

## **AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES OF GENDER AND SEX IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO’S TRILOGY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The notions of what is male and what is female are cultural conceptions into which all human beings are placed. These conceptions form a sex-gender view in African culture. This study examines the concept of gender and sex in Akachi Ezeigbo’s trilogy using Norman Fairclough (1995a), Ruth Wodak (2001) and Tuen Van Dijk (1988) model of critical discourse analysis. It was discovered among other things that Ezeigbo is using these literary texts as a medium to seek for the end of oppression of women in the world outside the texts. This work analyzed issues in Akachi Ezeigbo’s trilogy from a female point of view as Njoku (2004:277) asserts, “Feminist criticism engages issues from the female point of view which reflects the changing nature of society and highlights the protest of a marginalized group (women)”. Akachi Ezeigbo's trilogy is therefore seen as a message of hope to all oppressed women in Africa; that women are already in the ascent and that total liberation is possible and at the threshold. The “benign way” to survive being the pathway of sound

education and economic empowerment of women. These will help to facilitate the “coming salvation”.

### **Introduction**

Issues centered on gender and sex are recurrent in Nigerian literature, and by extension African literature. Women in Africa suffer varying degrees of patriarchal subjugation. Patriarchy is a social system controlled by men. Gender as used in this work is a socio-cultural construct, which transcends sex to refer to all the ideas about men and women, which are imposed on the different sexes through socialization. Male and female children are assigned different roles and status in the African society right at birth. In many African societies if not all preference of son is enshrined in the tradition which results in the neglect and subjugation of daughters right from birth.

This is done to the detriment of the mental, emotional health and self esteem of the girl child. Male preference in African society manifests even in allocation of food, education, inheritance and general upbringing; this is because of what Mbat refers to as “unbroken inheritance”. Mbat elaborating asserts that this negativism is traceable to the African belief in male chauvinism; which in itself beclouds their minds not to see the value and contribution of women in the economy and nation building (Mbat 2015: 142).

It is the rejection of sexism and male chauvinism occasioned by such an imposition that gave rise to the women’s Liberation Movement, which in turn gave birth to feminism. Although women had always intrinsically resisted male domination, the rise of the Women’s Liberation Movement marks the beginning of an organized re-orientation of the female, through the creation of awareness of the strength and nature of women, in both men and women. The movement has as its major preoccupation issues that touch women from all parts of the world; it militantly attempts to debunk the myth held by men and embodied in Aristotle’s assertion that;

...the female is female by virtue of a certain lack

of qualities. Men are born to rule women. Just as the soul: which is superior to the body: Men are by nature superior, and women inferior: and one rules while the other is ruled: this principle of necessity extend to all mankind. (quoted. by Khan 1976:21).

This myth is rooted in men’s common belief that a woman exists to procreate, stay in the kitchen, cook for the husband and look after the home. About feminism, Teresa Njoku writes:

Feminism is a theory in philosophical and literary thought. In this regard, it provides a body of knowledge, which attempts to change the human society. Those changes focus primarily on the elimination of discrimination against women. Both the feminist writer and reader are interested in the emancipation of the woman. While the writer promotes ideas favourable to the growth of womanhood, the reader evaluates the texts in order to assess how gender, female experiences and actions are portrayed in them in order to encode female presence in literary work. Thus, both the writer and the reader could be feminist because they focus attention on the female (2004:196).

It is against this backdrop that this research is focused on African Perspectives of Gender and Sex in Akachi Ezeigbo’s trilogy. Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo an award winning literary giant, as a foremost feminist scholar and women’s rights activist has in her numerous writing – novels, children’s literature, plays, poems, short stories and critical essays shown an unwavering commitment to women’s issues. In her own words, she fights patriarchal attitude and sex- centric ideologies that removes African women from the main stream of political and economic events to the periphery and she reconstruct the image of women through her female characters. She makes her female characters visible and

powerful enough to fit into the modern democratic Africa by setting them free from patriarchal subjugation and any other form of social oppression. Ezeigbo's creative works acknowledge the strength of the African woman which hitherto had been sidelined. Her creative arts are best described as restoring the dignity of woman. (Ezenwanebe, 2015: 262). This paper examines sex and gender issues raised in her trilogy.

