

# The Place of the Woman in the African Novel: A Study of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols*

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## Abstract

A recent United Nations Study of women's position showed that women do two third of all the work within and outside the home. They receive ten percent of all the money earned on earth, and they possess less than a hundredth of all the wealth in the world. African women are not an exception to humiliation, oppression, discrimination and enslavement experienced by women across the world. In Africa, illiteracy is four times prevalent among women than men. In light of all these, this paper has critically examined the various negative stereotypical perceptions of African male authors and looking at the counter-hegemony discourse made by African female authors. It makes a critical study of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* in showing the trials and triumph of the female sex in African Society in the patriarchal/religion oppressive and the struggle for selfhood despite all limitations by creating a niche for the women in socio-economic development within the African Society

**Keywords:** African, women, patriarchal, struggle for selfhood

## INTRODUCTION: THE PLACE OF THE WOMAN IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL

The African Novel has been a mirror of societal values and beliefs. It serves as a gateway into the African society. The African novel tells stories by creating characters that reflect the socio-historical determinant of real life (Bamidele 2000:76). The African Novel has been the correspondence between the African collective experiences from the traditional era to this modern period (Dairo 1998:149). A role which did not just begin yesterday. From this perspective, we are able to draw comparison between the traditional and the modern African society. We are also able to look at the place of women in the African society from the traditional and modern viewpoints.

The perspectives of the African female novelists could be seen from three angles: a writer, a feminist and a member of the third world country (Ogundipe – Leslie 1982:17). As a writer, she shows the problems in the society such as bad leadership and mismanagement of the economy, to mention but a few. A female novelist writes as a member of the third world to show the problems facing the third world African society in terms of racial discrimination, neo-colonialism, etc. The main responsibility of the African female novelist is to show the level of oppression, discrimination and trauma being faced by women in African society, and, possibly, to call for a change.

Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* (1981) portrays the fate of women in African traditional marriage as that of oppression. This position seems to be in tandem with that to be found among the Igbo people of Nigeria where a woman cannot dream to aspire to the highest title in the society (Kolawole, 1995:45). Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) correlates this fact that women cannot hold the prestigious "Ozo" title in the traditional Igbo society. The women folk is perceived as a symbol of adjudging the wealth and powers as of a man (Kolawole 1989:40). Okwonkwo, the hero of the novel refers to crop in male and female terms. "His mother and sisters worked hard enough but grew only women crops like cocoyam, beans and cassava. Yam the king of the crops was a man's crop..." (Achebe 1959:25).

Nawal El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1982) points out that women are always at a disadvantages in any relationship with the opposite sex. She shows the image of the woman as a sex object in the hands of men in the society.

Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1970) is a sociological reflection of the traditional African society. Ihuoma, the central character and an ideal traditional African woman does not venture into men's spheres of life. She is imprisoned into the tradition and customs of Omokachi village. Thus, Amadi says of her "...noted for his traditional, propriety and decorum even love and sex were put in their proper places... that was Ihuoma's world and she behaved true to type. (p.70)"

She retains the virtuous woman status being bestowed on her by the society because she is aware of her being a prisoner of traditional and customs of Omokachi village. Thus Amadi says of her:

It was as if they were confining her to  
an ever-narrowing prison (p.72).

In Sembene Ousmane *God's Bit of Wood* (1960) women are seen as activists who fight for the economic freedom from the oppressed colonialists. The women in the book contribute to the protest of the economic exploitation by supporting their husbands to go on strike, going on protest, to mention a few and they achieve feasts. This shows that women in African society are powerful not a weak vessel. They have potentials

bringing about a positive change in the society.

Also in Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottled Leopard* (1985), we see women competing favourably with men in the society. The novel shows equality of intelligence in both sexes. The novel makes us to understand that though women are the "weak vessels" but not with the "weak brain".

Furthermore, in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* (2000) and *Children of the Eagle* (2001), we see women taking important roles in the home and in the society. They contribute immensely to the political, economic and social development in the traditional and modern African society.

In conclusion, the African Novel is a direct correlation of art and society in an inescapable imposition (Adewoye and Irele 1993:90). It exposes the status of women in the African society from traditional and modern viewpoints.

