

Agglomerate Nature of Igbo Femininity in the Selected Novels of Chinua Achebe, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract

This essay interrogates Igbo femininity in Chinua Achebe, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and Buchi Emecheta's, *Things Fall Apart*, *Last of the Strong Ones* and *Joys of Motherhood* respectively. It reveals the agglomerate nature of Igbo femininity. Despite women's age-long struggle for freedom from the stranglehold of patriarchy, Igbo women still uphold some feminine ideals that perpetuate patriarchal control. Although literary inquiry has been carried out on Igbo femininity, the aspect of its agglomerate nature remains uncharted, hence the gap this essay is set out to bridge. The essay employs R. W Connell's emphasised femininity and Deniz Kanydioti's patriarchal bargain to the explication of data and synthesized the underlying principles of Igbo femininity. It explores Igbo normative and the eclipsing femininity, focusing on how Igbo women accept and reject socially constructed femininity. It establishes that cramped within the rigid roles and rules of emphasised femininity, Igbo women represented by the female characters in the texts refuse the scripted feminine ideals and reconstruct their individual femininity. Nonetheless, they uphold aspects of the culture-construct feminine ideals that is detrimental to femininity. The essay therefore, reinforces that, though the contemporary Igbo woman may exemplify aspects of social opposition to the gendered feminine norms; the competitive social regulations enforce their compliance to normative expectations of women. Thus, the budding Igbo femininity is a combination of the socio-cultural and individual construct feminine ideals. Therefore, agglomerate.

**Key words: Igbo, femininity, Eclipsing Femininity, Emphasised femininity.**

## INTRODUCTION

Igbo like every other African society is masculinised. Therefore, men prescribe rules that govern the society and create social institutions that stipulate qualities and expectations for women. They also shape and reinforce social/cultural feminine ideals and persuade women to conform to their needs and desire as depicted in the texts. For instance, Onyeakozuru is subjugated and transformed into a beast of burden by her old, land-rich husband. The desire and interest of her husband is paramount to her. Consequently, Igbo femininity

is centred around submission and subservience oriented towards accommodating the interests and desires of men.

The ideal Igbo femininity is constructed as motherhood and wifhood. Attributes such as nurturing, submission, passivity, docility, gullibility, fecundity, dependence on men and erotic object for sexual gratification find expression in motherhood and wifhood. Igbo feminine ideals are evident in the literary output of early writers of Igbo extraction like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, Christopher Okigbo amongst others. Femininity depicted by these male writers is portraiture of wifhood and motherhood which corresponds with Igbo socio-cultural notion of femaleness. These male writers are 'at home' with Igbo cultural milieu; they explore the core of Igbo tradition and culture, therefore, their works have provoked both aesthetic and unappealing response. For example, Chinua Achebe has been accused of creating back-house, timid, subservient, and lack-lustre female characters especially in his novels: *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Helen Chukwuma sums up the depiction of women in male authored literature thus:

The female character in African fiction (authored by men,) is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she has no part in decision making both as a daughter, wife and mother even when the decision affected her directly (219)

Chukwuma's statement attests to inferiorization of women in Africa evident in early years of African literature. This is a product of stereotyped perceptions femininity by male writers. Meanwhile, Christine Ohale sees male domination and the dearth of strong female presence in early African novel as an unbalanced image of African rural life especially as it concerns what constitute ideal African femininity and Igbo femininity in particular. The lopsided image of Igbo femininity casts Igbo women in marginal roles thereby ignore their inherent attributes, important and active roles these women have played and continue to play in the society.

Nevertheless, the new wave of female consciousness that swept through Africa during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries produced female writers of Igbo extraction such as Flora Nwapa, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye and a host of others who revolutionized Igbo

femininity by creating female characters who reveal multiple expressions of femininity. These writers present femaleness as it applies to the body, behaviour and the spirituality of the woman. They sought for and reconstruct Igbo femininity. Hence they create female characters whose dispositions are at cross-purposes with the convention. This essay therefore, explores Igbo socio-cultural construct femininity juxtaposing it with the reconstructed or contemporary femininity in the view to ascertain how Igbo women have accepted and or rejected the culture construct feminine ideals.

