
**RECENT NIGERIAN NOVELS OF GENDER AND THE TRANS-CULTURAL
ISSUE: THE NOVELS OF AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO, CHIMAMANDA
NGOZI ADICHIE AND GLORIA ERNEST SAMUEL**

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Abstract

A people's culture is a kind of mirror through which their degree of civilization is assessed. However, in a world where the gap in communication that hitherto existed between peoples has almost been literally erased by the internet communication's global village phenomenon, strict cultural distinction and exclusivity can no more be guaranteed. Thus there now exists untrammelled influences across cultures, resulting in the cultures of the stronger and more influential peoples greatly suppressing the cultures of the weaker and, therefore, less influential ones. Through this means, the idea of feminism, which is the idea of women's agitation for equality with men that originated from the West, came to have a very uncomfortable pressure on the African culture. It is the extent of influence that the said Western-originated feminism has had on the quintessential African woman's sense of culture that this work studies in selected novels of the African female writers Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Gloria Ernest-Samuel. Taking a bearing from the backdrop of cultural feminism, the study can find that, at least in principle, while Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo advocates what she terms the 'snail-sense' feminist approach for the African women to confront their men, so to say, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, on her part, wills that all, both men and women, join the feminism train, and Gloria Ernest-Samuel is even more radical in creatively accusing men of exploiting what she perceives as nature's unfairness to the female gender by making them the burden bearers in a childless marriage.

Keywords: Culture, Feminism, Gender, African, Writers

1. Introduction

It goes without doubt that the most distinguishing feature of African literature is its manifestation of the characteristics of African culture. African culture of course, is that way of life which the African people have evolved, experientially and historically, to make for order in society, and which from generation to generation has been seen to have very civilized qualities as well as continued civilizing tendencies. Every culture at its primordial stage is adjudged pure. However, through contacts with contiguous societies, especially by way of trade, inter-marriage, war, imperialism, and other such

activities, there exist tendencies and opportunities for inter-cultural borrowing and indoctrination.

To that effect, wa Thiong'o, (1999) sees culture as:

A product of a people's history... A specific history of which culture is simultaneously a product, a reflection and a measure, is a continuous working out of the contradictions within a given society and between that society and others with which it is in contact.

Also, Said (2010) defines culture, on one hand, as "all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exists in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure". In another sense, citing Mathew Arnold, he sees culture as "a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought" (Said, 2010).

To go back to Ngugi wa Thiong'O (1999), and in considering the element of trans-culture, he captures the trans-cultural essence in the following statement:

[a] given culture develops in contact with other societies in a state of hostility or hospitality depending on how they are placed relative to each other. Some nations are often in a position of economic and political power of life and death vis-à-vis others. The two cultures will be affected adversely or beneficially depending on the relations of power. Societies are at their healthiest stability when they develop in a creative balanced give and take within its interior elements and within the exterior relations.

Trans-culturalism, therefore, is a notch broader than the concept of cultural borrowing. It is a concept of cultural integration, the aim of which must be, on a mutually beneficial ground, to make the qualities of one culture available and enriching to another. It is supposed to be a kind of dis-otherness where all cultural barriers are extinct. But in the light of the above quotation from Ngugi, we see that majority of the African peoples have continued to experience gross cultural deficit balance in its external relationships, especially with the West, since colonialism. From that contact, authentic African culture has been on the decline. It can no more discriminate between the good and the bad in what it receives from the West. Thus, there is no better way to say it than that the African society has been a dumping ground for some ugly aspects of Western culture.

African culture has remained the weaker and the helpless receiver in the world politics of otherness in which, as Fuery and Mansfield (2001) put it, ‘the subject is the discourse of the other’, whereby the dominant power feels superior and lords it over the other less powerful people and society in all aspects of life, politically, economically, socially and, of course, culturally. It was through this avenue that the issue of gender rivalry was helplessly received into African culture.

Gender rivalry, in a nut shell, is that state of affairs in which mainly the female gender is no more content with the roles assigned to it by nature and cultural nurture and, therefore, charges at the male gender for at least being the enforcer of those roles. The male gender, more often than not, is jolted and tries to repel this unnatural and therefore unwelcome quest by the woman for more prominence, especially in the things that were hitherto the exclusive reserve of the men. It is in keeping with this that Fuery and Mansfield view gender studies, and consequently feminism, as “a response to the prominence of the woman’s movement in Western society”.

