

Liberation and Rebuilding Women's Identity in Akachi-Adimora Ezeigbo's *The Last of The Strong Ones*

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Abstract:

The subordination of women remains a big challenge for women in most African countries, where culture and patriarchy dominate women's freedom, reasoning, and desire to grow. This research therefore examines the liberation and rebuilding of women's identities in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Ezeigbo, through this novel, creates a powerful, dynamic female character that are bold, courageous, and fearless when faced with problems, as opposed to the negative representation of women by male writers as second fiddles and insignificant. This study contends that the misrepresentation of the woman in African literature is hinged on the patriarchal nature of traditional African society. The theory adopted in the analysis of our chosen text is the African feminist theory otherwise known as womanism. Womanism recognizes the African man or husbands as the head of the family. It however reminds them that the woman must be recognized and respected as such. Feminist writings in Africa encourage African women to tell their stories from the woman's point of view. Furthermore, this paper underscores how Ezeigbo creates strong and positive female characters who contribute immensely to their society. The research concludes that women are assertive and achievers, as represented the numerous roles they play in their communities, as seen in our chosen text.

Key Words: Liberation, Rebuilding, Women, Identity, and Womanism

Introduction:

What has been the status of women's representation in African literary writings over the years? This question has been the preoccupation of most critical dialogic, rhetoric, and creative writings for decades since the emergence of female writings and feminism in African literature. The emergence of feminism in African literature

ushered in extensive research and discourse on the roles and representations of women in African literature. Most of these criticisms and writings aim to assess how African women have been represented in male-authored and female-authored texts and literary or critical discourses in general. These issues, of course, have drawn many feminist attention and heated feminist discourses in African literature in recent times. Hence, Okachukwu

Onuah Wosu opines, "African writers (female) today demonstrate a strong dedication to nationalistic issues. They share their opinions and inclinations regarding the present problems in their countries (cultures) through writing" (1). This has also led to diverse speeches, writing pieces, and counter-discourses on the image of both women and men in African literature. The fallout has been that some critics and writers have argued that the image of women has been disparaged and debased in male-authored texts as subservient, timid, lacklustre, and passive.

Hence, Charles Nnolim, in *Approaches to African Novels*, affirms this assertion that females are misrepresented while speaking on the motivation of Flora Nwapa as a female writer thus:

Flora Nwapa must have felt revolted by the appalling images of the Nigerian women (helpless, dependent, brutalized, disparaged, and either prostitutes, concubines, or good-time girls) in the works of Chinua Achebe and must have set out to present a "corrected" image of the Nigerian women in her works in order to show them as having dignified comportment and capable of personal and economic independence (200).

This is why characters like Efurū, Amaka and others in Her *One is Enough*, are very independent economically and can cater for their families despite being married. Other critics argue that female-authored texts have been offensively aggressive, undermining, and abusive in their bid to present women as oppressed, subjugated, and victimized by men, thus presenting patriarchy as evil and the primary source of oppression for women. As a result of these divergent views, some groups of feminists have called for gender equality, the abolishment of patriarchal authority, and an end to women's oppression and subjugation in African societies. Reacting to this standpoint, some other critics claim that the notion of inequality, women's oppression, marginalization, and subjugation is un-African and therefore, strange. Catherine Acholonu, in her work *Motherism: The Afrocentrism Alternative to Feminism*, underscores

that women in traditional African societies have always enjoyed privileged positions, that both sexes have always played complementary roles, and that women are subordinate to marginalization. Suppression is foreign to Africa, having originated in the West and the Middle East and being imported into the continent through colonialism, Christianity, and Islam (103).

Given the above, these varied perceptions and standpoints affirm that women in Africa have diverse experiences and identities. The implication presupposes that considering all these viewpoints and in the face of contemporary and social changes, it is pertinent to state that women's identity in Africa is not homogenous but rather heterogeneous. Hence, literary writers are responsible for presenting realistic images of contemporary African women.

This is perhaps the task undertaken by Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones* as she strives to represent and rebuild women's identities in Nigeria and in African literature. Using this present research as a framework, an investigation of major female characters in *The Last of the Strong Ones* will help reveal Ezeigbo's aim and objectives in the novel. This novel is set in the eastern part of Nigeria, where, culturally, males are the ones who have the right to make laws that females must obey.