The three books, which make up Ezeigbo's trilogy are: *The Last of the Strong Ones (1996)*, *House of Symbols (2001)* and *Children of the Eagle (2002)*. Commenting on the trilogy, Femi Osofisan writes:

Akachi's books are more of a trilogy in the traditional understanding of the genre; that is three books which are interrelated, but which can be read independently one of the other. Each is therefore a complete story by itself, such that, even though it is the same family from the same village that we are dealing with, it is a different generation of it that is in focus from book to book (26).

Akachi Ezeigbo is described by Osofisan as a "womanist". According to him, "she is a womanist in the sense which female writers from Africa love to define their own form of feminism against the fiery anti male catechism of their Euro-American sisters" (Osofisan, 2004:26). Akachi Ezeigbo won the first prize in the 1989 Women's Research and Documental Centre (WORDOC) short stories competition organized by WORDOC Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. In 1989/90, she was a visiting Commonwealth Fellow at the School of Oriental and

African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London. She is an Igbo of Uga extraction, probably the Umuga of her Novels under consideration.

Ezeigbo’s trilogy is significant in the literature of gender discourse in Africa because she is among the foremost female writers who rose to salvage African women’s image through the pages of literature. Others include Flora Nwapa, Tess Onwueme, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Zaynab Alkali and others. These female writers have used literature like D’almedia puts it as “avenue through which women portray themselves as actors instead of spectators. They are at the core instead of the peripheral. They explore, develop, subvert and redress the status quo within the fiction”. (D’almeida 1994:22).

### **Objectives of the Study**

Ezeigbo’s trilogy have been able to critique existing patriarchal subjugation and gender based oppression in the African society. The aim of this paper is therefore a critical analysis of the structures of gender based discrimination and oppression in the African society and possible solutions using issues raised in Ezigbo’s Trilogy as a parameter.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The consciousness of gender inequality in African society gave rise to feminism. Feminism “operates on the political ideology of change, change in existing power structures, change in men and women geared toward better woman enhancement” (Chukwuma, Inaugural 2004:12). Elaine Showalter observes that there are different categories of feminism. She states that “English feminist critic essentially Marxist, stresses oppression, French feminism is essentially psychoanalytic and stresses repression, American feminist criticism essentially textual stresses expression” (Showalter 1982:16). African feminism, on the other hand, stresses exclusion or exclusivity and its theoretical prongs include: opposition to gender oppression, motherhood; political partnership; social mobility for women achievers; liberation from all obnoxious norms and practices as

denial of inheritance rights, female circumcision and genital mutilation, widowhood rites etc” (Chukwuma, Inaugural 2004:39). Feminism is therefore “the ability and strive of women to take their destiny in their own hands and forge a path of progress and relevance. Gender and sexuality are central themes in feministic literature” (Chukwuma, Inaugural 2004: 61).

The theoretical framework of this research is hinged on African feminism; which is born out of the feeling of women, that men either consciously or unconsciously have oppressed women; allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, cultural and economic issues of their society. “Feminism is basically an assertion by the women, which starts in the individual woman and manifests itself as a reaction to certain lines of action that intimidate, marginalize and deny the woman access to a full life” (Chukwuma, Inaugural 2004:12). Some of the actions which traumatize the African woman include violence, genital mutilation, denial of right to education and inheritance, early marriage, choice of a marriage partner, voicelessness and a myriad of other problems which have engaged the attention and energies of feminists from post colonial times till date. Feminism is natural, individualistic and propelled from within the individual. It is as natural as one dodging a blow or removing oneself from heat or any source of discomfiture (Chukwuma, Inaugural 2004:13). By not giving voice and value to women’s opinions and responses, African “men have suppressed the female, defined what it means to be feminine, and thereby devoiced, devaulted, and trivialized what it means to be a woman. In effect men have made women the ‘non-significant other’” (Bressler, 1994:102). According to Bressler, “feminism’s goal is to change this degrading view of women so that all women will realize that they are not a “non-significant other”. Feminists assert that women should define themselves and declare their own voices in the arenas of politics, economy, nation building, education and religion.

The above objectives inform all feministic actions, and writings worldwide and especially in the African continent and my nation Nigeria.

