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# **Women as Custodians of Tradition: Perspectives on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's The Last of the Strong Ones**

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### **Abstract**

Women have always been an integral part of their different societies. In some environments however, especially, in core patriarchal societies, the tendency is for many observers to identify women as a marginalized and sidelined social group. This paper critically assesses Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and its identification of women as a very important segment of the society. It highlights some major women characters and projects the fact that, quite contrary to some perceived notions, women indeed are the custodians of their society's cultural values and legacies. Employing the theoretical framework of feminism, the paper advances the recognition of women, in contradiction to certain generally-held notions, are not side-lined by their societies. The novel's Igbo background gives the woman a central role in the affairs of the society such that they can be boldly regarded as truly the custodians of the society's traditions and values.

**Keywords:** Women, Custodians, Society, Patriarchy, Tradition.

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### **Introduction**

The issues of male dominance and patriarchy in many world societies, especially in Africa, have generated a whole lot of concerns in literary works of art. It has often been said that the rise in feminist thoughts, philosophies and in literary criticism, is a direct reaction to this perception. Within the African context therefore, male – female relationship is generally considered as being dominated by the male, who naturally take charge, no matter the situation or the

circumstances involved. In other words, the woman is considered as naturally subservient to the man. To buttress and emphasize this natural male dominance, Ellen Gifford points out that “women are slaves and men are masters” (88). In support of such a seriously inclined disposition, Andrea Dworkin insists, especially to the marriage institution, that “all housewives are economically exploited; all working women are” (7). In all these, the generally expressed perception is

that women are subjugated in all circumstances by their male folks.

In the African continent however, perceptions exist that it was not, and indeed that it is not always so. While we may consider that patriarchy is a dominant disposition in many African societies, it is also an acceptable disposition that the African woman is not that subservient to the man. Quite sincerely, in many traditional African societies, the woman is not always relegated to the background, talking and looking up only when her male counterparts wish her to speak or act. Indeed, in many of these African traditional settings, and I truly mean that this is not merely a ruse, women exert tremendous influence on fundamental issues and developments in their societies.

In line with this converse perspective from patriarchal dominance, the American writer Carol Hanish actually makes reference to what she calls “men’s liberation”. According to her, it is men that need liberation from female domination. According to her:

The term “men’s liberation” was derived from the term “female liberation” and thus insinuates that women have power over men. Its very name infers liberation from female domination and is therefore an inversion of fact

as well as women’s liberation principles (72).

Her objection does not negate the principles of female subjugation of men. Rather, it only seeks to contest that its existence is a ruse. However, it raises that kind of scenario where every concerted effort to deny the existence of an issue only serves to reinforce such a perception. As a matter of fact, the Argentinian writer, Esther Vilar, advances that:

Women let men work for them, think for them and take on their responsibilities—in fact they exploit them (men) (10).

Exploring the difference between the “patriarch” and the “matriarch” however, the Nigerian social and literary critic, Chinweizu insists that females’ domination of males really exists. After exploring the several dimensions of arguments whereby different perceptions have tried to reinforce the existence of female power over the male folk, Chinweizu asserts.

Powerful matrons, often elderly, who dominate family groups and clans, who are patriarchs in all but gender, are neither unknown nor rare (10)

Advancing further on this assertion, Chinweizu strongly insists that the concept of female power is never a figment of

imagination, and therefore is truly a reality. According to him the basis of some feminist propaganda in the advancement of women's claims of patriarchal dominance flies in the face of reason. He insists that "feminist propaganda.... not with standing, it seems *prima facie* odd to claim that women are powerless in society, and in particular over men" (11). On the basis of this premise, Chinweizu advances that in many world societies, not exempting even the so-called patriarchal societies, women insist and indeed succeed, in getting anything and everything they wish and desire:

Women do get, and always did get, what they want- be it riches, or thrones, or the head of John the Baptist, or routine exemption from hardships and risks which their men folk are obliged to endure. That women operate by methods which often differ from those available to men does not in any way mean that women are bereft of power (11).

As it stands therefore, women are not considered by Chinweizu as a helpless group who seem always, to be under the influence of men's domination. This essay aligns

totally with this perspective expressed by Chinweizu.

### **Women as the Custodians of Tradition**

This paper actually advances a well known fact in many African societies, even though glossed over by so-called patriarchal influences, that women have always been a formidable force in the African society. My premise is to the effect that in many traditional African societies, the women folk are really not as subservient to their men as the major feminist narratives seem to suggest. As a matter of fact, it is the women who hold the social fabric together, irrespective of whatever claims to power that men would want the society to believe.

Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong One* is a feminist novel par excellence. Adimora-Ezeigbo explores the full potentials of the African woman in the traditional African setting. The author advances that the African woman is never an idler who has no engagement in the developmental processes of her society. Rather, the author advances a portrayal that recognizes the full potentials and capacities of the African woman in her traditional African settings. Indeed Adimora –Ezeigbo presents her readers with the picture of an African woman who is as much significant as

her male counterpart. But beyond these ephemeral considerations, the author presents an African woman that is, herself, the custodian and repository of her people's value system.

In every dimension, this novel is a positive story of the African woman. Adimora-Ezeigbo advances a tale that generously recognizes and celebrates the role of the woman as the custodian of her people's culture and tradition. Among the Igbo of South-East Nigeria, there is a popular aphorism that upholds the equal roles of the male folk and the female folk in the sustenance of the people's historical experiences. According to the saying, "*Nwoke luchaa ugu, Nwanyi enwere akuko*" (when the man concludes the fight, the woman tells the story). In this instance the story about the fight is as important as the fight itself. In other words, without the story, the fight will disappear from people's memory over a period of time. If the story of the fight is not transmitted to succeeding generations, the history will vanish and will not garnish the society's received experiences from the past.

In the novel, Adimora – Ezeigbo raises a very important aspect of this historical reconstruction. Men make history by their actions, inactions and reactions to social

developments while the women generate stories around and about the activities in society. In Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel, the roles played by the women go even much further to highlight the very important function which the African woman plays in making her society advance and sustain the very significant position she occupies in the scheme of things. In the novel, *The Last of the Strong Ones*, the African woman is not just the story teller, she is also a major part of the historical activities that give rise to the stories that are passed on from one generation to another.

A foretaste of this perception can be seen in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* where Beatrice and the other women gather to name the new baby born to the courageous journalist, Ikem Osodi, killed by the brutal military regime. Achebe's title of *Anthills of the Savannah* is in fact, a tacit recognition of the survivalist and sustaining inclinations of the African woman. The tall grasses of the savannah that overshadow the anthills can get scorched up by the raging fire that perennially burns up the environment, but the anthill will bear the testimony of the constant encounters between the grasses and the fire for succeeding generations so it is with our human environment where the tales of the men who die in the conflicts of life are borne

and transmitted by the women for posterity's sake.

Adimora – Ezeigbo presents very much the same scenario in *The last of the Strong Ones*.

The observers and recorders of the community's history are carefully selected for the great task of keeping the people's activities and experiences constantly in reference to avoid complications and misplacements. By virtue of their very important assignments of watching, observing and recording, they are accepted and clearly received at every meeting of the community leadership, recognized in the novel as "*Obufo*" and "*Oluada*". It is instructive that considering the membership of "*Obufo*" as both male and female leaders, it is only the women group that has an independent group known as the "*Oluada*". This specially recognizes the clear and unassailable position of the women group as a very crucial and absolutely very important role player for the achievement of peace, unity and progress in any community in Igbo-land .

This much is captured by the women watchers and recorders as they visit Ejimnaka to record her story, which in a way also captures the story of the people of Umuga.

We contrived to do the work of watching and listening with little friction on either side.

Farm work, buying and selling, household chores and childcare were skillfully accommodated to cause as little pain as possible (24).

In this passage, the watchers and recorders identify their tasks in society as part of the daily rhythm of life and existence of the community whose history the novel, as a work of art, reflects. In clear identification of the social significance of the responsibilities of the watchers and recorders, the narrative voice fills in the void to help the readers appreciate their duties. Sitting with the foremost *Oluada*, Ejimnaka, the narrative voice highlights:

Three women on a mat facing one another in a triangular formation. By instinct, we had assumed the time-honoured position that signalled a ritual performance. We asked Ejimnaka, daughter of Ezeukwu, to fill our famished memory with the detail of the unequalled story of her life. Our remembrance would nourish the souls of our people and others yet unborn (25).

As Ejimnaka tells her life's story, the reader is made aware of the experiences of the entire clan and the community of Umuga. Adimora – Ezeigbo's novel effectively highlights the very important position of the woman in the

livelihood and ultimate existence of the larger society. The stories of the lives, experiences, trials and tribulations of the four prominent members of the *Oluada*, viz: Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka advance correspondingly, the lives and experiences of the people of Umuga. Through these narrations by these important social personages, the people's traditional livelihood, cultural patterns and overall heritage are highlighted for the benefit of posterity.

