



Manifestation of the Struggle against Gender Inequality in the Perspective of Ezeigbo Akachi Adimora's *House of Symbols*

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ABSTRACT

Working within the tenets of African Feminism, this study examines the struggle against gender inequality in an African feminist text: Ezeigbo Akachi Adimora's *House of Symbols* laying bare the plights of African women as shown and the approach they adopt in order to liberate themselves from such oppression. To achieve this, the study adopts African feminism as its theoretical framework and thereby mapping out one approach of feminist strategy to explain how women struggle to be relevant in the midst of patriarchal dominance and this is: liberal snail-sense theory. Thus, the data derived for this study were analysed using the qualitative method of data analysis. Through a close reading, the study reveals that women have been relegated to the background and have gone through various forms of oppression, mistreatment, frustration and inequality over the years but there is a shift from her state of unconsciousness to the state of full awareness of her worth. The book, which is the analytical text of this study, depicts the African women's experiences in distinct patriarchal settings and their struggle against a long-held tradition of gender discrimination.

Keywords: African Feminism gender, discrimination, Snail-sense feminism

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality, sometimes referred to as sex discrimination, means receiving gender-only unfair treatment. Gender inequality acknowledges that there is no equality between men and women. In other words, in a given society, it refers to men and women not having equal opportunities. Gender and sex are two terms that are continuously used interchangeably, but they are two totally different things. Gender is, therefore, not measured in terms of sex or the biological differences between men and women.

Through the feminist movement, the fight for gender equality aims to re-evaluate the denigrated picture of women. This is currently done through Literature. Literature is a type of human expression that captures or mirrors real-life experiences, and it has been an efficient weapon to uncover the underlying gender-based constructs. Feminism is a literary movement that seeks to alter the way females are treated, thereby denouncing women's dishonour.

Feminism has recorded some striking changes in Africa in the area of empowerment, career advancement and realization that enables females to reach the peak of their careers, which have not been the case since females have been relegated to the background and seen as irrelevant humans with little or no expertise to contribute to change in their homes or society as a whole. In other words, feminism's objectives have helped females persistently struggle to rise from their subordinate state (which is caused by cultural stereotyping, patriarchal monopoly and educational deprivation) in order to carve out fresh identities and roles for themselves. The significant role females play in the development process is increasingly being accepted and recognized.

This study aims at analysing African women's plight and their struggle against patriarchal dominance through literary works and how writers address the issue. While research on women's oppression and

subjugation has been widely conducted by scholars, this study tends to highlight series of struggles that women go through to avoid being inferior or lacking a voice in society.

Some African women writers have revealed through their works how women fight gender inequality in the forms of patriarchy, religion, class, and polygamy in African society in order to gain a voice. Some female African writers who came up to rescue the image of the African woman are Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Zukiswa Wanner, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Nawal El Saadawi, Bessie Head, Gracy Ukala, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, Chimamanda Adichie. This study shall, therefore, examine the manifestation of the struggle against gender inequality in the perspective of one Nigerian female writer – Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo.

This article adopts the descriptive research design because it looks at how the female gender struggles amid patriarchy to have a voice by analysing the work of one female African writer who is a feminist and believe strongly in the power of a woman and the equality of the sexes. The literary text being analysed is Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *House of Symbol*. A descriptive research design (as the name implies) reports or describes specific elements, causes, or phenomena in a research area. This study intends to dig into gender issues in today's African society.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality can be defined as a condition in which men and women in a society do not have the same rights or social status. "During the early 1970s, the notion of gender, as we now use it, came into common parlance. It was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex distinctions and how they are used to inform behaviours and skills that are then assigned either as 'masculine' or 'feminine'". (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004 56)

Therefore, sex is determined biologically by being a man or a woman while gender is a society-made construct. In other words, gender has to do with the social, economic and cultural roles of men and women in a given society. In the same manner, John Zerzan 2010 asserts that "gender is not the same as the natural/physiological differentiation of the sexes. It is a cultural categorization, based upon the sexual division of labour, which is the single most important cultural form" (3).