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African Indigenous Feminisms according to Helen Chukwuma “show the plurality and diversity of ways women from various cultures and regions of Nigeria and Africa fight off male supremacist tendencies. It is not informed by any Western influence, it is the wisdom of their foremothers” (*Inaugural* 39). The theoretical prongs of indigenous African feminism are:

- Opposition to gender oppression
- Sisterhood bonding
- More spirit and character –oriented than body
- Family – centered
- Motherhood
- Recognition of males
- Financial viability
- Political partnership
- Social mobility for women achievers
- Exercise of powers as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers
- Liberation from all obnoxious norms and practices like denial of inheritance rights, female circumcision and genital mutilations, obnoxious widowhood rites.
- Recognition and enrolment of indigenous women organizations at the Local Government, State and National levels of government (Chukwuma, *Inaugural*, 2004:39)

This theoretical focus is relevant because the fictional community of Umuga is captured in the trilogy under analysis as a close-knit community that is “stratified” along gender bias. These researchers are of the view that although biological factors are important in any discussion on gender, certainly cultural or social influences are also very important because nurture is the most pertinent index in gender discussion. This agrees with Stroller’s view when she asserts: that “men and women are seen to differ largely because of differences in the manner in which their particular society shapes and moulds their behaviours, attitudes and values” (Quoted

in Bressler, 1994:106). This view is shared by Simone De Beauvoir when she argues that:

Passivity that is essential characteristic of the “feminine” woman is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned. It is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by her teachers and by society (Quoted in Fergelman, 1980: 259).

Emilia Oko commenting on the feminine virtue of passivity states that it is an emotional condition of a dominating patriarchy. In her own words “patriarchy does not socialize women to be a whole self; but to be man’s adjunct, his icon for unattainable perfection, his crystal balls” (Oko, 1999:16). Based on the theory of African Feminist criticism, this investigation considers issues on gender and sex in Akachi Ezeigbo’s trilogy.

### **Methodology**

Since a work like this one does not lend itself to fieldwork, analytic method is most applicable. This was done using Norman Fairclough (1995a), Ruth Wodak (2001) and Tuen Van Dijk (1988) model of critical discourse analysis. Their model was considered the best methodology for this work because critical discourse analysis is an analytical research method used in discovering traces of ideological bias in written or spoken texts (Majid and Fateme 2015). It can also be used to campaign against the ideology as well as beliefs of the ruling system; as in this study patriarchy - that tries to legitimize their control, power and domination of the female gender. Furthermore, this method is well suited for this work because according to Widdowson (2007), critical discourse analysis investigates the ideas, assumptions or ideologies trying to sustain the inequality and bias between male and female genders, elites and non elites e.t.c. and campaign against these ideas and assumptions.



This model of critical discourse analysis is relevant because the Umuga community in the texts under consideration has values, norms and assumptions that form gender bias and patriarchy as a social system seeks to create boundaries for women within marriage, politics and economics.

### **The Scope of the Study**

This research work is a study of Akachi Ezeigbo's trilogy – *The Last of The Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2001) and *Children of the Eagle* (2002). The aspects studied are: issues on Gender and Sex raised in the trilogy. The secondary texts include all critical works on the primary texts, and other sociological, anthropological and feminist essays that will help in the discussion of the issues under analysis.

### **Gender and Sex in African Society**

The African society at large influences gender stereotype. Every African society differentiates among its members on the basis of gender, treating its males and females differently and holding different expectations for the members of each group. Culturally, it is thought “natural” that a woman's place is in the home and that she has a very specific set of tasks, which are thought to be universal because they are based on biological imperatives of gender. Teresa de Lauretis commenting on sex-gender system states:

The sex-gender system is both a socio-cultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identify, value, prestige, location in kinship status in the

social hierarchy, etc) to individuals within the society based on their gender. (Quoted in Bilingtonet al, 1991:119).

The newborn’s sex is usually the first thing people seek to know in Africa. They want to know whether the newborn is a baby boy or girl. This marks the beginning of gender bias. The child’s experiences and self-concept will be profoundly affected by the announced sex. Even before a baby is born, parents are likely to have different attitudes about the sex of their child. In most African cultures, male children are clearly preferred over female children and having a son is seen as a mark of status and achievement rather than having a daughter.

This preference may be attributed to the belief that men are stronger, smarter, braver and more productive than women and that “it is a man’s world after all” – meaning that there are much brighter and better educational, political, occupational and economic opportunities open to males than females. Although this cultural belief may not be biologically true since women excel in almost all professions, the lives of the females are tailored towards its fulfillment. African women are constantly reminded that the pride of a woman is a husband with the warning that they may miss out on this blessing and the resultant fulfillment through un-submissiveness. Spinsters and divorcees are said to owe their status to challenging male supremacy (Obbo, 1980:18). Such widely held beliefs based on over simplified evidence or uncritical judgments are called stereotypes.