Theoretical Framework:

Feminist criticism is the concept that informs this work, and it adopts African feminist theory. Scholars and critics have defined this in various ways, but they all seem to be going in the same direction. Feminism is an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and ends sexism in all its forms.

Feminism could be seen as a burning desire not just to reduce female dehumanization anchored on sex-related issues but a total eradication of such. Feminism advocates women's rights on the grounds of equality of sexes. Feminism can then be said to support or defend women's rights in society. It is an organized activity to promote women's rights and interests. Women struggle to get their proper places in society and quest by women to get

their rights recognized. The term feminism has a history linked with women's activism from the late 19th century to the present. In the mid-1800s, the term 'feminism' was used to refer to:

The equalities of females and it was not until after the first international women's conference in Paris in 1892 that the French term feminist was regularly used in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women, based on the idea of equality of the sexes (Elizabeth Spelman 52).

Although the term "feminism" in English is rooted in the mobilization for women's suffrage in Europe and the US during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, efforts to obtain justice for women did not begin or end with this period of activism. Literary critics and scholars view and define feminism from different perspectives. In any perspective from which it is viewed, what is central to the definitions is the attempt of women to assert themselves. It is pertinent to note that feminism is a literary concept and an ideology. An ideology is a central or governing ideal of a particular time. The feminist ideology serves or informs a critical approach to a literary work, defining it and giving it form.

In whatever way the concept of feminism is looked at, the conclusion is always the same: it is an attempt to confront the negative issues, objects, and views that affect the woman and negate her fulfilment as a worthy human being. The reason for these differences in the definitive statements for feminism relates to the different societies these women emerge from. The implication is that a particular issue that might concern a Western woman might not be of concern to an African woman, and vice versa.

This work adopts African feminism as the theoretical framework. Feminism is an umbrella term for various views about injustices against women. African feminism is a struggle that gears towards African women using African parameters and yardsticks. African feminism's agenda finds expression in activism for economic, social, and

humanistic transformation through women's associations. These associations seek to empower women by promoting economic, political, and legal participation, peacebuilding, female education, and accessible health care. African feminism considers the history and diversity of Africa, including colonialism, as exemplified by Maathai Wangari, a Kenyan political activist. It concerns the realities of the challenges that African women encounter from their different environments in their daily lives, which can be traced to historical injustices. Catherine Acholonu affirms:

African feminist criticism is the mode of literary criticism that approaches a text with the primary concern for the female experience in it, the fictional experience of the characters, or the deductible or imaginable experience of the African female writer or character in the text as a yardstick for measuring the experience of the African woman in society (94).

Therefore, it would not be out of place to state that women in Africa have different experiences, culturally, socially, and otherwise. They want a meaningful union between women and men. They want to strike a balance. They want to be treated fairly in any environment where they find themselves, irrespective of culture, tradition, and other societal constraints. African feminism acknowledges that African women have preferences necessitated by education, race, culture, age, marriage, and so on, which determine their experiences, choices, and reactions to happenings around them.

Women Liberation in *The Last of the Strong Ones*:

The women's liberation movement of the nineteenth sixties and ninetieth seventies gave a new impetus to feminist politics. This liberation is the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities in society as men. A society that believes in the superiority of men over women. This is seen when Umuga nominated four women, Onyekozuru, Chieme, Ejimnaka, and Chibuka, to be members of Oluada and representatives of

women in the Obuofe Community. The female characters in this work have come of age through their roles as presented to the readers. They are nominated because they are bold, courageous, hardworking, and fearless. Despite all these qualities, they are allowed to merely contribute to the matters affecting the community, while the men take the final decision.

Ezeigbo demonstrates that women's resistance to various types of marginalization, subjugation and oppression in the novel is a result of dissatisfaction with how men are treating them. Onyekazuru, Ejimnaka, Chieme and Chibuka fought hard to liberate themselves and gain independence from the claws of patriarchy. They stood their ground, worked hard, and achieved their goals. Accordingly, part of Ezeigbo's objectives is to portray major female characters who suffered subjugation and how they fought to regain their freedom and rebuild their identities.

