

**FEMALE RAGE AND REACTION IN THE POETRY OF MAYA  
ANGELOU AND AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO: A COMPARATIVE  
STUDY**

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**Abstract**

This study on “Female Rage and Reaction in the Poetry of Maya Angelou and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo” reflects different geographical regions: Africa and African-America. The writers interrogate this ideological stance through the expression of defiance and vision in mobilizing the expressive resources of language in distinctive ways. The poetry of these poets may have been studied by scholars in diverse fields, but not as a modest contribution to 21<sup>st</sup> century Post- Colonial Literature. This paper exposes the quandary of womanhood by highlighting that which edifies female survival in Africa and African America. It also gives a global understanding of black female literature. The paper adopts the Marxist feminist’s approach in exploring their poems and shows how the poets expose and enforce a sense of responsibility; a responsibility of educating the masses on gender roles and resistance to institutional injustices. The black women experiences enrich the interpretation of the poems and facilitates the effectiveness of the stylistic techniques used. Angelou and Adimora-Ezeigbo drawing from their personal experiences, launch womanhood in a stifled space so as to decolonize a woman’s selfhood in a male hegemonic stage. The findings show that Angelou and Adimora-Ezeigbo are the “enfant terrible” and literary intelligentsias representing the subjugated women across the globe. It is recommended that more research on comparative studies be carried out to unmask those veiled experiences of women in different climes.

**Key words:** Marxist feminism, Rage, Space, Geographical regions, Male hegemony

### Introduction

#### **Female Rage and Reaction in the Poetry of Maya Angelou and Adimora Akachi Adimra-Ezeigbo**

Female rage and reaction are predominant in black women literature. This predominance is a pointer to the indignities black women have suffered and are still suffering. It is this prejudiced attitude of men that most black female writers have sought to debunk in their writings. Imoh Emenyi and Imo Okon affirm this when they remark that:

...literature is the aesthetic chronicle of a race struggling in the face of enslavement, oppression, deprivation and near-total subjugation of a people's right to live. The engendering impulse of this literature is the resistance to inequality, injustice, exploitation-all forms of human tyranny; the sustaining spirit of the literature is dedication to human rights and dignity. It is a literature created by the oppressed to indict oppression. (167-168)

The black women in Africa and Africa America are psychologically severed from their socio-cultural abode and not fully absorbed into the patriarchal space. In most cases, the women became social outcast made to bear the odium of inferiority and repressed pride of womanhood. Angelou and Adimora-Ezeigbo are representatives of subdued women who have found their own voice and their identity in an outpour courage and new found confidence. Their main target is to redefine the women's way of thoughts in Africa and in the diaspora. Angelou and Adimora-Ezeigbo like all sensitive writers recreate in their poems the reality which the women of African American and African descent have to live, in a world where institutional injustices are perpetrated and perpetuated. The women writers try to sensitize and organize black community to end these abuses and to give the repressed woman the chance to express her need. Their poems are imbued with gender tension, cultural alienation and the necessity for social change through revolutionary means. Feminist writers have reacted in various ways to nip this problem in the bud. Vivian Gornick states that "being a housewife is an illegitimate profession" (qtd in Bob Lewis, *The Feminist Lie...*38) and another feminist activist,s Sheila Cronin holds that " since marriage constitutes slavery for women, it is clear that the women's movement must concentrate on attacking this institution"(Bob Lewis, *The Feminist Lie...* 38). The analysis will vividly

unravel the teleological and ideological connectedness of African women writers and their counterparts in African America.

Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" is an agitation of a black young woman in a restrictive male society and an unforgiving racist world, especially in the United States of America. The poem is sarcastic address by the poet persona on the confidence and strength bestowed on a female child in a male hegemonic society. This strength manifests in successes in life, self-worth and pride in their capabilities. Angelou debunks the long held views that women are inferior to their male counterparts in the society. In her opinion, women have no need to feel inferior to men because their roles in the society has the same significance as that of the male counterparts. Lyman Hagen makes us to understand that the "woman describes in the poem is synonymous with Angelou. Angelou is an imposing woman, at least six feet tall. She has a strong temperament and a compelling presence as defined in the poem" (126). The poet launches the position of the woman in this sarcastic but scathing remarks:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies  
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model size.  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I am telling lies  
I say,  
It is the reach of my arms  
The span of my hips  
The stride of my steps  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally  
Phenomenal woman  
That's me.(4)

The phenomenal dexterity displayed by the poet persona, who by extension is a woman has shown that the position of women in the society is intricately woven with an inbuilt and unadulterated forces that are exclusively preserved for the female folks. As moral conscience of our debased patriarchy, Angelou brings to the fore that independence, strength of purpose that every woman needs to be attractive.

