

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

— 12<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access —

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed  
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. XII, Issue-1 (February 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Women and Power in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones***

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**Article History:** Submitted-14/01/2021, Revised-19/02/2021, Accepted-26/02/2021, Published-28/02/2021.

### **Abstract:**

Women's participations as well as their contribution in the society are often not sufficiently highlighted because most literatures on their exploits in the societal development are relatively silent. This oftentimes makes an independent observer hastily conclude that women have contributed next to nothing in this very important aspect of human life. The study critically examines the power of women in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* by analyzing their position and contribution from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. It employed qualitative method of textual analysis in x-raying the characters and their accomplishments in the novel. Using the feminist theory, the researcher contested the patriarchal label of women as inferior to men rather it projected the strength of women in our society by showing them as beings of equal intelligence to the men. The researcher portrays how this author uses her creativity to expose women's resourcefulness by evaluating the power of women and their contributions in the society. The paper concludes that women have a voice and can negotiate their existence in the society of today.

**Keywords:** Snail sense, gender, resourcefulness, patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

Women have, over the years been relegated to the background by patriarchy and this has generated a lot of controversy in recent times. The politics of power has consistently been a big issue between men and women, both in traditional African culture and in the western society. They have constantly fought against their degradation and persistent subjugation all over the globe. Apart from being seen and thought as vulnerable to exploitation, they have succeeded in showing that power is not limited to physical strength alone. They have also desired that they should be emancipated and involved in community development and nation building, but they have not been adequately given equal right with men. Though, their roles in society have been well documented through world literature but in reality, the women have been treated as the subordinates to men and have not been given a voice.

Traditionally, women assumed particular roles as mothers and caregivers but in some kingdoms, they participated in decision making by forming part of the King's cabinet either as the ladies of the palace or as priestesses or diviners who advised the king or the clan heads who were usually the men. Women were in charge of farming within the family, and were also prominent in the area of trade. Oral accounts recognized such figures as Moremi, amongst others in the Western region and Queen Amina of Zaria, who were independently powerful and are still being looked upon as sources of inspiration for women today. They held basically complementary, rather than subordinate positions to men in indigenous pre-colonial Nigerian society, which based power on seniority rather than gender. But the colonial masters destroyed our peaceful co-existence by introducing disunity and mistrust among our people.

The era of Colonialism brought with it, the rules of European patriarchy into African society and this in many ways was biased against women and their advancement in the society because most of the legislation concerning women attempted to control them. They were pushed to the background because Western education favoured boys over girls and thus largely excluded women from many of the new occupations introduced by colonialism. It also brought to Africa the European notion that women belonged in the home, nurturing their family. Although, structures of inequality existed in the pre-colonial times no doubt, however they were institutionalized as new legal structures under the colonial rule. At this time, women were marginalized - educationally by predetermining their school curricular and ensuring that girls enroll for things like domestic science as against other skill enhancing courses. Their ideas of the

appropriate social role for women differed greatly from the traditional role of women in indigenous African societies. The ideas of the colonizers resembled the patriarchal European assumption that women belonged in the home, engaged in child rearing – an exclusively female responsibility and other domestic chores. The colonizers expected African societies to consider women as subordinate to men because the Europeans considered women subordinate to men. They thought that if a woman obtained financial independence, she might not give her husband and his family their entitled respect.

There is the need to acknowledge that women are to complement the men for balance development to take place. For this need to be achieved, the novel, *The Last of the Strong Ones* by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo will be assessed using feminist theory which solicits for women's empowerment and emancipation in the society by creating equity between both sexes in the public and private sphere in order to form some sort of balance in the gendered spaces of men and women. This can be achieved using the snail sense feminism advocated by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. The snail does not confront objects but negotiates its way past any obstacle. It is a commitment to their cause to consolidate their positions and achieve success in the pursuit of their goals, despite harassments, intimidation and denigration by men. Akachi in *The Last of the Strong Ones* has explored the roles of women in a realistic way than the usual portrayal of women as witches, prostitutes and weaklings, as done by most African male writers of the years. The novel portrays societal growth and development that results in the co-existence of both male and female with none gaining superiority over the other.

