

RE-ENGINEERING LITERATURE FOR SELF-PRODUCTIVITY IN ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES*

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Abstract

This work dwells on re-engineering literature for education and self-productivity in Nigeria. Specifically, it focuses on self-industry in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's The Last of the Strong Ones. To achieve this, it makes use of Acholonu's (1995) Motherist theoretical philosophy to guide its thought process of restoring women's dignity. Based on the motherist aesthetic theory, it gives a critical analysis of the text. with women asserting their individual potentials for self-productivity in their society. The paper comes up with the view that the stereotypical portrayal of women as hangers-on or dependants based on sex is an outmoded consciousness. Hence, critics should be wary of unproductive patriarchs in their literary works.

Feminism is an elusive literary concept in that it has been very difficult to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive definition for it. However, the common denominator to whatever definition given to it is that, it is a movement to awaken the consciousness of women towards restoring their supposed lost glory in the annals of human history. It dwells on the suppression of women potentials based on cultural and religious beliefs. Feminism, then questions the social logic behind such beliefs that make the arrangement of male and female relationships and human activities patriarch-based.

Throughout the 19th century, the force of feminism made remarkable entry into political history, especially in America and Britain. Feminist agitation became noted in their "demand for mothers' allowances and divorce-law reform to proposals for a women's college and a women's newspaper" (Ben-Fred 2006:33). Furthermore, in pursuance of the restoration of women's right and glory in France, America and Britain, notable literary works abound: Simone De Beauvoir's *The second sex*. Dorothea Schlegel's *The Golden Notebook*, Virginia Woolf's *A room of one's own*. Walker's *Color Purple*, Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres*, Chopin's *The Awakening*, and many more.

Talking about African feminism, it emerged, though not taking every rhythm from the Western conceptualization, to negate the belief that "woman is the object, having her existence defined and determined by the men (Ben-Fred 2006). It is the perception of women through chauvinistic prism, which they consider equal to,

Pristine

if not more than enslavement that they emerged with the movement to regain and sustain their perceived lost pride, dignity, motherhood and humanity.

A good number of early Nigerian literary works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Arrow of God* (1964), Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1960), etc depicted their female characters from cultural perspective. The characters played women's traditional roles of mothers, housewives and housekeepers. Thus, feminist writers in Africa attempt to reconstruct the image of African women as against what obtains in the aforementioned works and their likes. For instance, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* captures women as mute and estranged from their destiny. Adimora's *The Last of the Strong Ones* has the same temporal setting with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* but, Adimora is able to depict her women as having their destinies in their hands and contribute to the development of the family and community. African female critics who have unwaveringly charted a path for the restructuring and reclamation of women dignity include Molara Ogundipe Leslie, Akachi Adimora -Ezeigbo, Catherine Acholonu, Zainab Alkali. Manama Ba. Buchi Emecheta, the list goes on. The male feminists among others are Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Olu Obafemi, Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan.

These feminist writers acknowledge that the radical posture of Western feminists would not fit in properly in the African parlance. Hence the need for them to conceptualize critical theories (Womanism, STIWANISM, Motherism, etc) of creating awareness in consonance with Africa's cultural situation. Feminism is a liberation movement. According to Oziohu (2003:1)

Feminism also rests on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place In any given society. Feminism accordingly, is shaped by the cultural, legal and economic policies of any particular society in which it flourishes, as well as by the politics of reforming movements from which it emerges.

Rowbothawn (1992:6-7) believes that some feminists and liberation movements specifically "confined it to women's struggles against oppressive gender relationships". Womanism demands of women to be accommodative, supportive, liberal, unoppressive, loyal and complementary. Closely allied to Womanism as a critical theory is Motherism which views "motherhood as a consoling aspect of women in their suffering at their matrimonial homes" (Ben-Fred 2006:34). It hinges feminism on motherhood. Female critics' conceptualization of the theories of "womanism" and "moherism" is based on the fact that we cannot swallow hook, line and sinker the Eurocentric view of feminism. Here is Acholonu's (1995:82) word of caution which informed Ben-Fred (2006) perception of Motherism:

The United Nation by Adopting Western feminist paradigms was quietly encouraging African women to reject (heir traditional roles in the family, which includes mothering, nurturing, home-keeping, even child bee/ing and opt for Western feminism which is anti-mother, anti-child, anti-nature and anti-culture.

This paper, therefore, uses Motherism as the theoretical frameworks on which Adimora re-engineers *The Last of the Strong Ones* for self-productivity.

Self-productivity in *The Lust of the Strong Ones*

Adimora captures the colonial life of the people of Umuga in Epic form. She relays the story through the major female characters: Ejimnaka, Chieme, Onyekuru and Chibuka. These protagonists constitute the "Oluada"- top women representatives. These women variously give their biographical entries as it relates to their marriage life, divorce and struggles. The epic struggle is to assert themselves as mothers that are self-productive in their homes and to liberate the community at large from the clutches of Western antics.