In other words, the concept of gender equality is that a woman can become or do whatever she places her mind to do and should therefore not be relegated due to her biological nature. The woman's objectification is seen in the marriage vow exchange that says, "We now declare you, man and wife." This instance demonstrates that the significance of the woman as a spouse to the man is only measured by the role that society has given her to play in her home while the man, who also is the husband, serves or receives dual personality and greater prestige. Oftentimes, the woman is deprived of exploring her abilities due to patriarchal dominance, and so she remains dormant and irrelevant to her society. It's a known fact that women are game changers because they can effect tremendous change wherever they are found. Undeniably, women play important roles in their families, communities, and society as a whole. They tend to effect change when given the opportunity, contrary to what society expects from them.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is an advocacy of equality between men and women. Thus, this theory sees its purpose in challenging the assessment of women's positions and experiences in a male dominated society. Therefore, its main preoccupation is to see that men and women are equal politically, economically and socially. Feminism supports women's right and criticises unequal social relations and tries to challenge, and de-construct male dominated ways of seeing things.

The theory of feminism began with Mary Wollstonecraft in her book entitled *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*(1792) where she noted the necessity of equality of women and rendering due treatment to the female at home. Feminist theory is an outgrowth of the general movement to empower women worldwide. The definition of feminism, therefore, a condemnation of male supremacy, it sets out to make women equal to men. From this, we find that feminism's main goals are to improve women's position and bring about gender equity. Feminist theory is an extension of feminism into theoretical discourse. However, there is no specific definition of feminist theory. It aims to reflect the diversity and the interdisciplinary of feminism. Feminist theories give a vital establishment to feminist scholarship,

research, literature, and activism. A huge number of feminist theories exist, giving an extensive variety of points of view with respect to why women and men have held an equivalent power crosswise over time and spot; why learning has truly been gathered by and for men and prohibit women, and how men and women can redress these issues and accomplish uniformity.

African Feminism: This study employs the theory of African Feminism to adequately show how women react in the face of patriarchal dominance and gender inequality. In place of feminism, African women, also known as third world women, have proposed the term African Feminism to explain the process of women empowerment in Africa. Due to the distinct socio-economic, political and cultural structures, the African woman is greatly distinct from the Western woman. Furthermore, the African woman is considered to have somewhat distinct Western Female preconditions, such as conflict, poverty, disease, illiteracy, etc. It has thus appeared that the African woman struggles for a distinct sort of feminism in the quest for female empowerment.

Like western feminism, African feminism also has strands which were propounded by African women scholars and theorists and they are: Snail-sense Feminism, Motherism, Femalism, Nego-feminism, Womanism, Stiwanism and African Womanism. These strands came about as a result of the different classes of women and their peculiar needs.

African feminisms address cultural issues that they believe are linked to the complex experiences that all women experience on the African continent. In her article, "Western African Feminisms and their Challenges," Naomi Nkealah examines the types of feminism:

"First, she points to Womanism, which she claims is not part of African feminism, as it concerns African females Diaspora and not continental Africa females. Secondly, she examines Stiwanism— which places African females at the core of the discourse. This is because stiwanism is profoundly rooted in the experiences and realities of African women. Thirdly, she looks at Motherism, a maternal feminist that considers rural females as performing the needed job of nurturing society. Motherism is also questioned as far as African feminism is concerned. It places the body of the woman at the centre of feminist discussions. Fourthly, she looks at Femalism, which places the woman's body at the centre of feminist discourse. Lastly, she examines Nego-feminism and Snail-sense feminism that urge men to be included in debates and advocacy for feminism, and both argue that men's inclusion is essential for women's liberty". These variants share a number of things in common. They all challenge the word "feminism," regarding its Western definition as well as its roots, because they take the African woman's experiences to the forefront, and it is considerably distinct from the Western woman. They are also dependent on indigenous designs, taking from African peoples' histories and cultures to develop the necessary instruments for emboldening females and educating males. African female writing has gone through three phases with each phase having its objective. The concern of the first phase of female writers are: motherhood, marriage and childbearing with writers such as Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta. The second phase of writers are Akachi Ezeigbo, Zainab Alkali, Catherine Acholonu. The radical group like Chimamanda Adichie, Kaine Agary make up the third phase.