### FEMINISM AS A LITERARY THEORY

A major feminist Sherry Ruth (1988) defines feminist movement as a movement concerned with political, social and economic equalities of the sexes. Going further, she notes that the theory has many forms and not a single theoretical approach. She outlines some of its regular features in literature:

One stand probes the understanding of literature (predominantly written by men) through the experience of reading a woman's work and queries the supposed 'objectivity' or neutrality and universality of the written discourse. Another query the EVALUATION procedures which have predominantly women writers.

In summary, as a literary theory, feminist theory is the sexist ideology which aims at lifting the womenfolk out of gender repression in which they have been confined to by men and other repression structures. This is what Ruth Sherry (1988:59) thinks of when she says:

Women are still not treated equally in many respects, and many values traditionally, thought of as 'feminine' are exercised mainly in the private sphere and not well reflected in public policy.

Some feminist students of literature believe that literature written by women should not merely reflect or highlight this situation, but should actively seek to change it. Perspective criticism, espoused by some (but by no means all) feminist critics, attempts to identify the ways in which literature can assist in this process of reform.

Beauvoir (1988) in *Selden*, then defines the principles of modern feminism in the following manner:

When a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying "I am a woman", revealing the fundamental asymmetry, between the terms "masculine" and "feminine" (p.10)

Ruth Sherry outlines some measures of feminist writing:

...it identifies inequalities and injustices in the girls and women are treated in a particular society, and the disabilities and disadvantages which result from these.

This in essence means that a feminist work identifies those "patriarchal" and other structures which are responsible for female oppression in the society. Feminists believe that their male counterparts had denied women their rights because women were not allowed to voice out their point in the society. Feminism is more of a radical theory clamouring for the dethronement of the patriarchal society. The theories of feminism are based on women enthrone in the society. The measures feminism advocates for achieving their aim include the freedom of women from domestic roles which make them dependent on their male counterpart.

In conclusion, feminism is about making a positive change in the society through the betterment of women.

### BACKGROUND TO EZEIGBO'S HOUSE OF SYMBOLS

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* (2000) is a profound monumental study of the womenfolk in the traditional African society during the colonial era. The Novel portrays motherhood and wifehood in a typical African society.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo skillfully portrays the roles of the woman in the traditional African society through the use of flashbacks, soliloquies and biography. It shows that wifehood and motherhood are the major roles expected of a woman in the traditional African society. It shows the central dominating character "Ugonwayi" nicknamed Eaglewoman as a specimen of African wifehood and motherhood. Eaglewoman is painted in the garb of a typical African woman whose primary role is to take care of her husband and children.

Eaglewoman is an astute businesswoman but she is more of a mother and wife than a businesswoman. When her husband playfully scolded her for spending quality time on her business, she retorted

Since I became your wife, have I done any other thing but prepare delicious meals for you? (p.74)

The woman in the African traditional society as epitomized by Eaglewoman is also much attached to her children. Motherhood is even celebrated than wifehood. She is to serve as a friend, companion and teacher to her children. She is to be the sweet mother at most times and correct whenever occasion demands. She rebukes Nnenne her second child seriously when she looked at the swollen scrotum of Diribe out of childish inquisitiveness.

You are a troublesome child, Nneme cries. You should not ever do that thing again. Do you hear me...? (p.131)

The bond between the traditional woman and her children is depicted by the traumatic experience Eaglewoman went through when her baby Chukwuka died.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* shows that the traditional woman is an epitome of hardwork. Her business acumen is for the economic well-being of the entire family, by keeping a bakery, fashion shop and tobacco outlet. She is a source of support to the less-privilege in her community. She is a mother to the abandoned, friend to the lonely and giver to the poor. She contributes to the political development in her community by helping to elect a good political leader.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo also points the plight of woman in the traditional marriage institution. Eaglewoman was married to a man who greatly loved and cherished her, but she still experienced marital violence. Osai, Eaglewoman's husband tells her that wifehood is not an art to be learnt. She was barren for five years and was almost driven out of her matrimonial by her husband. She was physically assaulted by her husband twice for going to Onitsha for a wedding and also for having a male visitor.