Adimora- Ezeigbo has used her novel to negate certain patriarchal assumptions about women while not missing out on any opportunity to project their uncelebrated superior achievements and comportment in an otherwise unfavourable climate of mutual social and cultural mistrust. She tried to take us back to how it was before the white men (*Kosiri*) came and dominated our society.

In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Adimora-Ezeigbo depicts the centrality of women in the core of Umuga traditional existence before the coming of *Kosiri* (The white man). What could better prove that, than the fact that at this time, the four (4) daughters of Umuga – Ejimnaka, Onyekaozuru, Chieme and Chibuka – through their activism became members of Obufo (custodians of the ancestral staff, *ofo*) which was largely a male entitlement. In this, Adimora-

Ezeigbo is seen as a writer committed to the conscientization of fellow women and the enlightenment of men. Femi Osofisan remarks that,

While Ezeigbo may be “vociferous” in insisting on the “empowerment of women” and also in her condemnation of their marginalization in a male dominated society”, she is not “for all that an iconoclast or phallophobist. She protests and denounces, but her goal is negotiation, compromise reconciliation. (39)

This was supported by Filomina Steady, who states that

True feminism is abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant. When a woman is resourceful and self-reliant, independent of the man financially, then she can boldly exercise the right to choose between the alternatives open to her. (Qtd in Achusi, 160)

Part of the history that the writer wanted us to remember was that the decision for the progress of the community lies on the heads of both the women and the men. These are selected people from the community who were assigned with the decisions of the community. She projected that we have four main actors of *Umuada* and *Alutaradi* who were called the *Oluada*. They were chosen from the four villages of *Umuga* as the voice of the women, among the sixteen inner council committee members known as the *Obufo* that were also selected from the four villages. Though, in the choosing of these traditional caretakers, it tilted towards the direction of the men who were twelve while women were four. Yet, the women were not bothered because at least, they were represented in the group of decision makers - the *Obufo* who monitored closely the activities of the community. The research tries to assert that women were not observers as was originally projected but active participants in the decision taking of the council of *Obufo* and therefore needed a little space to be fully involved in the affairs of the society such as in the villages, town unions and so on.

In the novel used for this study, the *Oluada* met from time to time to discuss issues concerning them that will lead to the development of the community and then relate it to the *Obufo* whenever they had a meeting. It was in one of those meetings that one of the members of *Oluada* commented on the intrusion of the *Kosiri*. Chieme says “Our people say that it is the traveller who must make the return journey and not the owner of the land. The power of the

intruders is to be compared to the evening rays of the sun” (7). It was after the intrusion of the white men that patriarchy was greatly enhanced and this bred disharmony and distrust.

The four *Oluada* - Ejimnaka, Chibuka, Chieme and Onyekozuru, from the novel were strong and assertive. They are not weak as women were normally projected. They were resourceful and financially independent. They know what they want and move towards them without feeling inferior to the men. In other words, they have individual qualities of resilience, dynamism, courage, and inner strength needed to overcome their plight. In Ejimnaka’s case she was actually the person who wooed her husband (Obiatu). It was a marriage of equals and it supported the complementarity of Adimora-Ezeigbo. Thus, “The immediate attraction we felt for each other was magnetic. It was like the alluring fascination between the flower and the bee. One winked seductively and beckoned, invitingly; the other indulgently surrendered and gratefully gave off itself” (34). In spite of their attraction to each other, Obiatu’s Kinsmen tried to oppose the marriage but they resisted. Ejimnaka said that, “Obiatu’s mother and his kinsmen opposed the marriage. They said I would not make a good wife; that I was rebellious and was not likely to have children especially male ones” (47). Again, when Obiatu had business problem, the wife Ejimnaka stood solidly behind him and even supported him financially. Thus,

Obiatu had to abandon his claim to the tree. He lost his money as well. Soon enough the guild had need of the money but Obiatu could not produce it. He was eaten up with worry. And the days that followed were dark and ominous. We tried discreetly to raise money. I gave him all my savings and even my capital. (44)

It was also seen that childlessness generally affects women and makes them lifeless and voiceless but Chieme did not degenerate to that level. When her husband quietly asked her to leave his house because he wants to get married, she left and picked up the pieces of her life.