The strand of African feminism that applies to this work is briefly highlighted below:

Snail-sense feminism: This is a theory propounded by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo which adopts the habit of the snail to negotiate or dialogue with its environment to be able to get around obstacles. She states further that the principles of shared values which operate in many cultures in Nigeria encourage one to be tolerant, to imbibe the virtues of negotiation, compromise and balance. This theory encourages Nigerian women to move slowly but diligently like a snail in their dealings with men in the struggle against patriarchy. Ezeigbo specifically states in her 2015 interview with *Encomium Magazine* that her feminism brand is snail sense:

It is a variant of the womanist principle that does not promote aggression in women and in their relationship with men. It seeks to promote a kind of balance in women's lives and their relationship with men but at the same time, demands that women have an independent mind and do what they want to do but not to the detriment of other people around them. I call it snail sense because a snail moves over rough edges and thorns

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

There is no doubt that African feminism has been put in place to specifically tackle the African woman's plight and needs. According to Obioma G. Nnaemeka "Power sharing, complementarity, accommodation, compromise, negotiation, and inclusiveness form the foundation of African feminisms and mark their difference from aspects of Western feminisms" (6). "African feminism is especially important to this research because it offers arguments that validate the African woman's experience against a mainstream feminist discourse" (Goredema Ruvimbon, 34). African feminism is shaped by African experiences, and this theory makes us understand that women's experiences in the Western world differ from those of African women.

The Struggle against Gender Inequality in Akachi Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols*

The focus here is to examine *House of Symbols* by Akachi Ezeigbo in relation to female struggle, paying attention to the relevance of education and gender bonding as viable tools of female liberation and self-identity.

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

Female bonding is the phrase used extensively by female scholars, activists and writers to describe types of friendship and love that exist between individual women and/or groups of women which enable them to support one another for a common good. Osita Ezenwanebe observes that Ezeigbo articulates liberating ideologies for gender discourse capable of ensuring a sustainable, context friendly strategy for women's emancipation (18). This attitude is exemplified in *House of Symbols* as female characters operate within a communal setting that allows for strong social ties among them. For instance, the friendship between Titi Odeyemi and Eaglewoman, Eaglewoman and Mgboli/Ekeamam, Eaglewoman and her mother illustrates the author's evocation for female collective consciousness unity.

However, female bonding expands to include aspects of solidarity, support and concern. In her interview with *Encomium*, Ezeigbo postulates the importance of bonding and integration which are relevant to the woman's self-expression. Therefore, "in a society, a woman should be able to tolerate others, work with others and maintain a very humble attitude towards others but at the same time be herself" (2). Taken together, solidarity and bonding place a demand of unity of purpose, interest and sympathy on the part of the women folk. It incorporates an acceptance of unity based on common interests, objectives, standards and sympathies. *House of Symbols* chronicles women showing individual and collective solidarity as well as the ties that bind to specific shared values. The excerpt below is an expression of consolation to Eaglewoman by her friends during her fertility crisis:

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

Eaglewoman garnered another name Enyi: Elephant. The wise matriarchs called her Enyinwayi – Elephant woman (House of Symbols 103).

The above, while expressing solidarity which is an aspect of snail sense, also communicates the author's message of oneness, love and unity among women. Folasade Hunsu adds that "the representation of female subjects . . . is therefore central to the author's attempt to portray positive images of her female characters" (172).

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

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

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

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

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

Eaglewoman is portrayed as a woman of resilience who would stop at nothing to succeed and corresponds to the resilience of the snail in Ezeigbo's feminism theory. From another perspective, the Eagle is symbolic of female empowerment. Ima Emmanuel avers that "the eagle is noted for its strength, foresight,

homeliness, and care; its monogamist nature represents peace and harmonious relationship” (4). Emmanuel further adds that “through the image of the eagle the author also endows the women with extraordinary strength and the ability of soaring high in all spheres of life” (4-5). Little wonder then the role given to the character, Eaglewoman, in the novel. This same trend of economic resilience is also seen in the character of Titi Odeyemi and validates our position that female bonding positively impacts the general wellbeing of women.