In effect, Ezeigbo creates powerful, dynamic female characters who are bold, courageous, and fearless when faced with problems. This is quite unlike the case before in most male-authored texts where women play second fiddle and insignificant roles; for instance, the female characters in Isidore Okpe's *The Last Duty* and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, to mention but a few.

Therefore, *The Last of the Strong Ones* becomes instrumental in her agenda of women's liberation in traditional African society and reaffirming the existence of feminism in African literature.

Rebuilding Women's Identity in *The Last of the Strong Ones*:

Ezeigbo, in her image-rebuilding agenda, reveals another side of women that has often been neglected, submerged, and unexplored in African literary writings. The women the reader encounters in *The Last of the Strong Ones* are courageous, bold, assertive, and independent, and they need no one to speak for them or fight for them despite their limitations and challenges as women in a traditional cultural setting. To reveal these women's identities and personalities, the study examines some of the significant decisions and

actions taken by these women. Onyekazuru, Ejimnaka, Chieme and Chibuka are courageous women, masters of their lives, and in control of their decisions. They know what they want and refuse to compromise on their values and principles despite the odds and challenges against them.

Ezeigbo reveals through her female characters that women's self-reclamation, self-actualization, and identity rebuilding are individual races and battles that each woman who desires liberation from unwarranted oppression must strategize by herself to accomplish. Additionally, the study underscores that the women in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, viewed through the lens of African feminism, show that their experiences and personalities are insightful in understanding the identities and challenges of African women and their native culture.

Thus, they are independent, vocal, innovative, resourceful, adventurous, accommodating, and unpretentious for their gender. They refuse to incline themselves to any identity imposed on them by the society they inhabit and instead define whom they want to be by making choices and decisions that they consider favourable to their lives and personal developments. Ezeigbo's aim of deconstructing and reconstructing the images of women by giving them new identities that suit their social and cultural transformation in Nigeria is remarkable.

Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chibuka and Chieme as Role Models for the Liberated Women in the Traditional Setting:

Ejimnaka:

Ejimnaka, for instance, is fearless, bold, courageous, and outspoken. She is a sculpture that everyone is amazed by her unique moral act. She is a woman of many parts who fears no one and encourages other women to be independent and bold. The women always come to her for words of wisdom and encouragement. She affirms:

It is the men who are afraid, not the women." I hated being any man's appendage. I could not entertain having to

eat but 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 (22)

Her rejection of being under a man's bondage as the father or husband indicates she refutes the patriarchal order in most Igbo archaic cultures that lords the men over the women, even when it is against their wishes. She is very strong-willed and independent:

At last, I trusted my instincts and settled with Alagbogu, who had taken a liking to me. It was common knowledge that he had boasted about taming me, like a wild bird, by clipping my wings. I had lost no sleep over this because I was confident, I knew all the tricks and would be the one to play him nchorokoto...Alagbogu insisted I could only go to the markets in Umuga and to no other. Two years were all I gave to Alagbogu. I left him and returned to my father's house. I resumed my mat-making trade, which had suffered gross neglect (24–25).

Ejinnaka exhibits great courage, which indicates that she is bold, tough, fearless, resourceful, magnanimous, and innovative. Living in such a precarious situation, she defends herself, regains her freedom, and rebuilds her identity. Her decisions were not well received by her father. Her parents were still expecting Alagbogu to come to her father with a keg of palm wine to take her back according to tradition, but Alagbogu did not budge; instead, he was busy telling his friends that he had no intention of coming for her. She affirms:

He was confident I would crawl back to him; however, he was farthest from my mind. People scoffed at me, saying I was a fool to leave Alagbogu. They believed no one else would want me as a wife. My mother became irritable. She found fault with virtually everything I did and would shout, "Ejinnaka, leave my home for me;

go and make your own home." I was a bal, belonging neither to the birds of the air nor the earth-bound animals. I busied myself with some more petty trading (25).