### **Conceptualization, Clarification of femininity in Africanist literature.**

Femininity is a social/culture construct character trait and appearance attribute for women. The concept of femininity is fluid and susceptible to culture specificities. Like masculinity, its meaning varies from culture to culture and from one historical period to another. According to J. Wood (1999) to be feminine in the United States is to be attractive, deferential, unaggressive, emotional, nurturing, and concerned with people and relationship. Hofstede (1997) states that femininity in Confucian culture is associated with virtue and modesty. Arab femininity, according to Boulanouar is synonymous with modesty and submissive(135). On the other hand, Igbo femininity is wifehood and motherhood. Despite these slight differences, most feminine ideals, especially as they concern character traits, are universal.

Like most gendered cultures, Igbo society prescribes specific ideals in relation to how women are seen and how they see themselves. The script for Igbo femininity is written and transmitted over time through culturally ascribed gender roles within the institutions of family, marriage, age grades, and affinity groups. As stated above, the ideal Igbo femininity is often depicted in literature as wives and mothers who are inferior, dependent on men, agreeable to men's sexual advances, submissive, passive, sentimental, overemotional, gullible, mentally weak; ignorant, short-sighted, childlike and shy. For example, Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood* represents these feminine attributes. She is gullible, passive and submissive to both her father and her husband to point of self-denial. The depictions of Igbo femininity toe the line of Martha Nussbaum's features of objectification. These features are instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, and ownership. Hence the commodification and objectification of femininity in Igbo culture.

Paradoxes exist in Igbo construct feminine ideals. These are rooted in what appears to be an age-long matriarchal foundation deeply ensconced in cultural representation and yet co-exists harmoniously with equally deep-rooted forces of male chauvinism and patriarchal hegemony. Granted that maternal ideals are

entrenched and valorized in Igbo culture, these ideals are fundamentally patriarchal and symbolize the central purpose of the Igbo woman's life, her *raison d'être*. These maternal ideals are built around the woman's wifely and reproductive functions. So, motherhood and mothering become intertwined with Igbo femininity in terms of fecundity and wifeness. This reinvents motherhood and mothering in real life. Kristeva (1987, p.234) captures the core of Igbo femininity when she says, "we live in a civilization where the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood. If, however, one looks at it more closely, motherhood is the fantasy that is nurtured by the adult man or woman" (234). Butler (1985) notes that femininity is an artifice, an achievement, a mode of enacting and re-enacting received gender norms which surface as styles of flesh. Expanding on Butler's claim, this paper cites Sandra Lee Bartky (1997) statement that one is born male or female but that femininity or masculinity is achieved in the process of re-enacting gender norms. This is gained through disciplinary practices that produce body, which in gesture and appearance is recognised as either feminine or masculine. The disciplinary practices involve assembling feminine or masculine body aimed at producing specifics expressed in terms of body-size and general configuration, repertoire of gestures, posture, and movement and/or in displaying of the body as ornamented surface. Butler and Bartky's concept of femininity is appearance-based. They downplayed behavioural traits. However, female figure vary overtime and across cultures. This reflects cultural obsession and preoccupations in a way that is poorly understood. This paper's preoccupation is on behaviour traits rather appearance attributes. It looks at the internal qualities that define the Igbo woman and how the Igbo woman asserts self in a masculinised culture as portrayed in the texts.