The plight of the woman in the traditional society is also known in the case of Louis, one of the Eaglewoman's surrogate children. She and her twin sister were taken to the forest to die because the birth of twins was considered a taboo. She was however found by Osai before it was too late. The thrust of this argument is that it would be a traditional woman who gave birth to these twins. What an agony it would be for her to give up her children to be killed because the culture dictates it. So also is the case of Moses Akume who, because of his intense jealousy of Osai's position forced his wife Soronje to cut off her good friendship with Eaglewoman. This turns Soronje into a bitter and unfulfilled woman.

*House of Symbols* portrays the religious tone of the traditional African society. The traditional African society is full of superstition. Every natural event has a spiritual connotation. The inability of Nnenne to walk during her early childhood was ascribed supernatural. It was believed that she is a reincarnation of Ejimaka, Eaglewoman's grandmother. She remained crippled until she met Okwudiba (Ejimaka's friend). The role of Ezenwayi, a prophetess who believes in African traditional religion and Christianity cannot be over-emphasized.

### **THE PLACE OF WOMAN IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *HOUSE OF SYMBOLS***

The novel, *House of Symbols* (2001) is the second in the trilogy of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. The novel focuses essentially on the heroine, Ugonwayi, nicknamed Eagle woman. It presents graphically, the travails of the woman in the traditional African society. It portrays the image of the traditional woman as that of motherhood (Ogundipe-Leslie 1990:20).

*House of Symbol* depicts the traditional African society as replete with laws, beliefs and superstitions which do not favour the womenfolk. Despite the fact that Eaglewoman could be termed to be an epitome of hardwork and virtue, her role outside the family could at best be described as an appendage to her husband's role.

The education a woman receives in the African traditional society is to make her a good housewife and mother and not a career woman. Eaglewoman, after her primary school education, went to learn the art of womanhood for two years. A woman in the traditional African society is expected to wake up at dawn and work till dusk, in carrying out the twin role of being a good housewife and mother. This is typical of Eaglewoman who wakes up every morning, even during the harsh harmattan period (p.46) to cater for the household welfare.

Barrenness is also a great stigma in the traditional African society. The symbol of an African woman is that of love and fecundity (Ogundipe-Leslie 1990:21). A woman in the traditional society is necessarily a mother. Should a woman in the African society fails to have children, she will not be recognized and as such the woman is victimized. This is because a woman is perceived to be first and foremost a mother than anything else and thus a barren woman has no usefulness in the society. Despite the love the husband of Eaglewoman professes to her, he almost drove her out of the home because of the failure to have a child for a period of two years. The traditional African woman is a mother that instructs, guides and controls her children. Eaglewoman as a traditional African woman is always in the company of her children guiding them as well as instructing.

The picture of a traditional woman is that of a supernatural entity in the traditional African society. The

lives of women were largely controlled by the superstitions. Ezenwayi was made a priestess of Anuli of Umukwulo against her wish. This religious belief system impacted upon Eaglewoman, who against her will took her child Nnenna to the priestess. Okwudibia an aged traditional story teller and singer believes so much in the traditional African superstitions. To her, every natural occurrence has a supernatural connotation, she believes that Nnenna, Eaglewoman's daughter is a reincarnation of her close friend Ejimaka who was Eaglewoman's grandmother. When she saw the little child, she accepted her as someone from the world beyond.

What news do you bring me  
from the ancestors... (2001:83)

She believes that the coming of Nnenna was to usher into the world of the dead. She refuses to release the child to the parents but made her to pass the night beside her. In the morning, she was found dead. From these perspectives, Adimora-Ezeigbo supports the idea of the symbol of the woman in the traditional African society as that which is enmeshed in superstitions.

## CONCLUSION

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. She aims to show that though woman are suppressed and oppressed in the society, but they contribute immensely to the growth of the society. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo believes woman can create a niche for themselves and occupy a special place in the socio-political structure of the traditional society. In making this a reality, Adimora-Ezeigbo creates a real picture of womanhood in her novel, *Children of the Eagle* (2001). She shows the woman as an important personality in the home and within the society.

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