Likewise, Habib (2011) views modern feminism as “having been forged in the same fire as much post-structuralist thought, questioning fixed and stable notions of gender, sexuality, and even the category of woman”. He also traces the origin to the American Betty Friedman’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* saying that the original grievance of the women was “their entrapment within private, domestic life and their inability to pursue public careers”. Much of that has since changed, of course, to the point of female writers of the radical feminist school using literature to ask for even the very castration of all male, especially all male writers, who they perceive as being opposed to the untrammelled freedom of the female person to express even the most weird of views. One of the climaxes of this is the French Helene Cixous’ view that men have “riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa (a woman figure of beauty and laughter) and the abyss (Freud’s myth which, according to Habib, designates woman as a ‘dark continent’, pregnant with mystery and signifying lack, castration, negativity and dependence (Habib, 2011). To Habib, Cixous believes that “laughter is a way of exceeding the very notion of truth as defined by Masculine traditions” (Habib, 2011). Therefore, Cixous in her feminist frenzy charges the female writers thus: write yourself. Your body must be heard” (Habib, 2011), because, according to her, the essence of the female literary work of art is “to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the truth (as designed by men) with laughter” (Habib, 2011).

As an inevitable result of the African woman’s contact with Western culture, and especially the great impact of the very influential West European language on her and her cultural psyche, she has unfortunately been infected, so to say, with the feminist virus. Thus both in her familial, social and intellectual, especially literary artistic, activities, she is disposed to advocating views, attitudes and positions that represent a

flagrant disregard for the African cultural norms. This state of affairs, to be modest, has pervasively affected the traditional stability of the marriage and social institutions in African societies. No wonder, therefore, why Ama Ata Aidoo at inception had shouted, as it were, that feminism portended no good to the African woman and the African society at large. In her words, “you know how we all feel about that embarrassing western philosophy? The destroyer of homes? Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African women?” Also Nnolim (2010) in trying to account for how the “virus” found its way into African female literature, pins it down to “the dangerous ideas and tenets of Bell Hooks, Shulamith Firestone, and Leslie Steeves – European feminists who have dangerously infected the writings of our African feminist sisters”. Some of these “our African feminist sisters” he has earlier named as the Nigerian Flora Nwapa, the Senegalese Mariama Ba and “the Egyptian Nawal el saadawi” who he says are all in league to push the tenets of feminism to scandalous, and even criminal and murderous levels,” (Nnolim, 2010).

In the foregoing, we have at least a fair glimpse into the negative trans-cultural effects of the west-influenced gender over-consciousness on the African women and the African society. Let us survey the primary texts for this discourse for fuller insight.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo advocated for the African woman the ‘snail sense’ approach in dealing with their men. In the Igbo proverbial lore from which she derived her idea, the snail is said to be able to walk on even the sharpest thorns without being hurt only on account of its honey-polite tongue. But in her novel *The Last of the Strong Ones*, we find a study in violation of the Igbo cultural norms through the actions and utterances of her female characters whom she has created to ingeniously usurp the traditional roles of the men in a typical Igbo folk society of the novel. The Igbo of course operate about the most patriarchal culture in southern Nigeria. Thus women’s roles are clearly defined, under the men. Therefore, it is aberrant to have a woman in such a society make such a declaration as in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Thus:

I hated being any man’s appendage. I could not entertain having to eat out of any man’s hand or being under his heel all my life, as my mother and my father’s other wives had been... My independence meant everything to me, indeed my very life, and I guarded it fiercely. (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2006)

The Oluada or Umuada conclave of married women in traditional Igbo society actually play some traditional judicial or adjudication roles where a dispute between either two members or two sections of a family, kindred or village, has become too difficult to settle by the men. The women who were born into the family, kindred or village but who are now married, are ceded this role as an honour partly on the notion that, as people

who are now married out, they have no more stake in their fathers' houses and so they are adjudged unbiased and neutral. That is why their judgment or decision in such a case is mandatorily accepted by the parties. In *The Last of The Strong Ones* however, Adimora-Ezeigbo(2006) turns this group in her fictional Umuga community into an instrument for the destabilization of the Igbo norms in that community. For instance, in a gathering of Oluada, Chieme, a member in whose home a meeting is held, not only presents kola nuts in the exclusive men's traditional manner but also goes ahead to say the ritualistic kola nut prayers that are reserved for revered titled elders.

As if that is not enough, a member of the Oluada, in praising the personality of Chieme, on the same occasion, gives her the appellation, "Oluada who showed the world that a woman's reputation does not depend on a husband"(Adimora-Ezeigbo 2006) . This sarcastic appellation and other related statements by the Oluada are clearly in breach of known Igbo cultural taboos. It is to drive home the unbecoming nature of the women's strange and foreign behaviours that Okorie, when he could no longer put up with his wife, Mgbeke's intransigence, reprimands her in this way,

"I am the one that married you and brought you into this house. I am your husband and you must not forget that. I am the one to make all the decisions in this house. You are growing wings. Your duty is to obey!" (Adimora-Ezeigbo,2006).