### **Analytical Framework: The Reconstructing Igbo femininity.**

The assumption that Chinua Achebe creates disparaged and debased Igbo femininity is contrasted by Nwachukwu-Agbada (2006). He argues that "contrary to the view that Achebe is a lover of the 'macho spirit' and that women are prisoners in his novels, he is probably one of the few African writers (men) of his age who considers the 'female principle' as morally and intellectually superior to the masculine and machismo" (56). The current study shares Nwachukwu-Agbada sentiments. It views Chielo, the priestess character in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as a departure from Igbo cultural representation of femininity. She represents assertiveness and authority that is alien to Igbo women. This is evident in the way she orders Okonkwo to handover Ezimma his daughter to her. Chielo further threatens him about the consequences of following her (p.77). The fact that Okonkwo obeys her is proof of the enormity of the power she wields. In addition, the ability of a woman to occupy the position of a spiritual leader as well as her ability to perform the exalted role of

the priestess of *Ani* goddess with such fierceness reveals a clear paradox of the position and reverence for women in Igbo society portrayed in the text. This paradox is typical of the Igbo society that subjugates women and defames femininity. However, the text revolutionizes the Igbo notion of femininity in Chielo a female principle whose voice resonates in a male dominated culture where femininity is constructed as submission and passivity. The depiction of femininity as it applies to the behaviour and spirituality of the priestess, Chielo, supports what Nwachukwu-Agbada describes as females who are “morally and intellectually superior to the masculine and machismo” (p.80). Such female characters in the texts considered in this study allude to the depth of inconsistencies that pervade Igbo femininity.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Last of the Strong Ones* and Buchi Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood* reveal multiple expressions of femininity in women of Igbo extraction. They present femininity as it applies to the conduct of the woman. Their depictions affirm Simeon De Beauvoir’s (1989) postulation that “woman is not a fixed reality but becoming ... it is not nature that defines woman; it is the woman who defines herself by taking nature in” (p.66). Chieme, and Ejimkonye in *Last of the Strong Ones* and Adaku in *Joys of Motherhood* define themselves. For example, Chieme takes the *lolo* title that is designated to married women whose husbands are titleholders. Note that at the time of taking this title her marriage with Iwuchukwu has collapsed (p.97). In case of Ejimnaka, she chooses her own husband and quits when she deems it right to leave (p.22). Luce Irigaray (1992, p.168) states that, “I am born a woman, but I must till become this woman that I am by nature,” thereby advocating for sexual difference. This essay assumes that sexual difference provides fertile possibility for inquiry into the nature of femininity as well as the lived experiences of women. The concept of sexual difference expresses the different ways of being and becoming for both men and women.

The different ways of being and becoming for women include: the bodily, social, linguistic aesthetic, political and religious forms. Characters in both texts become women in bodily, political, social, and aesthetic zones. But Betty Friedan (1963 p. 334) proposes that women will be liberated when they choose the painful growth of full identity or individual construct femininity over normative construct femininity and when they are allowed and encouraged to take up tasks considered masculine and avoid tasks executed by or for the body in traditional women’s role. Ezeigbo and Emecheta’s female characters affirm Betty Friedan’s proposition because they take up masculine tasks. For example, Chieme in *Last of the Strong Ones* builds a house in her father’s compound and her fosters children who become a source of joy for her, while Ona in *Joys of Motherhood* refuses to submit to any man. However, *Joys of Motherhood* presents a

character, Nnu Ego, who is absorbed in motherhood. She however, takes up tasks considered as masculine; thereby exhibit inner resourcefulness and self-possession. The masculine task she takes up is that of children upbringing. This she does without recourse to her husband. She denies herself of all the pleasures of life in an attempt to achieve this feat. Nnu Ego, though passive and submissive when it comes to her relationship with her husband. She redefines Igbo femininity that is constructed and dependent on men for sustenance.