She says this, “But for how long could one decide to nurse a severe hurt? Especially, when the one who hurt one was living a normal life with a new wife? The fact confirmed to one that one was no longer wanted” (109). She also added that, “I was going to be like the back: impervious to gossip and deaf to the decision of the world” (113).

In spite of her childlessness, she decided to live her life in full without depending on anyone for sustenance. She began to trade in kolanut and later started performing in ceremonies

such as festivals and funerals. She learnt the business and did well in it. She travelled to many parts of Igbo land with her chanting and became prosperous. Due to her marvellous achievement, the custodians of their history addressed her thus,

You defied *agwu*, the spirit of disorder and deformity. You wrestled with adversity and took the bull of life by the horns. Your triumph is enviable and has made you the greatest funeral artiste in Umuga and in the surrounding towns. Your life is a source of inspiration to Umuga women whom you have led with wisdom. Omesarannaya, Woman Mountain, seeded in tradition. We greet you. (119)

Another member of the *Oluada* is Chibuka who in spite of all the difficulties with her husband, did not relent but projects that, "As the number of my children increased, I worked harder at my trade so that I could take care of them and myself" (140). She went further to say that

It is incredible the way the soul adapts to harmful situations even those so harrowing as to threaten the mind with insanity. Call it patience, call it cultivated indifference, call it providence even; the soul of a survivor is indestructible. People like me are great survivors and would find a way out of crippling situations. We emerge, strengthened, like mudskippers after a season of hibernation. (142)

It was clearly stated here that these women are strong-willed and are not easily intimidated in the face of any challenge. The custodians of history addressed her thus,

Chibuka ... leader of women, your life instructs the world that the hour a farmer begins work is the morning of his day. *Oluada*, you are the mushroom that breaks the earth without a hoe. Daughter of Umuga, you are the squirrel that scales the iroko. Woman of many parts, the one who is pushed but is not thrown. For you, solitude became a source of strength; you're scorched of silence. You fought and defeated the demon of bad marriage with the thunder of patience. (149)

It was also projected in the book that the men were traitors while the women were strong willed and decisive. Thus, "A good thing, this medicine has caught no woman yet", Onyekozuru hurled at him (Abazu). "Only men are reeling under its influence, like drunkards". Ejimnaka then supported that it was the men who fell under the spell of the *Kosiri* by being weak and

treacherous. Thus, she says that, “Power?” spat Ejimnaka contemptuously. “His power feeds fat on people’s weakness and on our disunity. It is the men who are afraid, not the women. Why can’t all these towns come together to fight him? He practises divide and rule. That is his method” (20).

For the four members of *Oluada* marriage is not the start all and ends all. They are all individualistic and were strong enough to take decisions on their own. Ejimnaka left the first husband (Alagbogu) because she felt that she was not fulfilled and was able to engage Obiatu. While Onyekozuru refuses to pick any other husband, which is *nkushi* as was normally done in Igbo land when her husband died rather, she decided to be an independent woman working on her husband’s land. Chieme was the member of *Oluada* who showed the world that woman’s reputation does not depend solely on her husband (119). They (Ejimnaka, Chieme, Chibuka and Onyekozuru) were strong business women travelling round Igbo land to trade. Though, without education they were financially independent.

