in the novel. Though, in doing this, she is careful not to overstep certain bounds. When, for instance, Ejimnaka's rebellious nature gets the better of her, and she climbs the berry tree in the forest, to Obiatu's disapproval, she falls. This incident might be interpreted to mean that there are certain tasks women cannot execute, and may also have prefigured her eventual death at old age by falling from Ukpaka tree in pursuit of Uzoegbu's son. The point being made here is that Umuga society provides institutional structures for effective participation of women in her affairs even as members of the highest ruling body, the *Obuofo*. Therefore the role of the women group in the novel can be read in the light of the ample space and opportunities afforded them within the institutional framework of the society. Noteworthy is the collaborative effort that exists between the men and women during the purchase and preparation of food for the fighters during the war with *Kosiri* (the British administration).

The high point of Adimora-Ezeigbo's representation of sacred feminine principle is found in such cultural matters as masquerade performance which is usually the exclusive preserve of the males. We find Chibuka, one of the women leaders, taking charge of the masquerade cult and receiving ancestral spirits home. It is not quite clear or stated if this is covertly a subversive move to challenge patriarchy but what is factual is that in some traditional African societies, women of certain age bracket are initiated into masquerade cults. Women also maintain the buildings and sacred spaces of the masquerade institution even though they dare not look inside it or ask questions about the contents therein (Nnolim 163).

The usual charge is that in male-authored works, one of the ways of subjugating women in society is through linguistic suppression. Women are socialized into a certain linguistic category thought to be appropriate to their sex as feminine specie and a violation of this code is seriously frowned upon. However, we find in the novel that this

strategy is only appropriated by men but that women themselves believe there are specialized linguistic codes appropriate to themselves. This is exemplified in the exchange between Onyekozuru and Abazu on the manipulation of the letter written to the District Officer at Awka: "Onyekozuru, hold your tongue. Do not offend the ancestors" (Strong Ones 81); and among women themselves: "Mgbeke, these are hard words which are not expected from a sensible woman like you. Do you want to use your mouth to bring bad luck to your husband?" (*Strong Ones* 94). Even among women in the novel, there are levels of control as to a girl's participation in adult conversation. Chibuka's mother's visitor advises her: "Chibuka, my child, you must not put your mouth in adult conversation. It is not right for a child to do that, especially a girl" (*Strong Ones* 130). This linguistic strategy is vigorously condemned in western feminism (Abrams 125) but in traditional African society, women actually appropriate certain linguistic codes to themselves. The question, therefore, might be whether they are socialized into this frame of thought through the supposed instrument of patriarchal ideology or whether they perceive their position to be in the balance of nature where phenomenon operate on binary oppositional structure.

Conclusion

The study has shown that the charge of chauvinistic art usually leveled against Chinua Achebe is misguided. His subtle portrayal of women as sacred being and sacred nature has largely been misrepresented as suppression of the feminine principle. But the society of Umuofia clearly demonstrates her distaste for marginalizing women in terms of wife battering and other practices intended to demean them. Mgbafo faced and secured justice from the almighty *egwugwu*, the highest judicial institution of the clan with her husband being reminded by the spirits that "it is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (*TFA* 66). Okonkwo was equally punished for beating his wife even though it was for a different reason, desecration of the week of peace.

Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo, on the other hand, in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, exploits the sacred cult of *Obuofo* to celebrate the triumph of the feminine principle in a traditional African society with all the structures of patriarchy. Her overt portrayal of women who hold their own in all situations is not necessarily confrontational. There are clearly defined boundaries for gender collaboration. Where excesses are noticed, the author is quick to intervene. The humiliation of Abazu and the triumph of Onyekozuru critiques aggressive phallic aggrandizement that degrades women. Also, Ejimnaka's death occasioned by her fall from Ukpaka tree in pursuit of Uzoegbu's son discourages female aggression (*Strong Ones* 203-4).

The study concludes, from the foregoing analysis, that women in traditional African society have always been accorded adequate recognition and respect in the general affairs of the society. It maintains that African women in our traditional settings are very much fulfilled and at peace with themselves and the cultures of their various societies and that the clamour for equal rights and privileges is a confused, elitist female preoccupation. Rowland Amaefule puts it more poignantly when he writes,

> Indeed, an Africana man lacks the institutional powers to subjugate an Africana woman just as she does not see him as her enemy. For instance, the presence of powerful warriors, priestesses, and queens in traditional African societies nullifies the view that women completely existed on the fringes, suffering oppression in the hands of men. (294)

The study therefore hold the view that our gender attitude has been largely dominated by a concern with using foreign or western standards of women condition to re-interpret African cultural practices and world view, a situation which we consider unwholesome and pathetic. The whole idea of the negative portrayal of women in our traditional literature seems to be over-flogged and blown out of proportion. Nobody knows if the problem lies with interpretive paradigm or with our inability to come to terms with the social and cultural realisms which give birth to and nurture our narratives. For it is quite curious that much ado has not yet been made of the negative portrayal of men in the novels of Floral Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo and other works rooted in our traditional African societies. Again, in our oral tales, the cunning, deceitful, unreliable and mindlessly ungrateful tortoise and Ananse, the spider are male figures around whom countless negative stories are woven and the appropriate sanctions and punishments meted out to them depending on the severity of their proven offences. Yet, some critics flare up and level the charge of chauvinism at the slightest manifestation of the opposite case. They forget that it is the same culture which generates unhappiness for the barren woman that also compels a frustrated man to commit suicide rather than live with the shame of disclosed impotence such as happened to Abazu. African culture, from which our tales are generated is very dynamic and egalitarian and provides unbiased measures for its validation and re-validation to both sexes. The same culture produced Chielo in *Things Fall Apart* who could make the brave Okonkwo fearfully follow from a safe distance to avert unpleasant consequences to him. Yet, as we mentioned earlier, Chielo was an ordinary woman who operates a small business in front of her house to make ends meet. Beyond Ezigbo's disclosures of the shortcomings of patriarchal assumptions, one is inclined to agree with Nwachukwu-Agbada that what these traditional women need is the strategy of re-education as a weapon against non-

progressive customs that privilege patriarchal assumptions (96). On the whole, Ezigbo has introduced a novel strategy of snail sense womanism to provide alternative and subversive representation of women in literature and the society. This enables her to conduct subtle critiques of aggressive phallic aggrandizement of men that seek to degrade women as submissive sexual object.

It is also suggested that a more traditional approach to gender issues will also give rise to what Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of story" and a more harmonious and authentic articulation of women's concerns and other areas germane to the enhancement of our traditional community as well as the eradication of unprogressive and repressive practices which hamper women empowerment and upliftment. It is this snail-sense, accommodating posture that Akachi Ezeigbo overtly uses her characters to adumbrate in her novel.

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