Chinweizu recognizes the power available and exercised by the woman and contends that the man suffers a form of oppression in the hands of woman (121). Unlike Nwachukwu-Agbada, who declares that women are morally and intellectually superior to men, Chinweizu insists that the woman is biological superior to the man. He contends that; the woman has exploited her biological superiority and consolidated her power in the process of overseeing home affairs in her role as mother, cook and nurse of household. He maintains that marriage is a source of man's oppression, and insists that “men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world” (p.121). In other words, Chinweizu repudiates the traditionally scripted attributes of Igbo femininity which relates to docility, irrationality and subservience. His view runs contrary to both the traditional/social constructions of Igbo femininity and other portrayals of femaleness in Igbo culture. The texts recognise the strength of the woman, but do not brand her exploitative and superior to men like Chinweizu does.

While Achebe has been variously accused of relegating women to the background in most of his novels, however, this essay argues that in *Things Fall Apart*, he subtly presents strong female characters thereby contradict some of the features of Igbo femininity. For example, the active principle in Umuofia's most potent war medicine is Agadi-nwayi, a one-legged old woman (p. 10). In addition, the Agbala (Oracle) in *Things Fall Apart* is a woman (p.9). It is imperative that men in the novel consult Agbala (the female oracle). Again, Chika, the priestesses of Agbala is a woman. She is said to be full of power of her god, hence, greatly feared. For example, the tone with which Chika commands and addresses Unoka when him consults Agbala (p.14) cannot be said to be that of weakness, inferiority, sentimentality, gullibility, or childlikeness associated with Igbo femininity. Chika's attitude is unfeminine or butch in the Igbo cultural gender parlance.

In another brand, crops are gendered in Igbo culture. For example, yam is masculine, while cocoa yam, cassava and vegetables are feminine. However, the fertility of the soil in which all crops are cultivated is entirely determined and controlled by a female goddess, Ani. She is also adjudged to be of high morality

and good conduct. She is endowed with the power and authority to grant and or withhold bountiful harvest. Ani's credentials validate Nwachukwu-Agbada's claims that Achebe's female principle' are morally and intellectually superior to the masculine and machismo. Furthermore, *Things Fall Apart* juxtaposes Okonkwo, a symbol of feminine subjugation and Chielo, a symbol of feminine strength. Okonkwo's wives live in fear and dare not complain of his highhandedness (11). Chielo is a priestess and a healer; whose roles enables her to control spaces that are not available to even the fearless and ubiquitous Okonkwo. She displays control, strength and assertiveness that contradict and revolutionize the culturally ascribed weakness of Igbo femininity. For example, the strength and speed with which she runs through the length and breadth of town carrying the sick Ezinma on her back in addition to calling out greetings to notable community personages and *Agbala* questions and undermines the weakness, sentimentality, passivity and male dependency ascribed to Igbo femininity. The confidence displayed by Chielo negates the postulation that women in *Things Fall Apart* are passive, submissive and oppressed in the novel. The fact that Chielo retains Ezinma for the entire night in her cave whilst the great and celebrated warrior, Okonkwo, is compelled to wait outside helplessly is significant. That Okonkwo is unable to intervene or recover his daughter from Chielo as he would ordinarily do is a point to note. The fact that Chielo returns Ezinma to Okonkwo at her convenience and in the morning underscores her spiritual superiority over Okonkwo. It also reveals the enormity of the spiritual power she wields. Especially, her action challenges Okonkwo's authority and masculinity. This is evident in the way she reprimands him, "Beware Okonkwo! Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks?" (p.77). Chielo dismantles and (re)constructs Igbo traditional notion of femininity that is defined around submission, subservience and oriented towards accommodating the interests and desires of men (emphasised femininity), that necessitates the portrayal of female characters as passive, docile, silent and submissive.