As an instance, Adimora- Ezeigbo portrays the image of a self conscious, confident and intelligent African woman. The African woman in *The Last of the Strong Ones* is not timid, nor is she boxed into a corner by any traditional rules and regulations. Contrary to the perceptions of Rebecca C. Iwuchukwu that "traditional beliefs have produced values that continue to make women inferior", where "bride price is inimical to the freedom of women" and that "women are seen primarily as dependants and subordinates no matter the class" (132), the novel identifies the African woman as an individual who realizes what life holds for her and who confidently knows what she wants. According to Ejimnaka, "I did not want to marry a young man, for two important reasons. I did not consider any of

my young suitors attractive or intelligent enough". As though that was not enough, Ejimnaka further affirms;

In addition, 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 to Ezeukwu. My independence meant everything to me, indeed my very life, and I guarded it fiercely (27).

As a matter of importance, the four major female characters of the novel advance what Adimora-Ezeigbo recognizes as strong features that mark them out as dependable social figures: Cultural inhibitions may exist from one social group to another but Adimora-Ezeigbo's presentation of the female personality in the traditional African society highlights the woman as a co-worker with the man, raising collective hopes and aspirations within the same social milieu where responsibilities are equally shared and victories and triumphs equally celebrated and savoured.

As the readers meticulously read through the life and times of each of the four major female characters the cultural and traditional values of the Umuga people are revealed for appreciation. The writer uses each story to offer the reader unrestricted access into the

typical identifiable value systems of the larger society. Several of the people's social, economic and political values are highlighted for effective understanding. In the relationship between Obiatu and Ejimnaka, a beautiful love story of coexistence is nearly marred and would have been utterly destroyed by Ejimnaka's inability to give birth to a male child. In the people's tradition, a male child in the home consolidates the position of the wife, especially since the African traditional society encourages polygamous marriages. As Ejimnaka's wonderful relationship with her husband Obiatu, becomes the target of criticisms from Obiatu's curious relatives who worry so much about his "only son of the parents" status, Obiatu is vigorously being encouraged to take a second wife to avoid the "ceasation" or "closure" of his lineage in his own father's house. This is a normal development in the typical African traditional setting. As Ejimnaka relates, "Obiatu's people were unhappy that we had no male child, so they wanted him to marry another wife. Obiatu refused". (44-5)

Naturally, given the above scenario, the cordial relationships at the different levels of the social fabric will be generally strained. An ordinarily "very good" wife will be held in scorn by her husband's relatives. In

Ejimnaka's case, her mother-in-law "did not hide her resentment". As she holds Ejimnaka responsible for Obiatu's refusal to get a second wife. Given such unfavorable developments in the life of an individual, tempers will necessarily flare and the peace of the home will be shattered. In the ensuing imbroglio, the author highlights a very typical African traditional value that eventually saves the situation:

It was Aziagba who solved the problem and saved all of us from slow death. She was willing to *remain at home* with us to produce male children for her father. After we had performed the *nluikwaceremony*, she chose Okoroji as a mate. And he was willing to enter the relationship with her. It was a big relief to all of us (45).

In this situation, the people's culture and tradition advances to save everyone concerned from further quarrels and altercations. And as the author reveals, the social fabric is sustained to enhance peace, cooperation and progress. In similar vein of reflecting on the people's traditional values, the marriage of Onyekozuru to her husband, Umeozo explores one of the processes through which cases of indebtedness between families are settled. Umeozo is far older than Onyekozuru, but a marriage between the two is contracted because Onyekozuru's father is

indebted to Umeozo. According to Onyekozuru, “Umeozo was elderly and had grown children. I was not happy that my husband was that old but I did not complain aloud.” (52). Moreover, “his first wife, Udumaga, was not young; she was older than my mother. I called her Mother” and “she took me as her daughter” (53). Such cultural patterns helped the individual in society to maintain his/her composure in the sense that even when material possessions are not readily available for the repayment of an indebtedness, giving out one’s daughter in marriage to a creditor is as much a repayment in value to a debt of a landed property.