Ejinnaka's actions and dispositions entail that she believes in what Ezeigbo, using the words of Ogunyemi, describes as 'freedom and independence'... Ejinnaka refuses to lean on anyone, not her parents, as she goes for her dreams. She is no man's appendage and does not suffer from "penis envy," according to Nnolim. Society should be a place of peace and rationality where women grow up strong and secure without the constant threat of violence by which contemporary society works to ensure women's compliance with their dominance. Ejinnaka strengthened the Umuada association: "Alutaradi became reorganized so that we could discipline ourselves and protect our members from the tyranny of bad husbands and in-laws" (36). Her worth and value made the women pay homage and acknowledge her thus, "Ejinnaka, mother of the land, you were born to lead, favourite child of the great Ezeukwu who was the terror of the Agbaja strong men, Oluada, cream of Umuga daughters, you have regaled our memory with the story of your remarkable life. Your history will be remembered by posterity" (39).

Culture does not make a people; people make culture, and culture thrives when it best serves and reflects a people. African culture must become one that celebrates achievements, whether they come from men or women.

Onyekozuru:

Ezeigbo also presents Onyekozuru as a strong woman who, though rattled by widowhood, survived it. She was given out in marriage as a second wife to an older man at sixteen. A man she has never met, and he has older children and grandchildren; Onyekozuru reveals this:

My youth and my early parental discipline closed my mind to the possibility that I was being exploited by everybody around me. I did not realize how much I slaved to make others happy, though I had no

leisure, no close friends, and no pleasure to look forward to. My husband did not take me out. The only times we went out on an outing together or were in company with each other were during funeral ceremonies or farm work. If we were out for a funeral, I would carry a keg of palm wine on my head, and he would walk, with dignity, a few paces behind me. I found myself wondering if this was what marriage was all about. The drudgery of wifehood and motherhood affected me in many ways (46).

Onyekozuru exhibits strong faith, as she did everything in her power to take care of her children. "I began to have people assist me so that I did not have to do all the work alone. Farm work became much easier. Harvesting and preparing the food crops and fruits for sale were labors I shared with paid workers" (48). Some of Umeozu's people were not pleased with her new-found freedom and initiative, so they held a meeting and persuaded Udoye, the eldest son of her late husband, to marry her. This is called Nkushi in Igbo land. Women should be allowed to make their own choices. "I rejected the offer; some of them got upset and said that I had done wrong by rejecting their decision. My refusal to consider any of them stung them, and I stomped off" (48–49).

Onyekozuru is bold and courageous like Ejimnaka; both were made the spokeswomen of Umuga. They were both active in Alutaradi. Onyekozuru led the women against Egwuagu when he unjustly drove his wife away and threw her belongings out in 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 space in his large Ngwuru. A day later, he indicated his willingness to talk with his in-laws" (59).

Onyekozuru played an active role in Umuada, hence her position as Oluada. She is bold, beautiful, and courageous, like Ejimnaka, who captivates the reader by her free spirit and high sense of purpose and independence. She built her own house to make space for her first son to stay in her father's compound. Onyekozuru does not want to be

encumbered by anything. She holds no such weakness to which most women are vulnerable: the need to be any man's appendage, the craving for marriage, childbirth, or attention. She knows that most people do not like how she lives her life, but she is not worried. Furthermore, Onyekozuru loathes male domination and suppression. She has a mind of her own, is always assertive.

Chieme:

Ezeigbo, through the character of Chieme, shatters the negative patriarchal stereotypes of women in most male-authored texts as the insignificant creatures, the destructive stepmothers, the powerless, illiterate widows, the timid, subservient rural women, the weak victims of traditions, or the domesticated and objectified housewives, among others. Ezeigbo also refutes the presumption by Nnolim that "with so many African female writers unsure of the future of feminism and of the rebellious female characters that they often destroy or make mad, one could predict a bleak future for the movement" (259). Ezeigbo's female characters in *The Last of the Strong Ones* disprove Nnolim's prediction and show that the future of feminist dialogia in African literature is bright and promising, as shown in the novel. Interestingly, Ezeigbo also deconstructs the stereotypical portrayal of women in most female-authored texts, especially the penchant for essentialism (specificity such as the homogenous traits expected of all women in behaviour, attitude, etc.), which gives rise to the utopia that every woman should aspire to be impeccable mothers and wives or the angelic girl child. Ezeigbo also deconstructs the stereotypes that depict women as victims of failed marriages, abandonment, childlessness, and victims of culture and tradition.