Nevertheless, Akachi-Ezeigbo's *Last of the Strong Ones* successfully obliterates the male-focus or andocentric norm that subsumes female principle into the male. Igbo as an ethnic group defines identity and all spiritual, historical, emotional and social configurations along sexual lines (male/female), or/and in gender terms as (masculine/feminine). Even though Igbo femininity is subject to, and a product of cultural influences, *Last of the Strong Ones (TLSO)* presents women whose experiences are fundamentally grounded in their lives as women. Through their narratives, we encounter them as not mere appendages. Hence, their previously stereotypical image of passivity, docility, weakness, can be contested from the structured margins of a dominant ideology. More than this, these women reform the hitherto culturally scripted norm by becoming

determining factors in their society. This they achieve by joining socio-cultural and political pressure groups such as obufo, oluada, umuada and alutaradi. These groups work for the survival and benefit of their town Umuga. Each of these women in different and peculiar way, and perhaps unconsciously, answers Gayatri Spivak question of, “can the subaltern speak?”. They individually emerge from much objectified space and seize-hold method of confrontation in such an unprecedented manner. They inscribe themselves in the centre of things. They show skilfulness in the subtle manner with which they tell of their individual life stories. In the stories they confirm that indeed, the subaltern speaks, and from a position of power too. Their stories also contravene the stereotypical docility, submissiveness, gullibility, and childlikeness ascribed to Igbo femininity. These Umuga women represented by the female characters take centre stage and perform roles that are powerfully influential, transformative and committed to the transformation and survival of their homeland. These female characters’ grappling for the tools of communication, empower their voices, record and articulate their individual stories with sheer force, lucidity and directness of their lived-experiences. Their stories resonate what Ezeigbo graphically describes as “the rhythms of each other’s lives like the confluent streams of the Agwazi and the Ebizi, our two rivers of ideas and commitment joined and mingled their waters of harmony that was always at high tide” (p.19)

Buchi Emecheta presents four different types of females. These are the butch, independent, the traditional or normative woman and the patriarchal woman. The butch female, represented by Ona, is proud and masculinized, the independent woman represented by Adaku, struggles to liberate herself from stranglehold of patriarchy while the traditional woman is represented by Adankwo and Nnu Ego, submit to the authority and superiority of men. Nnu Ego is preoccupied by being a good daughter to her father, a good wife to her husband and a good mother to her children. Adankwo, who also represents the patriarchal woman, accepts her fate, internalizes the patriarchal values and norms, and joins in the oppression of other women represented by Nnu Ego and Adaku. Ezeigbo creates butch female character, Chieme, who is a violation of motherhood and wifehood. That is central to of the Igbo notion of femininity. For example, Chieme’s citation is rendered thus:

Oluada, who showed the world that a woman’s reputation does not depend on a husband. You defied Agwu, the spirit of disorder and deformity. You wrestled with adversity and took the bull of life by the horns...Your triumph is enviable...Woman mountain, seeded in tradition....(P.98)



Chieme's triumph over the mountain of fecundity confirms Simeon De Beauvoir's postulation that "woman is not a fixed reality but becoming ... it is not nature that defines woman; it is the woman who defines herself by taking on nature in" (p.78). Nature does not define Chieme as a woman; rather it deprives her of the proof of womanhood, *iso-ezi* (menstruation) which is the kernel to motherhood. J. Lee describes menstruation as a "biological act fraught with cultural implications" (1994, p.343) associated with the uterus, while Greenhill (1954 cited in Elson 2002) avers that menstruation is a badge of femininity that signals a woman's biological tie with other women. Within cultures and societies, especially in a heterosexist context, menarche signifies the real-time development of sexual availability and reproduction potential. This development and menstrual flow is lacking in Chieme. Her husband, Iwuchukwu, refers to menstruation as 'the proof of womanhood' and decries that Chieme lacks proof of womanhood therefore her in fecundity.