The tendency is for many cultural perceptions to regard marriage and childbirth as the ultimate fulfillment for every woman, but *The Last of the Strong Ones* highlights a very important development in this regard that is also fulfilling. Chieme’s life is such a testimony. Like other maidens her age, she marries a husband, but is portrayed as being unable to exhibit the natural tendencies that make child-bearing possible- menstruation and subsequent ovulation. This shortcoming brings her marriage to Iwuchukwu to an end. However, her return to her father’s house does not mark the end of her fulfilled existence as she eventually becomes a

wonderful artist after learning the art of praise singing for different occasions. Her uncle, Onwukwe, the Chief Priest of *Idemmiri* tells her, “my daughter, anyone who wished to live long and enjoy peace in this world must learn to be patient” (112).

Chieme’s subsequent confession becomes the testimony for her determination to succeed and excel, in spite of her biological deficiencies as a female:

After that incident my life changed. I was determined to live my life in full. I was going to be like the back: impervious to gossip and deaf to the derision of the world ... I was young and healthy, I was not going to depend on anyone to provide for me (113).

Her ultimate decision to start trading in kola nuts and eventually learning from Nwakaku, the job of a chanter at public ceremonies make her become a celebrity with immense contacts and reach. As such, she assumes a fulfilling social status:

Having accumulated wealth and made a name in my profession, I became a *Loolo* and chose the title *Omesarannaya*\_ the one who brought fame to her father (118).

In Chibuka’s story, the author takes the reader through the processes of child adoption and parenting in the Igbo traditional



family relationships. The eight years which the young Chibuka spends with her aunt, Eyiuche, in Igwe Anoka's house at Agbaja exposes the young maiden to a totally different variant of cultural values of the larger Igbo society. Chibuka's experiences in Igwe Anoka's household offer the reader a glimpse into the peculiarities of life and existence in the household of the wealthy members of society:

There were occasional quarrels and misunderstandings, but most of the time there was peace, in the compound. Igwe Anoka was very rich and there was enough for every one to eat. Consequently, areas of conflict were much reduced. Igwe was a kind but strict man. He treated his wives with respect. (127)

The Igwe's household is not much different from the houses of ordinary citizens as general rules and guidelines are also inculcated in the children. As Chibuka recalls:

We rarely went to look for firewood or to fetch water. Igwe had slaves and servants who did such work. However, each wife taught her children how to cook and take care of little children. Even though they were Igwe's daughters, they were expected to marry and procreate and they had to be prepared for such roles, like the children of commoners (128).

The processes of training the younger generation in the ways of their society's cultural values are therefore the duties of not just the biological parents alone, but those of relations, friends and the society at large. The women in traditional African societies can thus be seen as individual characters who stand shoulder to shoulder with their men. In the case of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, they are not just purveyors of the heroic deeds of their men, they are themselves major actors in the making of the people's historical engagements. In fact, through the *Oluada/Umuada*, the women constitute a great force to reckon with:

Umuada, 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).

It is in this united effort that their roles as propagators, defenders and custodians of

tradition are most evident. As individual characters, they still advance unique personal and leadership attributes, but as a collective, their formidable influence as propagators and custodians are unquestionable and unassailable. So, whether as *Oluada* (*Umuada*) or *alutaradi* the women are portrayed as an integral part of the social process. As has been clearly outlined from the foregoing, the women in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* are very much different from C. E. Nnolims confined description as "appendages to men, mere chattels recognizable only as mothers or wives to important men, and always in the background" (176). Not at all, in Adimora-Ezeigbo's presentation, the women are themselves the makers of history, the bastions of their society's values and the custodians of their people's traditions and cultural ethos.

### **Conclusion**

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* is thus a new generation novel that clearly advances the key roles which the women folk play in the social environment. In the novel, the women are not mere by-standers who have no clearly defined roles towards social transformation. On the contrary, Adimora-Ezeigbo follows the guidelines outlined by I. Uko for a

"holistic redefinition of African womanhood" (92). The novel effectively strengthens Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike and Olajumoke Verissimo's admonition that African writers should "feminize their literary vision, with a view to correcting the absurd stereotypes of the female in African literature" (133-4). It is this strong image of the African woman that Adimora-Ezeigbo presents very succinctly.

As we have seen, the women become the purveyors of tradition, the makers of history, and the custodians of the society's values. Even in the physical war with *Kosiri* in the novel, the women characters are also fighters, alongside their male compatriots. In this way, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo advances to the prominent position of African writers who wish to effectively represent the African woman as a formidable force in her society. I consider this stand as a very important development in Africa's frantic search for definable and development-oriented leadership. For the continent to advance in all developmental indices, the women in society should be given their own space to prove their mettle. When this happens, there surely will be more advancement.

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