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006) Ifeoma Ifediora's persistent efforts to counter her brother, Eugene Achike's rigid handling of both his nuclear and extended family issues, both through her overt confrontation of him and also through her persuasion of his wife, Beatrice, to quit her marriage with him, eventually leads to the 'rupture' and "crash" of the Achike family, to borrow the words of Udumukwu (2011:18). Even though Eugene Achike's brutalization of his wife at the slightest provocation is not normal, it is even more abnormal, for Ifeoma to persuade her brother's wife that "sometimes life begins where marriage ends" (Adichie, 2006). That is why Beatrice's reply that, "[a] husband crowns a woman's life." (p.75), underscores the normal African woman's attitude to life in society. On another occasion, Ifeoma tries further to indoctrinate her by painting the picture of a perfect man in her late husband, Ifediora, thus, "when Ifediora was alive, there were times, Nwunye m, when the university did not pay salaries for months. Ifediora and I had nothing, eh, yet he never raised a hand to me." Beatrice's response is this barrage of rhetorical questions to Ifeoma:

Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go? Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many

asked him to impregnate them, even, and not bother paying a bride price? (Adichie, 2006)

And, though in the end, Beatrice cannot hold out anymore and surreptitiously takes her husband's life, it is Ifeoma, her sister-in-law, who provided the lethal feminist weapon for that homicide, the greatest taboo in African culture.

Gloria Ernest-Samuel's *Dear Kelechi* (2005) is awash with incisive feminist statements, but we can only accommodate a few here. What is most revealing in the novel is that it is actually the personae called mother-in-law their fellow women, that feminists should hold responsible for their woes, especially in a childless marriage. For one, the heroine, Ihuoma pours out her bitter frustration and even blames God for her inability to get pregnant, thus:

God created nature and made the ruler a feeble entity with little powers over his affairs. Being a woman then becomes the mistake of nature or, is it the society? (Ernest-Samuel, 2005).

Furthermore, she is an emotional wreck and throws all cares to the winds as she laments of even the unconventional love making attitude of her husband towards her:

Have you experienced the pressure and mechanical nature of being made love to simply because your ovulation is near? Or, have you been rejected when you are feeling sexy, simply because your husband is tired of wasting his sacred semen on a fruitless exercise?... (Ernest-Samuel, 2005)

That is indeed a very touching, but a very un-African, utterance by an African woman. It is a taboo to discuss the sacred issue of sex without due reverence. She manipulates the language of emotional appeal to paint the portrait of a man-husband who has no respect for both his wife and the marriage institution, something rare in an igbo society of the novel where men slave to provide for and protect their wives. It is natural for a woman to complain, though, when she is unfairly treated in a situation of this kind. That leads to another aspect of trans-cultural interference that African culture is left to reckon with. The African culture allows for more than a wife in order to take care of the pressures of

childlessness in marriage or the need for a male child. But the Christian doctrine limits the modern African Christian to only one wife.

Ihuoma's mother-in-law does not want to wait anymore for any explanation on why she is not yet able to have children especially male children, for her son, Ikem, an only son. Consequently, Ikem's mother desperately tells Iheoma, "I am now aware of your deceptive antics. I know how you found your way into my son's life and how you have come to destroy him and render my husband and me useless like yourself". Therefore, the antidote to her chastisement of Iheoma, according to this mother in-law, is "bear me a child...a grandson(p.69)." Now, if feminists want to vilify the men for subjugating the women, what have they to say about such mothers-in-law as this who are at the root of many women's restiveness in their marital homes on account of the African extended family system. Ihuoma runs to her mother for solace, but what she discovers to her chagrin is that a childless woman has few allies in the African culture. Her mother's position is so straight:

our society expects every woman to have a child. Even with your doctorate degree and position... My daughter you cannot be respected or considered important without a child or husband. Childlessness is a curse, divorce is a bad. (Ernest-Samuel, 2005)

In the end Ihuoma reconciles herself to her situation and blames "the society that treats women as non-human or as chattel-belonging to men" (p.85) and "the culture that holds women responsible for domestic problems" (p.85) and not her husband, Ikem.

In conclusion, hedonism as reflected in the different contemporary western queer modernist social inclinations like same-sex marriage, legalization of abortion, popular culture syndrome and other such modernist and postmodernist lifestyles have impacted very negatively on the modern African woman's psyche. We can join this to what Fuery and Mansfield (2001) say in their "study of visual culture". According to them, visual culture takes up many ideas from cultural theory (such as meaning, the body, culture and ethnicity) and examines them in relation to the image, arguing that the image has replaced the word as the dominant mode of discourse practice". When this is weighed against the invasion of the contemporary African television, movie and internet computer screens with nude women's pictures, one clearly understands the extent of the damage the African culture is undergoing as a result of its contact with Western culture and its extreme technologization. This is because, in their bid to express themselves in line with the aggressive posture of the received feminist movement, they disregard the African culture and the African image, of women's comportment and dress code, and throw themselves almost bare.

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