The poet did not only negate the fact that men are foil in a woman's world, but she is calling on the supposed harbingers of tradition that women are phenomenal in all ramifications and should be given the chance to prod and reform a sullied and bias society. The poet persona states:

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery  
When I try to show them  
They say they still can't see. (4)

Angelou in the poem illuminates the position of women as a gladiator of womanhood, noting that women can exist with or without men. The poet persona describes men who swarm around her as “hive of honey bees” (4). This demonization and dehumanization is aimed at conjuring up an image of men as less powerful creatures. By asserting that men cannot grasp her “inner mystery” she continues to elevate the female identity in comparison to that of the male, implying that men are incapable of understanding the mystery behind her existence. Angelou in *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* expatiates:

We must replace fear with chauvinism hate, timidity and apathy which flow in our national column with courage, sensitivity, perseverance and love. And by love I mean the condition in the human spirit which is so profound that it encourages us to develop courage. (32)

Feminist themes deepen, as Angelou portrays men falling on a submissive position in a male driven society. In situating men at the bottom of the rungs of the ladder, Angelou fumes against a society that practices racism and sexism which she sees debasing and subverting humanity.

The male controlled society in Africa and Nigeria in particular uses power as an instrument of negation to frustrate the dreams and aspiration of women by instituting a reign of terror and disillusionment. As poets whose poetic ideologies are anchored in Marxist-feminist's framework, they are convinced that the plight and objectification of the women are intricately woven with the exclusion of the ordinary people who are placed on the borderline of relevance. This pedestrian placement of women is what the poets, through creativity, seek to redress. Through the poems selected for analysis in subsequent paragraphs, a counteraction of these depressing images surfaces in the portrayal of women who are determined to reform their societies from their sexist standpoint.

“Those Wings Must Fly” by Adimora-Ezeigbo reminds one of Maya Angelou's poem entitled “Still I Rise” where a woman refuses to be subdued in

a male dominated society. Toril Moi has it that “throughout history, a few exceptional women have indeed managed to resist the full pressure of patriarchal ideology, becoming conscious of their own oppression and voicing their own opposition to male power” (26). Women have vowed to resist any attempt to crush their beings. The poet persona remarks:

The offending time wounds our ears  
It discordant sounds drown our initiatives,  
Erase our efforts  
Masculinist tone assaults our sensibility  
Droning on to control the captive more  
Beware of the Queen Bee’s stunning sting  
That banishes dubious drones from the hives.  
(*Dancing Masks*, 34)

The warning “Beware of the Queen Bee’s stunning stings/that banishes dubious drones” metaphorically refers to African feminism and institutionalized patriarchy, respectively. The Queen Bee is weary of the dubious drone represented by patriarchy. Adimora-Ezeigbo is calling for a revolutionary action against this institutionalized hegemony in the society. The following contentious assumption led to the creation of authentic, refined, educated and vocal women in the society. The poet’s persona holds that:

We feel the claws of paternalism  
Mistaken as criticism  
Disempowerment disguised as empowerment  
Opportunism wearing the toga of generosity  
You blow the horn of humiliation  
And spread the tunes of greenhouse gases  
Stop before we suffocate  
But we are the cat with nine lives!  
We shall not die (*Dancing Masks*, 34)

The poet persona realizes the inevitability of making men aware of the fact that they are “...cat with nine lives”. This situation accentuates the position of the defiant and assertive woman in Africa which is significantly different from the African-American women’s opinions on womanhood. The women are imbued with the kind of strength that contravenes the expected phallic norms as Grace Eche Okereke explains