In socialization process, women learn the subordinated roles in society that are available for them. Stereotypes about careers do not of course apply only to girls and women. Many boys have in the past experienced very negative reactions from their parents and teachers if they indicate an intention to enter vocations or professions which have traditionally been seen as the prerogative of women; for instance hair-dressing, nursing,

social work, etc. According to Evelyn Accad, “stereotyping is said to occur when a group is portrayed in such a way that all members of the group are regarded as having the same set of characteristics, attitude or conditions of life”... (2003:101). Stereotypes can be harmful because they lead to erroneous judgment and generalization which can therefore affect how people treat one another. It is obvious that gender stereotyping is an aspect of the sex – gender system of every society.

What then is gender? This word has generated controversy as to its real meaning. Gender, according to the United Nations definition adopted by the Fourth World Conference on women (F.W.C.W) in 1996 in Beijing China is “Man” and “Woman”.

According to Bonnie Smith,

Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are “male” and “female”, the corresponding terms for gender are “masculine” and “feminine”, the latter may be quite independent of biological sex (2000:15).

Like class, gender is not simply a social category but relative and relational: women and men as social groups are defined in terms of each other (Hirst and Woolley, 1982: 12). When we say culture is gendered, it means that such culture “embodies and represents ideas, beliefs and practices about women’s and men’s roles, work and leisure and sexuality” (Billington et al 1991:120).

Sex, on the other hand, is a physical distinction, while gender as highlighted above is a social and cultural issue. Although masculine and

feminine gender are usually associated with male and female sex, this is not the absolute correlation. For we are born male and female sex but we learn other cultural definitions. In other words, sex, unlike gender, is immutable and not subject to a local material culture.

Sadiq comments on gender and sex distinction thus:

It has taken psychologists a long time to realize the importance of drawing a distinction between sex and gender... many psychologists such as Mead and Kemper now prefer to reserve the word “sex” to describe specific biological mechanisms or structures and to routinely use the term “gender” when they are discussing social and psychological aspects that are characteristic of man and woman or which are assumed to be appropriate to men and women (1996:104).

Therefore, we have terms such as “gender stereotype”, “gender role” and “gender identities” which imply that these are subject to social and cultural influences and are only minimally, if at all, influenced by sexual characteristics such as hormones, chromosomes and sex organs.

This research therefore seeks to investigate how Akachi Ezeigbo incorporates these gender issues in her trilogy. This is because like Warhol and Herndl put it, “... the oppression of women is a fact of life, and gender leaves its traces in literary texts and on literary history...” (Quoted in

Chukwuma, Inaugural 2004:12). In the same vein Nwahunanya referring to “the predicament of women as tragedy” affirms that gender bias, cultural prescriptions and the norms and belief based on such prescription constitute the backdrop against which the experiences of characters in Anglophone West African fiction are presented” (Tragedy, 1998:192).

Against this backdrop, it will be beneficial to analyze how the female characters in Akachi Ezeigbo’s trilogy are portrayed in comparison with her male characters. In doing this, the female characters are examined against the demands of their cultural and traditional milieu. This work also examines the female characters’ acceptance or rejection of such cultural prescriptions. The writer’s perception of such gender issues is also examined to see their usefulness in ending gender biased oppression in the African society.

Therefore the following gender based boundaries set for African women will be considered:

- **Boundaries within marriage and home and**
- **Political and economic boundaries.**

### **Boundaries within Marriage and Home**

Ezeigbo presents marriage and the problems associated with it as one of the burdens confronting the African woman. Marriage is presented as the desire of any young African girl because it bestows social status and worth on a woman Ezeigbo describes the life of Ejimnaka (one of the four protagonists of *Strong Ones*) who married late thus: “I was about twenty and three years old. I was not living in the home of a man - the way our people describe a mature woman who has no husband. My life was like a lone boat floating down the river. I could not think of a way to steer my life well” (*Strong Ones* 20).

Ejimnaka did not only consider herself a failure, the society also considered her so. "Her friends did not want to be friends with her again.

Her mother was heart-broken, Her mother's hopes were unfulfilled and she raged and grieved (*Strong Ones* 20).

The societal feeling expressed by Ejimnaka's mother is what Rose Acholonu refers to as "another form of gender violence" in which "high sense of insecurity and social stigmatization are the lot of spinsters, who are often given derogatory label of old maid." (Acholonu, 1999:65).