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

Besides, she enjoys a peaceful a peaceful marriage with evidence of gender complementarity unlike the marriage between Eugene and Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*. Eaglewoman’s marriage is peaceful and devoid of strife and violence. It is an alliance which promotes dialogue and the rehabilitating trait of the decorous snail.

In the novel, Eaglewoman’s participation in politics is a giant stride towards women liberation and empowerment. Odoemelam agrees that “the issue of political empowerment and emancipation is seen in Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* (28). By supporting his wife, Ossai corresponds to “Ezeigbo’s idea of womanism” that “does not seek to eradicate men or fight for leadership with men”. The novel shows that “her female characters seek dialogue and interaction with the male folk” (28). Ossai shows an agreeable posture towards her participation in politics to the extent of encouraging her to register as a member of a political party. Her subsequent election into the office of Vice Chairperson of the party’s working committee in Umuga encourages infallible interactions with associations of Umuga women. Thus, when she returned to Akaju county headquarters late that day, she told Osai that “she made up her mind to register as a member of the NCNC ... unknown to her, Osai had himself been nursing the desire to persuade her to register as a member of the NCNC – a strategy he has to influence the forthcoming election into the Eastern House of Assembly in Umuga (*House of Symbols* 354)”. The above excerpt admits that Eaglewoman’s enrolment in politics is beneficial to both the female and male folk as well as the nation. At the end of the novel, the successes of Ossai and Clement Umeudu in politics attest to the phenomenal role Eaglewoman played in the political space of Umuga and the nation at large.

Again, politics serves as a driving force to women’s liberation. A case in point of political influence on women is the merging of the Umuada “Association of Daughters” and the Alutaradi “Association of Wives” as one body as captured in Eaglewoman’s address; “She has just finished preparing a speech to be delivered at a joint section of Umuga women – the daughters and wives in the town. The Umuada (association of daughters) and the Alutaradi (association of wives) will mingle with strength and act together as one body” (354). It is noteworthy that Eaglewoman’s image in *House of Symbols* is reminiscent of the Nigerian women politicians in the early 1950s and 1960s that fought vehemently alongside their male counterparts for Nigeria’s independence (Odoemelam, 35). Women such as Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Lady Yinka Abayomi, Chief Mrs Janet Mokelu among others, and their contribution to the Nigerian political independence come to mind when reviewing the impact of political consciousness as a liberating tool among female characters in *House of Symbols*. There is no doubt that Eaglewoman’s resounding success in politics is a function of snail sense philosophy which is as liberal as it is conciliatory.

Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* thoroughly denounce women's patriarchal oppression and also encourage women to assert themselves irrespective of cultural norms and outdated practices that denied them their human rights and encouraged their subordination to a large extent. The protagonist of Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* adopts the liberal snail sense feminism which is greatly portrayed by Eaglewoman's relationship with her husband and her household.

CONCLUSION

Women still live in societies which support or enforce female oppression. In addition, the marital institution also continues to be nothing less than slavish and tormenting for women. From the preceding discussion, the core solution for societal transformation is change. Ezeigbo's text is very clear on this. There is need for the transformation of deep-seated, stereotyped and long-held attitudes which tend to hinder progress in the lives of African women. In other words, it is imperative to address all oppressive structures and situations in our societies in order to encourage and to sustain lasting peace in our homes and in the world at large where peace and harmony are lacking, violence essentially erupts.

This study concludes, firstly, that the most significant contribution of (African) female writers is in their creation of dynamic and forward-looking protagonists who are given very strong voices with which to assert themselves in sexist societies rather than being helpless victims of male chauvinism. Secondly, the study concludes that African women must possess the initiative, the wherewithal, the will power and the educational empowerment with which to make a difference to their lives. The necessity of gender complementarity in developing African nation is shown in *House of Symbols*.

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