Chieme remembered her father's utterances to her mother when her mother, Mgbeke, pleaded with the father to quit his job at Igedu because of his ill health and stay home with his family:

Mgbeke, are you now the man in this house? So, you are now the one who says or decides what will happen in this family? I am the one who married you and

brought you into this house. I am your husband; you must not forget that. I am the one to make all the decisions in this house. You are growing wings, and your duty is to obey. The pumpkin stem that is left untended creeps into excrement (7).

This indicates that men see women as passive objects and subordinates, not partners in progress. Their opinion is not needed, nor does it count. Chieme was not pleased to see her parents' relationship deteriorate. She got married to Iwuchukwu and promised herself "I was determined to make a new beginning in my new home to ensure that my marriage did not end up like my parents. I was not going to be called Chieme, the daughter of Okorie and Mgbeke. I preferred to trace my lineage straight to my grandparents—Nlebedum, the great warrior and farmer, and Nnuola, a woman leader and an excellent dancer" (81). Ezeigbo indeed understands that the world is new, and for women to survive, overcome, express themselves, and have a stake in it, they need to be determined and empowered. Women need a new weapon to navigate this world, which is education, determination, and empowerment. Chieme expressed thus: "I was happy and settled down to married life; I was not afraid of hard work, so I fitted into the routine easily" (83). This was fitted in because there was no model to follow but the old existing order. Women long for female models to look up to, idolize, and emulate. Onukwusi, Jasper, in a bid to endorse literary models, suggests that:

Nigerian writers and critics ought to recognize the imperative of creating models in Nigerian fiction. In a situation of moral confusion and shifting values, the writer must rise to the task of creating models to be copied. He must regard writing as a sacred responsibility, the ultimate use of which is to create a vision that will give society some hope and confidence in itself (243).

Iwuchukwu and family are a typical traditional African family that believes in the culture and tradition of the land and that a woman gets married

to any man to have children. As far as Iwuchukwu is concerned, any woman who cannot perform this simple function is not a woman. His description of Chieme reveals the true extent of his beliefs:

I want you to know that I have decided to end this marriage, which I consider to be no marriage at all. I want to marry another wife who can give me children. I am afraid of you; you are not a woman. You should ask your chi. I don't want to stay with a person whom I cannot say is male or female (88).

This statement can only come from a narrow, traditional, enslaved mind like Iwuchukwu. Chieme's self-esteem was severely bruised because the only man she thought she trusted saw her as a failure. "These words stung me like a scorpion" (89). This is unfair to the woman; her not having a child is not her fault; the issue of childlessness may even come from Iwuchukwu, as has been proven in most marriages where their infertility problem comes from the man. Nevertheless, the traditional man does not see from that point of view.

Iwuchukwu further laments: "I want you to leave this Ngwuru before the Isigwu celebration, which is twenty days from today. If you do as you are told, you will have no problem, but if you prove headstrong, you will have yourself to blame" (89). This proves that men see women as property that they can toss around at will. Iwuchukwu refuses to listen to Chieme's plea; his mind is made up. Ezeigbo reveals how strong beliefs in culture and tradition are and the extent to which these control people's lives and actions. She also exposes the awful side of some African traditions, especially the patriarchal nature of African culture, and how the culture defends one gender and leaves the opposing gender unprotected.

Chieme could not take it anymore and hurled at him, "Iwuchukwu, you have said enough. You are cruel and thoughtless" (89). Chieme identifies herself and regains her identity. She resolves to go back to her father's home. "I made up my mind to leave Iwuchukwu because I could not bear the

scorn and the lack of respect I had discerned in his voice. I would rather die than allow another human being to despise or humiliate me without a just cause" (90). At this point, Chieme takes charge of her life to rebuild herself. Chieme's reaction is the voice the author Ezeigbo intends for her female characters. We can see that the female characters in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* serve as models for women in a time when so many theories and ideologies of feminism flood literary and critical discourses. Chieme affirms, "After my visitation to Idemmiri, 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 world's derision. The representation of Chieme's personae shows that women can achieve whatever they dream of; they can be bold, courageous, innovative, fearless, and masters of their lives and decisions, if they so wish. Chieme attests:

I was young and healthy. I was not going to depend on anyone to provide for me. I began to trade in kola nuts. One day I was at a funeral ceremony and listened to Nwakaku, the Chanter, perform a graveside recitation. I was fascinated by her voice, which was charged with emotion (Role Model). My desire was to be the best chanter in Umuga and the towns far and near (94).