Ezeigbo, seems to encourage the women to cherish their freedom and resist being economically attached to men. Thus Ejimnaka explains that the reason for her late marriage is her intense desire for her freedom:

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. 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 heels 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 (*Strong Ones* 21).

Because of this determination to fiercely guard her freedom, when she eventually gets married. Ejimnaka quickly packs out of her husband's house when her expectations in that marriage failed. Osofisan commenting on the issue of marriage in Ezeigbo's trilogy asserts that "always AkachiEzeigbo foregrounds the heroism of women in their encounters with men and patriarchal traditions; it is their very resistance that shapes them into figures of legend" (2004:28), Ezeigbo's female

characters are quite unlike Achebe's female characters in his first three novels. In *Things Fall Apart* in particular, the female characters are passive, invisible and sometimes unintelligent. Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi commenting on Achebe's portrayal of female characters in *Things Fall Apart* contends that Achebe:

Pronounced an eternal sentence on his innocent female characters, imprisoned on the pages of his books, destined to carry and serve foo-foo and soup to men dealing with important matters, Achebe's Macho spirit with its disclaim for women robs him of the symbolic insight into the nurturing possibilities of women's vital role. Things fall Apart also because of the misogyny or contempt for the female (66).

Ezeigbo also records in *Strong Ones* that the choice of a marriage partner in the traditional society is made for the young woman.

Onyekozuru another of the four protagonists has to labour to satisfy her husband and his first wife who is older than her mother, for she lacked the voice as she did not complain loudly. When this is the case, such women stay married to avoid shame and disgrace onthemselves and their families. this is what Helen Chukwuma refers to as “marital stress”

Ezeigbo's view here agrees with Ama Ata Aidoo's in *Changes*; when the latter uses Nana, Esis's grandmother, to sarcastically equate the bride with one condemned to death who was granted any wish on the eve of her execution. While talking about the mental condition of the bride on her wedding day Nana concludes by saying; "Anyhow, a young woman on her wedding day was something like that, She was made much of that because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been (110)".

Ezeigbo's Trilogy depict the traditional belief that the woman is culpable in matters regarding childlessness: a barren wife can easily be replaced or seconded if the husband is kind-hearted. Chieme, one of the four protagonists of *Strong Ones*, who got married at sixteen, is childless. She suffers tremendous emotional and mental anguish until she, like Amaka in Flora Nwapa's "*One is Enough*" comes to terms with the fact that her condition is not really the end of the world and she is not after all useless to society even if she cannot be a mother.

For Chibuka, the last of the four protagonists, her burden in tradition was slaving under a cruel husband" (*Strong Ones* 95). The words of Chibuka's mother show that in the traditional setting, salving under a cruel husband which results in domestic violence is acceptable. Chibuka the last of the four protagonists experienced this. Through Chibuka we discover that in the traditional African setting marital love or bliss is normally sacrificed for security and provision. So then, it suffices if the man can work hard even if he does not show love to the wife. This lack of emphasis on love normally leads to battering as exemplified through Chibuka who was battered for every offence. The reason is that in the traditional African society, it is considered "not safe to show a woman you love her, not too much anyway. Showing a woman you love her is like asking her to walk over you" (Aidoo, *Changes* 7).

The traditional culture of keeping the girl child at home to bear children, specially boys, to make up for her mother's failure is also mirrored in the



three novels under study. In *Strong Ones*, it is Aziagba who becomes "Idegbe" in order to help bear male children for her parents Obiatu and Ejimnaka (33); in *Symbols* it is Amaka the midwife who is made a "male-woman just to produce enough offspring to fill her father's compound" (188); in *Children*, Pa Joel suggests that Amara the youngest of Eaglewomans five daughters remains at home to perpetuate their father's name by producing sons, should the only son of the family - Nkemdirim - join his ancestors (385).

The fate of women in the African traditional culture in matters regarding sex and sexuality is also highlighted in Ezeigbo’s trilogy. She portrays women as having been conditioned to be passive in relation to sex. In the traditional setting it is the exclusive prerogative of the man to demand and enjoy sex unlike the woman. This view is expressed by one of the women who visit Ogonna and her sisters- She says: "How can I look him in the face and demand such a thing? How can I act normally before him after making such shameless demand? Will I be able to retain my dignity?" (*Children* 114). In this excerpt it is obvious that female subjugation in this area has lasted so long that even the exploited women accept it as normal.