Granted that maternal ideals are entrenched and valorised in Igbo culture, patriarchal ideals present wifely and reproductive functions as Igbo woman's central purpose. Motherhood and mothering become intertwined with Igbo femininity in terms of fecundity and wifehood. Iwuchukwu declares 'I am the only son; it is my duty to fill the ngwuru (homestay) with children' (p.88). Motherhood and wifehood are central to Igbo femininity; therefore, barrenness is an aberration. Chieme's barrenness results in the loss of her marriage. However, Chieme redefines her womanhood (p.66). She takes up tasks considered masculine. In line with Betty Friedan's proposition that women will be liberated when they choose the painful growth of full identity over normative femininity and when they are allowed and encouraged to take up tasks considered masculine and avoid tasks executed by or for the body in traditional women's role (p. 181, 333-378). Chieme chooses the painful growth of full identity that does recourse to any man. She caves a niche for herself, accumulates wealth, builds a house for herself and takes the title of *lolo* (p.97). A title reserved for married women, *lolo* given to women whose husbands are titleholders. Chieme reveals the social and political ways of becoming a woman as postulated in the concept of sexuate difference (Friende 1963).

*Last of the Strong Ones* also presents feminine independence and resoluteness using Ejimnaka. She portrays resoluteness in her choice of a husband. This is evident in her choice of Alagbogu, a man old enough to be her father (p. 22). This is contrary to what is obtainable in her culture where fathers or father figures chose marriage partners for their daughters. Her choice reveals her steely determination to be independent. She says:

I did not want to marry a young man for two reasons. I did not consider any of my young suitors attractive or intelligent enough. In addition, I hate 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.”(p.22)

Ejimmaka's marriage collapses because of her quest for independence. A demand that is not granted to Igbo women. Like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Alagbogu is a symbol of female subjugation. He vows to subdue Ejimmaka. Nevertheless, after the dissolution of her marriage, Ejimmaka finds solace in her petty trading with which she keeps herself busy. She refuses to concern herself with hostilities and subtle rejection from her family. The fervour with which she wades through steams of opposition explains limitations entrenched in passivity and devalued sense of self and femininity. She meets and marries Obiatu. They express love in very scenic terms even in the face of the stern realities of their existence. This is profound and fundamental to the success of their marriage.

Unlike Ejimmaka, Onyekaozuru is given out in marriage to old Umeozo without her consent. Umeozo has grown-up children who are older than Onyekaozuru. Although she is not happy with her father's choice, she dares not complain aloud. She is a symbol of feminine docility, gullibility, and passivity. Hence, she resigns to fate. Her marriage is to trade by barter. This is because her father exchanged her for a large piece of farmland from Umeozo. Onyekaozuru's attitude exudes the popular belief that, “marriage and motherhood are the greatest goal of woman in Umuaga... who reach puberty” (p.42).

Throughout her marriage to Umeozo, Onyekaozuru labours to take care of two elderly people, Umeozo, and his first wife, Udumaga. The drudgery of wifehood and motherhood robs her of her youth and the opportunity to take care of herself. Though her marriage is peaceful, her children are adequately provided for, however, it is unexciting. It is more of a master-servant relationship rather than that of marital union. Nevertheless, Umeozo's death marks an end to her era of servitude. It ushers her into time of self-realization and identity formation. She joins and attends the Umuada and Alutaradi meetings as well as makes personal choices. For example, she boldly chooses Obiatu as sex partner, and rejects Abazu sexual overtures though Abazu approached her first. The death of Umeozo becomes the metaphor for the liberation of her femininity.

Female characters in *Last of the Strong Ones* relentlessly forge new identities in the face of tyrannical social feminist ideals. Each of them women entered marriage as a call to duty necessitated by culture's construction femininity as motherhood and wifehood. Consequently, they gain entrance into women discourse through which they clandestinely contend with the phallus. As it were, they enter into the "symbolic- order- of- the fathers". Thus they, undermine the order that endue the men with enormous power and authority. This order also classifies their gender as passive, gullible, emotional, sentimentally weak, and childish. When some of these female characters appear docile, they use their seeming docility to gain socio-political exposure. This resonates Denizkaydiotu's concept of patriarchal bargain. The deliberate passivity of these women and how they bargained their way through is played out in the case of Chibuka's relationship with her cruel and abusive husband, IHEME. It also reverberates in Onyekozuru's matrimony in which she is more or less a beast of burden. She accepts her fate and plays along in a bid to secure inheritance for her children. This is portrayed in the way she serves her elderly husband and an equally elderly co-wife, who is older than her biological mother is.