This illustrates self-consciousness, determination, and the rebuilding of identity. Chieme attained her tutelage under Nwakaku for some time. She progressed into the occupation of a chanter at funeral ceremonies and other ceremonies, and she mastered the profession of chanting. She turned out to be the best and later devotes her time to her kola nut trade. She became so popular that this tool (new identity) gave her the power to navigate her world and gave her the transgressive power to cross boundaries and cultural and social limitations to locate herself as a decision-maker, survivor, achiever, defender, and iconoclastic representation of new woman identity. Her vast popularity and importance earned her numerous wealth awards and a name in her profession. She became Loolo and chose the title Omesarannaya—the one who brought fame to her father. Ezeigbo indeed gives

hope and confidence to women, especially those determined with the willpower to rebuild their identities and those exposed to diverse social and cultural orientations, that they can make meaningful contributions to their community.

Chibuka

Ezeigbo, in her mission of transformation, liberation, and rebuilding women's identities, uses Chibuka, the daughter of Umeahunanya and Akubata, who got married to IHEME at the age of seventeen, to correct and refute those negative assumptions, perceptions, and ideologies in African culture that are meant to subjugate, delimit, and prevent women from having a fulfilling existence as their male counterparts. This affirms the opinion of Chibuka to her parents when she points out her dislike for her proposed husband, thus:

He was older, and he could have been close to thirty. When I saw him for the first time, I got the impression that he was not pleasant. This worried me because I had hoped the man, I would marry would be playful and cheerful. IHEME was quiet and rarely smiled (109).

This shows that women in some African societies do not have an opinion regarding their wellbeing. Chibuka pointed this out to the mother, but she snapped, "Does it matter whether he smiles or not? Are you going to eat smiles? Will smiles take care of you? What you need is a serious and healthy man who can work hard and take care of you". (110).

Ezeigbo illustrates that the African tradition that places much value on the male child is detrimental to the female gender. Chibuka's father contributes thus: "Akubata, take your daughter and give her some pieces of advice. Let her not go to her husband's house and prance about like a calf or throw her weight around. When IHEME speaks, she should not answer him back" (110).

This reveals how women are oppressed by patriarchy, culture, and tradition. It examines how various social injustices, oppression, or prejudices experienced by these women affect their experiences in and outside their environment.

Interestingly, Chibuka is portrayed as a very vocal and courageous young girl. She is very expressive and always sure of what she wants, thinks, and insists on her beliefs. An instance is when she married IHEME, and she affirms:

My mother thinks she has done her best to demolish the Agbaja influence in my life; I did not think my mother was convinced she had completely succeeded. The real truth was that I had left home early, at seven, and my parents had not had me with them long enough for them to discover who I really was. Consequently, they blamed Eyiuche and Agbaja for what they found unacceptable in me, but even as a seven-year-old, before I left home, I had been a bold, spritely, and pleasant child. What Agbaja did to me was to affirm my nature and direct its development. By trying to reverse my life, my parents only succeeded in putting my nature to sleep (111).

This reveals how society views the girl child. She is not allowed to voice her opinion or be blunt with the truth, and when she does, she is condemned for being outspoken. African society devises every means to keep the female child suppressed and subjugated with the use of culture and tradition. Society expects the girl child to be timid, irrational, passive, and unfrontational. Chibuka is very curious and inquisitive. She demands to know a lot of things that were not clear to her or that she thinks are not right. She is filled with questions when she learns that IHEME had another wife before her, who had died in childbirth about two years earlier, and the little baby girl was taken away to be looked after by the late wife's mother. "My husband, is it true you had a wife before me? Is it also true that there is a little girl? But, why did you not tell me? I asked in a pained voice" (112).