Ezeigbo feels the days when patriarchy imposed taboo on such matters as sex in order to exploit women are over. Ezeigbo's emphasis is on good marital sexual relationship as she depicts Eaglewoman being healed of a prolonged depression resulting from the death of Chukwuka the boy, when her husband makes love to her. Ezeigbo advocates mutuality in sexual relationship between husband and wife. According to her, women should not allow themselves to be "acted upon" but should "act themselves" (*Children* 113)

### **Political and Economic Boundaries**

In the first novel of the trilogy (*Strong Ones*) there are four female protagonists whose lives were created to depict the capabilities of women in nation building; each protagonist laboured tirelessly to join forces with

the men folks in the Obufo to save Umuga from the impending danger occasioned by colonial incursion.

Ezeigbo ascribes the gradual erosion of women's political and economic power to the advent of colonialism which culminates into the total political and economic incapacitation of women. For instance *Strong Ones* depicts the judicial function of the women's association such as the “Umuada” (daughters of the land), ‘Oluada’ (voice of the daughters or leaders of Umuada) and Alutaradi’ (Association of married women) before the coming of the white man (Kosiri).

In the novel - *Strong Ones* - Ezeigbo asserts the importance of women in the traditional Umuga culture in preserving tradition, as the women were chosen to work with the men. This is further brought to the fore in these words; "Obiatu and Ejimnaka were husband and wife. Both were chosen on merit, as members of Obufo, and by different interest groups" (*Strong Ones* 11),

Recapturing the roles of women in the traditional African setting, Ezeigbo presents the four female members of the Obufo (Ejimnaka, Onyekaozuru, Chieme and Chibuka) as militants, motivators, comrades committed to the struggle against colonialism and its attendant destruction of Umuga traditional culture.

These female characters depict women as active contributors to the dynamics of existence. Ezeigbo, like other writers, insists on the solidarity of man and woman. Thus she urges the recognition and acceptance of women as equal participants in the work of societal reconstruction. This agrees with Chukwukere’s assertion that:

Although the traditional African society was generally regarded as a man's world, yet the African woman in her tribal past had in addition to her revered roles of wife and mother, well defined social and political functions within the society (1).

Ezeigbo in her trilogy, like other feminist writers, has brought to the limelight the continuing subjugation, degradation and discrimination of the African woman by the patriarchal society via culture, religion and societal norms. There is the indication that to dismantle all these traditional prescriptions that subjugate and exploit women, there is a war to fight. And as Orabueze succinctly puts it: "the first step in fighting the war is for women to probe and reassess themselves. They ought to discard and disregard the outdated, imbibed religious and cultural doctrine that they are born inferior. It is only after this that they will rediscover the symbolic relationship between man and woman" (118).

### **Ezeigbo’s Postulations on Ending Gender Inequality in Africa**

There is the need to explore Ezeigbo strategies for dealing with gender inequality and sex – class hierarchy in Umuga (African) traditional society which subsumes women. For her the role of education, economic and political empowerment of women in transcending patriarchal subjugation cannot be over emphasized.

Ezeigbo proposes education as a panacea to, gender inequality. Women's lack of education is presented in *House of Symbols* as an impediment to their social, political and intellectual development. For as the author puts it, “hardly any went beyond standard four in the primary school before being married off”( *Symbols* 182). The education of women is the “liberation force that can free women and bring them to awareness and emancipation”( *Kaita*, 141 ). Through Eaglewoman's five daughters, Ezeigbo celebrates the removal of the yoke of ignorance in the lives of women through education ( *Children* 129-130).

The role of education in the enhancement of women contributions to national development has also been re-emphasized by UNESCO in 1980. The task before our society is to enhance these roles (God-given and acquired roles) through education.

Education over-rules the fact that women are the weaker sex. This is because education is an equalizer which arms Nigerian girls and women with the weapon of measuring up with their male counterparts or even outdoing them. Education of the African women is a sharpener that enables African women to develop their inherent potentials. Education has helped to project the African women beyond the traditional belief that women's place or office is in the kitchen. This is because, education is the liberating force that can free women and bring them to the limelight. As can be seen in the life of the likes of Ngozi Okonjo – Iweala The Director of World Trade Centre and others like her.

For women political empowerment, Ezeigbo prescribes that women should also play active roles in politics. The message of economic, political, educational and social empowerment of women has been drummed to the hearing of even the deaf.