Apart from the *Oluada*, who were selected from the *Umuada* and *Alutaradi*, the *Alutaradi* as a group (the married women in a particular community) “became reorganised so that we could discipline ourselves and protect our members from the tyranny of bad husbands and in-laws” (43).

Onyekozuru recounted their efforts in bringing peace to families by controlling the excesses of some husbands. She says that,

I remember when we organized the women against Egwuagu when he unjustly drove his wife away and threw her belongings out into the courtyard. We descended on him like a swarm of bees, with the full intent to sting sense into him. We turned ourselves into human litter, occupying every available space in his large *ngwuru*. A day later, he indicated his willingness to talk with his in-laws. (71)

Moreover, *Umuada* is a group of women that also plays important part in the development of their community. Adimora-Ezeigbo presents them as,

... the watchdog of the community, the guardian of tradition. Who, among us, did not know that unity is strength? Locusts are able to devour a huge forest because they move in swarms. Individually, they are insignificant, ineffective. The gathering of *Umuada*

showed the power of cooperation. When Umuada joined forces, the earth trembled. When they talked, the people listened ... (49)

Adimora-Ezeigbo shows that women wanted peaceful co-existence with men so that they can stay together and work towards achieving success in their homes, this discussion ensued between Chieme's mother and Okorie her husband.

"What is Okorie doing in Igedu?" mother asked the mediators. "The men among you, let me ask you, why are you not doing that kind of work yourselves?..."

"Mgbeke, are you now the man in this house?" father asked mother angrily. "So you are now the one who says or decides what will happen in this family?"

"If you want to live in Igedu the whole year, you can do as you wish"

"Mother retorted: "But 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? (93)

Ukonwa joined Mgbeke her brother's wife in admonishing her husband while the men who came to mediate on the issue were not forceful in admonishing their fellow man. Okorie later travelled to Igedu against his wife's warning and wasted away.

During the war, both genders were given different roles to play to ensure victory. Hence, this was portrayed in *The Last of the Strong Ones* that,

"*Umuada* reviewed the part women were playing in the preparations for war and made plans on their expected role if war broke out. *Umuada* would give total support to *Obuofa* and would take charge of the purchase and preparation of food for the fighters. Every woman was to get involved in the war effort, excluding old women, nursing mothers, pregnant women and those who were ill". (182)

The women being part of *Obuofa* shows that they are not useless and that they also have something to offer to help the men for the progress of the society. Tobalase Adegbite and Luck Aikabeli assert that "... Ezeigbo tries to balance the male characters she creates with the four strong female characters while stressing the point that both genders have different roles to play in the society" (23).

## Conclusion

The four members of *Oluada*, selected from *Umuada* and *Alutaradi* gave the impression that so much can be achieved by women in a bid to weaken patriarchy which was fully established by the colonial masters by raising the consciousness of the rural women, to challenge non- progressive customs. Although, the pre-colonial era gave a bit of room for women's participation and representation, the various changes along the way brought with it new challenges for women inclusion and participation. Comparing life during the colonial era and today, one can confidently say that women have come a long way, they are emerging but it had not been easy because they have faced and, in many ways, still facing a lot of marginalization in the society.

Having discussed the position of women in the society, it is obvious that women should be given the chance to fully participate in decision making in serious issues in the society starting from the villages. From the fore going discussion, it can be seen that the women used in this discussion have contributed powerfully in the economic and political progress of the pre-colonial Igbo society before the white men came and destroyed the culture of the people. That was why Adimora-Ezeigbo encouraged the reciting of the history of our people so that we can learn from our past.

'Umuga had a rich history, full of heroism. A knowledge of the past was not lost on its people. From that early stage in their lives when children were eager to listen to stories with undivided attention, the family historian, the story-teller and the custodian of tradition began to gather the young ones together and teach them our ways ... There was a multitude of things that every child needed to know in order to have a deep understanding of our past achievements as well as our failures (1-2)

They believed that every child should be brought up to understand life as it was lived in the community and to have a clear awareness of future hopes and aspirations.

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