These female characters' suppressed resistance is a form of bargain/strategy meant to first, ensure their survival at the domestic sphere and subsequently, empower them to be relevant in the society. They later take centre-stage by joining the various socio-political associations of *alutaradi*, the *Oluada* and the *Obufo*. Notably too, female characters in *The Last of the Strong Ones* are not constrained by their deficiency in gender (as woman), in economic status (from poor parentage) or literacy status (as illiterate). Rather, what they lack in material wealth, they make-up in strength of character, resilience, integrity, and other attributes of subversive resistance. They contribute their strength and wisdom to the land of Umuga and collectively they take on the colonialist "kosiri" with all their humiliations against the Umuga and people. Ezeigbo remarks that:

It is not an easy matter being a woman in a society like ours where women are expected to do two-thirds of the chores. Women cannot escape many of the responsibilities thrust upon them by culture and tradition, but they can at least control their destiny to a large extent, and structure and take pride in every aspect of their lives (1996b, 7).

Conversely, Emecheta exposes what it means to be a woman, an African woman and a mother in Igbo society. She reveals how sexuality and fecundity may

sometimes be the only way by which femininity and womanhood are defined. For example, in *Second Class Citizen*, she presents Adah whose nurturing role is evidenced in her labours to support her family. Ada's tasks include fending for her children as well as preserving her womanhood. This is because the man of the home failed in his role as the family breadwinner. In *Joy's of Motherhood's*, Nnu Ego defines the authenticity of her womanhood only by the success of her children. She ties her success as a woman to her success as a mother. Consequently, she marries a man of a lower birth, who does not even appeal to her in any way in her quest to attain motherhood, having being humiliated and battered in her first marriage. Nnu Ego's whole destiny is tied to maternity. Her hope for happiness and prosperity is viewed through fecundity and the success of her children. Nnu Ego is a depiction of feminine violability and gullibility, the self-sacrificing mother. She also represents women as creators who must also nurture and bear pains with perseverance.

However, Emecheta assigns no space for the mother as a woman who feels pains, anger and frustration, or as one who is sapped by the responsibilities that is associated with her roles as a mother. This is because, she allows Nnu Ego to die without the benefit of her labour and self-sacrifice. Conversely, she depicts feminine assertiveness, which is a misnomer in Igbo femininity in *Adaku* and *Ona*. These two characters refused to be appendages to any man, in their various relationships, they dictate the tone.

### Conclusion

This essay submits that despite the fact that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, said to portray back-house female characters it also reveals strength and assertiveness. It also establishes that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Last of the Strong Ones* and Buchi Emecheta's *Joy's of Motherhood* revolutionized Igbo culture prescribed qualities of femininity. They present female characters who are not inflamed by the burdens of the traditional Igbo society prescribed feminine docility, gullibility, passivity, submissiveness, and the like. Rather, they reveal great bold characters who are not disempowered by their masculinised society. The female characters empower themselves and contribute in building their society. In this society, they create valued and are valued who they are.

The essay reveals that *Last of the Strong Ones* counsel that women choose the painful growth of full identity over normative femininity. Hence, they should take up tasks considered as masculine and avoid tasks executed by or for the body in traditional women's role. In addition, women must participate passionately in the political processes of their societies or face the consequence of erasure that a negative complacency brings.

This essay therefore contends that the authors studied dismantled and (re)constructed the Igbo traditional notion of femininity that perceives females as passive, docile, silent, wife and mother. They positively reconstruct characters who embrace their femininity in a more balanced personality culminating in self-actualization. However, what is profound in the texts remains the feminine (re)construction that these selected authors have employed to represent characters that reject the debilitating traditional norms of femininity, hence the emergence of new forms of Igbo Femininity.

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