The dynamics of the cultural devaluation of women have been identified, and so have been such factors as the militarization and masculinisation of politics. Yet, as Durueke observes, it seems that there is a written policy to exclude women from politics in Nigeria(Africa). The statistics of women elected into various offices, from the local government councils to the national level since the 1999 democratic elections in Nigeria for instance, clearly shows that the Nigerian women were marginalized. It was then said that “in 2003 it will not be the same”.... But it was the same in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. Therefore, one can summarise the situation thus:" Nothing has changed in political inclusion of women in Nigerian/African democratic setting between 1999 till today” (1).

By creating Eaglewoman as a woman in politics, the author reminds the reader of the chequered political history of women in Nigeria. Eaglewoman was introduced into politics by her fellow woman (Goria Uzundu). Eaglewoman is therefore shown as being able to combine her roles as a wife, mother, employer of labour and politician perfectly. Adeniji describes her as "a strong woman who combines an amazing range of roles as employer of labour, entrepreneur, nurturer of children,

healer, budding politician, yet very vulnerable to the buffetings of life" (50). With Eaglewoman's successful political career, the author seems to proffer that there should be a re-structuring of our political terrain so that women will participate fully, rather than remaining alienated from politics.

Women should therefore, struggle through networking to challenge all forms of political marginalization by our present day male politicians. Martins Iheanacho expresses similar views thus: "the new feminist institution can force a break in the vicious circle of democratization of women's alienation from politics. Women can openly oppose the present political parties formed by men who have already fashioned their visions and missions and are now trying to placate women by offering them minor concessions" (129), With such overt opposition to male domination in politics, women will be able to make some positive impact on African politics.

### **Summary**

It was discovered that through the portrayal of female characters like "the strong ones" of the first Novel, Ezenwanyi of the second novel and Eaglewoman and her five daughters in the third novel, Ezeigbo establishes that gender complementarity and women bonding will rid the society of female subjugation. Her view agrees with what Humm who sees as one of the tenets of feminism, "a belief in sexual equality combined with commitment and variety of dissatisfaction to eradicate sexist domination and transform our society"(1). Ezeigbo's view equally agrees with Elizabeth Fox-Genoqvese's who states that "feminism embodies a variety of dissatisfaction with things - as-they-are and a variety of visions about how they can be improved. Above all, feminism represents different attempts to come to terms with women's changing position in the society" (2).

Ezeigbo is advocating gender complementarity, in the words of her persona, Nnenna, she asserts: "man needs woman, just as woman needs man. None can go it alone. If man and woman believe and take action, every part of the world will achieve gender equity" (*Children* 320). A reading of Ezeigbo's novels reveals that her approach to gender issues is mainly from the realist point of view, realism being "the portrayal of life with fidelity. It is thus not concerned with idealization, with rendering things as beautiful when they are not" (*Cuddon* 729), She therefore realistically portrays in her trilogy the life of man and woman as she sets out (as declared by her persona) in search of the female "Okoroigwes" (legendary invincible heroines) who she feels patriarchy obliterated. According to Osofisan, Ezeigbo's whole agenda in her novels is this all-important search for the female "Okoroigwes" (legendary invincible heroines) (26).

Therefore, much as Ezeigbo is clamouring for women's liberation, she also advises that women should apply caution. Through *Eaglewoman* the author's voice can be deciphered;

Listen my children.... you have to know how to deal with these people if you want to get on with your life. A woman is like a snail that must crawl over thorns and rocks with a smooth and lubricated tongue. This is the only way the snail can survive, or its tongue will be torn on rough terrain (*Children* 318)

We find Akachi Ezeigbo's feminist model, "**snail – sense feminism**" employed in the analysis of the strategy of the women's collective struggle and the women's liberation issues in the trilogy.

Ezeigbo's point of view may derive from her belief that "there are many things that are wholesome in our culture - things that are worth preserving just as there are a multitude of customs that mortify the soul so much that

... one wonders who was the evil genius that engineered them”(children 318). It could also be because she is optimistic that "women are on the ascent, that there ought to be ample room for them to rise to the top"(Children 319). She believes that no matter how the men look at it, they must “make room for women to come and inject fresh blood into their expired bodies” (Children319). For her, the "benign way to survive" should be the pathway of sound education and economic empowerment. These will help to facilitate the "coming of salvation". Akachi Ezeigbo's trilogy is therefore a message of hope to all oppressed women of Africa, that women are already in the ascent and that total liberation is possible and at the threshold.

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