Chibuka is indeed a rare breed of teenage girl; she is not docile, naïve, or timid. She is very conscious of herself.

IHEME has the mentality that suggests that "real men" should have absolute control over their families and consider their women as immaterial and beneath them. Chibuka starts avoiding IHEME,

keeping to herself as any action attracts oppression and attacks on her. IHEME slapped and molested Chibuka while at the farm for a fault that was not hers. IHEME shoved aside a study branch that was obstructing him; it swung back and struck his forehead. Chibuka hastened to sympathize with him, and the outcome was not pleasant, "He gave me a strong push and slapped me. Why did IHEME resent me so much when I had done him no wrong? I uttered a cry in sympathy. After this incident, I learned to avoid him as much as possible" (113). Women suffer oppression and other forms of social injustice as wives, mothers, single mothers, widows, divorcees, or unmarried women. This is because most oppression, prejudice, and discrimination against women are deeply rooted in gender constructs, religious sentiments, and cultural expectations endorsed by patriarchy and even other women who have assimilated these expectations as norms and thereby enforce this oppressive behavior against fellow women. Chibuka suffered deeply and was at the mercy of IHEME.

Chibuka's determination and sense of purpose are what saved her from annihilation. Her hard work was an added advantage. Chibuka, though made certain choices the reader would consider reckless and stupid, like not abandoning IHEME at the early stage of their marriage and not paying him back with the same coin while on his sick bed as he was still mean, rude, and heartless to her, demonstrates that she is a strong woman. She picks up the ashes of her life and tries to liberate herself from her terrible situation:

I began to attend Alutaradi meetings. I renewed my attendance, which had lapsed over the years, at the Umuada meeting. My reappearance was received with an ovation, and a few women commented openly on my improved looks and good humour because I stopped attending when another member with whom I disagreed over an argument called me fishbone. In another year, I was one of those selected to lead Umuada in the village (120).

Chibuka strikes the reader as a strong woman when she takes control of her life. She does not relent in

her effort for self-reclamation and rebuilding her identity when she overlooks her husband's maltreatment and humiliation to fend for herself and her children. Ezeigbo uses these strong female characters to refute the image of the naïve woman who is often taken advantage of, as is often witnessed in most African literature. A woman who is naïve, timid, and unchallenged is a typical African traditional woman. This is the kind of feminine disposition that society expects from a woman, and thus, society sanctions this as a yardstick to measure a woman's personality and to refute this perfect and angelic image. The reader is not surprised at the women and what they became, despite their challenges in their various life experiences.

Ezeigbo's female characters change their stance as they reclaim themselves after discovering that they are the only architects of their fate and success. They accept that they are not in competition or fighting with anyone. They reject accommodations that go contrary to their beliefs and happiness. The various characters explored with their diverse experiences showcase experiences of oppression by women in some African nations. These experiences and actions differ in various ways through their environment, age, class, gender preferences, and cultural expectations of them. Thus, each of these factors is interconnected and on multiple levels, which heightened the challenges these women face in Nigeria. Some women emerged stronger through these experiences and helped impress positive attitudes on other women. Women are raised differently and aspire differently, and their various experiences cannot be categorized as universal or overlooked as insignificant in rhetoric regarding women's identities and experiences of oppression, especially in the traditional African environment.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that women are achievers, given the numerous roles they have played in society. Feminism or feminist literature should highlight why both sexes should live in harmony rather than in opposition or antagonism.

This research helps to throw more light on the concept of feminism and feminist writings in general. Through Ezeigbo's novels, the reader discovers that feminism is not antagonism for patriarchy or hatred for it, as most misogynist writings try to project; instead, it is a refutation against behaviours, traits, stereotypes, ideologies, and outlooks that undermine women and their worth. This study thus underscores that feminism is a movement that portrays and projects women's potential, abilities, capabilities, and yearnings. It, therefore, contends that feminist literature in the twenty-first century should be progressive, innovative, and constructive. Ezeigbo, in her works, planted the seeds of equilibrium, focus, and balance. Her female characters are neither saints nor angels but rather portrayals of women with limitations, challenges, and yearnings, each fighting for self-actualization and a better livelihood despite the circumstances surrounding them.

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