Though, the men as fathers and husbands are self-productive in their own ways and at certain levels, it is crucial to note that since the work is a feminist piece, the substantial and redeemable industrious feats of the women would be given weight. The author re-engineers literature to showcase women in their attempts to be self-productive to support the economic stature of their husbands. Even, sometimes, they take full charge of feeding and other demands.

For instance, determination and value of self-productivity in support of herself and possibly her husband makes Ejimnaka to choose a husband, as old as her father, who would not deter her from pursuing her quest for self-economic reliance. She engages in mat making and designing of artistic work on the walls. According to her in economic terms "I hated being any man's appendage. I could not entertain having to eat out of any man's hand or being under his heels all my life" (p.22)

Still in attainment of self-productivity, the once archrival of Ejimnaka, Ijeoma, a widow, sells chickens in the market. This becomes inevitable as she has to take care of herself and to meet other necessities of life.

The men folk are not left out in the zeal to dedicate themselves to their occupations so as to be self-productive like the women. Obiatu. Ejimnaka's husband for example is a palm wine tapper. The writer further depicts Obiatu's entrepreneurial skill in wood carving. This is a skill reminiscent of his father. In the words of Ejimnaka:

He carved doors for shrines and people 's homes. Pie was also skilled in carving "arusi". Sometimes, he decorated his works with "uri" and "i/hie". He carved me many beautiful objects and when we had our daughters, he carved dolls and other toys for them. (p. 30)

Ezeigbo is also able to beam her literary search light on Onyekozuru's mother's resourcefulness geared towards self-sustainability. Though, she is not primarily captured in the text for the readers to value and appreciate her industrious spirit, but the writer speaks of her through her daughter, Onyekozuru "my mother who sold vegetables in the local market, ended up taking care of their children as well as hers" (p. 42). This can be likened to Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* who. Out of her resourcefulness takes care of the feeding and other requirements of her children and other kids.

Pristine

The industrious nature of Onyekozuru's father is also recounted through Onyekozuru. Though, his diligence and resourcefulness took place outside the text, the author skillfully narrates his over-whelming desire to be self-productive as the root of Onyekozuru's industrious stature. She recounts: "My father was a blacksmith but did not make enough from it. So, he farmed and tended his crops when he was not at the forge", (p.43)

Onyekozuru's over zealousness for self-productivity shows itself as she is fond of beans; at the smithy. He discouraged her on this term: "Onveka, this is not a woman's work, go back to your mother's hut" (p.43) Onyekozuru's potent initiative coupled with her focused dedication enable her to have a large farm that needed more than one hand to tender. It becomes a source of employment as she hired hands to make the farm work easier. She claims that "harvesting and preparing the food crops and fruits for sale were labours I shared with paid workers" (p.48)

The entrepreneurial prowess for self-productivity is also exemplified in the characterization of Ekeamam, the smoked-fish seller and Ngonadi, the butcher. It is noteworthy that the female characters have been at the front burner in the bid to be assertive with regards to self-productivity. Chikuba's mother, in order for her to subdue the impending economic vagaries gives Chikuba a fresh orientation of resourcefulness and industry:

was made to work hard on the farm and to go to market with mother and help her to sell palm oil. Sometimes I wept at the end of the day when I surveyed my hand and body soiled by the red. oil. This was not a trade I would have chosen for myself. My parents insisted I must learn to be industrious so as to be self-reliant in life. " (p. 108)

Chibuka hence, engaged in selling melon seeds and fish, for a start, before she later becomes a big-time trader. She did business not only to complement IHEME's frugal attitude, but also for self-reliance. IHEME is a strong and prosperous farmer, but he takes meticulous account of his food crops in stock. An instance in point is when Chibuka's two younger brothers visit her in the absence of her husband. Chikuba takes two tubers of yam from the wooden-tray which she roasted for the famished boys. IHEME discovers and scolds her: "Mgbeke, are you now the man in this house?" (p.93) "So you are now the one who says or decides what will happen in this family? "Since when did you become the man in this house? ... who told you, you can take yam from the barn? Let this not repeat itself." (p.115)

He keeps goats, sheep and poultry on free range system but it is purposely for pecuniary advantage. To eat the animals is not always accepted by IHEME except when he sacrifices them to the ancestors or appeases the gods that his wife and children would have advantage of the carcass value. Chibuka, therefore, at her own or children's interest for meat, has to buy from the market. And, to avoid possible friction with him, she has this to say: "I got for chicks from mother and bought a few more from the market and began to keep my poultry at the back of my hut." (p. 114)

Also important in Ezeigbo's attempt to re-engineer literature to depict the self-productivity in women is the entrepreneurial prowess of Chieme's mother. She engages her strength and skills in planting and harvesting throughout the seasons in the farm. She is also involved in buying and selling in the local markets and neighbouring markets. As an African woman, she did not slaughter motherly care on the alter of self-productivity as she still has time for her husband and her six children.

Her husband, Okorie is as lazy as Unoka, Okonkwo's father in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Okorie always only plant yams in the season and goes to Igeduland to saw woods. It is always Chieme's mother who would tend the farm in his absence. She does this with her cocoyam, melon, okra, maize and pumpkin crops. She complains time and again the risk that fraught sawing but her husband fails to understand until he slips his hand into the machine and lost two fingers. Despite the risk, according to Chieme, "it did not seem to fetch enough money as father was not supporting the family. It was mother who was responsible for our feeding and other requirements", (p.77)

The re-engineering of literature for self-productivity is not exclusive of Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Buchi Emecheta corroborates the depiction of Chieme in *Joys of Motherhood* through the portrayal of Nnu Ego. There, Nnu Ego is seen in her business of buying and selling cigarettes and other items to feed herself and her children, pay children's school fees and rent. Her husband, Nnaife spends his meager income as a washer man and later, soldier, on taking alcohol and to satisfy his desire for polygamy.

It is plain to the eyes that women's industry for self-productivity is more beneficial, stable with prospect than the men. It is apparent that the traditional African patriarchy which places the men "above" the women, in essence, neglects the burden of self-sustainability of the family on the men. They are carried away with that false air of patriarchy. In order to make Okorie retrace his steps, mother disclaims: do not expect me to do your work here for you, to take over your farm. Why should I do the work a woman should do as well as that which a man ought to do. (p.77)

Ngugi, a male feminist critic, also gives credence to the portrayal of Ezeigbo's Chieme, in his *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). Tajirika's wife, Virginia, displays sense of resourcefulness and industry as she takes over fully her husband's business, as the General Manager of Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate when he, with the order of the Minister of Information, Sikiokuu, is arrested for some days interrogation. The business flourishes with her efforts to sustain the family before her husband is released.

The orientation of diligence which Chieme later begrudgingly had from her mother gives her adequate preparation for her marriage challenges. Iwuchukwu, Chieme's husband is a farmer. He cultivates a large fertile plot of land close to Umura River, where he planted vegetables, maize and melon throughout the year. Chieme is fond of singing when working with him in the farm or in the house. People around always enjoy the

Pristine

melody of her voice when she is inspired to sing. Her resourcefulness does not die even after he had left Iwuchukwu. These are her words in the pursuance of self-productivity: "I was young and healthy. I was not going to depend on anyone to provide for me. I began to trade in Kola nut" (p.94) Chieme started, purported by the zeal for self-productivity and blossomed in the trade.

Her artistic dexterity of chanting kindles as she one day listens to Nwakaku sing songs that are quite emotional. The fascination congealed into desire. She, with her mother met Nvvakaku to learn under her. She learns fast and becomes successful. However, Chieme did not allow any opportunity cost for either kola nut business or the chanting. Take her confession: "in between our journeys, I devoted time to my kola nut trade. I was making money from both. My brother gave me a piece of land and I built a house for myself so that I could enjoy my privacy" (p.95). She goes further to acknowledge the fruit of her resourcefulness and industry. "This profession has taken me everywhere and brought me popularity and prosperity. I have traveled extensively to perform at funerals and on other cultural occasions" (p.96)

Conclusion

Feminist writers emerged in the nineteenth-sixties to create the awareness of women's exploitation and suppression; and the desire for women's restoration of their dignity and assertion of their potentials. In Nigeria, for example, feminist critics began to straighten and where possible, refute the ill-formed stereotypic portrayal of female characters by male writers. They relegated women to the background socially, educationally and economically from cultural and religious perspectives, using sex. Ezeigbo is not bias in the treatment of her male characters in favour of the women. She succeeds in asserting female characters not as weaklings, dependants or mistresses as it were with the male critics' works before the emergence of feminist aesthetics.

Recommendation

It is obvious that male characters have been depicted as foils to the female protagonists based on the nature of the text. The potentials of the female protagonists are quite overwhelming. The male characters should be characteristically portrayed to be at par with the female protagonists since feminism is essentially about female equality with men and the right for them to exhibit and utilize their potentials in line with Acholonu's Motherism.

Our findings reveal that the male characters depicted were not so industrious. Few that displayed sense of productivity did not use what accrued from their work to maintain their wives and children. The women characters responsibly discharged their duties within the philosophical arm bits of motherism.

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