It is a confrontational dialogic that serves as a paradigm of male gender animosity and antagonism when his authority is threatened by female awareness and revolt. The confrontations with gender politics pits patriarchy against African feminism, and is often played out within articulatory space, and quite often degenerate into outrage. (“African Feminist Dialogics...” 266)

Women in African society have continued to achieve this gender reconstruction and reformation in variant ways. Okereke further reaffirms that “Ezeigbo’s women use witty, pithy proverbs to express their thoughts and ideas with phallic abandon... thereby redeeming women’s language from the trivialization to which patriarchal consciousness often condemns it” (“African Feminist Dialogics” ...266). The women’s position has been elevated by women writers in the socio-political landscape of the world.

But Maya Angelous in “Still I Rise” reechoes the strength and position of the women in the phenomenal woman. The woman in this context is assumed to have been humiliated, abused and reduced to the dust of the earth where Tom, Dick and Harry could trample on. Her reputation in the society has been besmirched by the forces of hate. It is this bestiality exhibited by patriarchy that ignited the burning desire of a woman who refused to be subdued and cajoled by an unforgiven racist and the male super structure as she speaks:

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I’ll rise. (2157)

The poem displays the confidence of being a black woman and the insecurity of being a white supremacist. The recent attack of the Capitol in the United States in Donald Trump’s administration is a demonstration of this division in the society. Angelou ostensibly confronts history by using her haughtiness and seething anger to intimidate the perpetrators of racism and sexism in the society. In Angelou’s view, she is pretentiously assuring the white society and patriarchy that she will rise to any occasion and her skin pigmentation and sex would not stop her as she asserts:

Out of the huts of history’s shame  
I rise  
Up from the past that’s rooted in pain  
I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise....  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and hope of the slaves.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise (2157)

In spite of being branded as a slave in the larger American society, the poet persona feels she will rise “out of the history’s shame”. The tribulation and psychological torture in the middle passage have not in any deterred an African American woman from rising to fame “leaving behind night of terror and fear”. As a representative of the slave and the maligned black, the poet persona feels that restrictions are bound to occur and surmounting it demands this inbuilt dexterity of womanhood. In the poem, Angelou is inculcating in new born babies the smugness of the ancestors. Race pride and social protest are major tools that the poet is using to nip the existential problems of patriarchy and racism in the bud. Angelou’s style of writing poetry helps in reigniting and reinforcing the attitude of black women towards this double edged evil: racism and sexism. Her views on sexism is radically different from Adimora-Ezeigbo’s opinion. This is because Angelou downplays complementarity and accommodation as a veritable tool of female liberation. Feminist like Angelou believes that the black women are undergoing psychological, physical and socio-cultural transformation and this transformation is affecting the society’s definition of their roles and positions. This feminist’s position unravels the revolutionary impulse of the poets. Abey Lincoln reaffirms this in his paper “Who Will Revere the Black Woman?” when she states that “Any black human being able to survive the horrendous and evil circumstances in which one inevitably finds oneself trapped must be some kind of a giant with great and peculiar abilities, with an armour as resistant as steel yet made of purest gold” (81) Having gone through racial discrimination and the tight fisted grip of patriarchy, Angelou has challenged that space that is exclusively meant for men. In surmounting these obstacles, the poet is projected as a “giant” of her race that is endowed with peculiar abilities in a racist male hegemonic society. This is why the poet persona attacks all hegemonic strands and stereotypic branding of womanhood in a chauvinistic space

In spite of the atrocities committed against women, Adimora-Ezeigbo still feels that complementarity between the sexes is a driving force for reformation and

giving the woman the rightful place in the society. No segment of the society captures the phenomenon more succinctly than the creative artist who uncompromisingly illuminates these changes in her poem and explores how these changes are intensifying the conflict within the society. In this sense, Bohannon P and Curtin P in their book entitled *Africa and Africans* state that “African women, by and large, have a high position: legal rights, religious and political responsibility, economic independence...Women in Africa and (African America) are not, in short, a deprived group as they were in the nineteenth century western world” (107-8). The women writers have a unifying vision but are discreet in their artistic exposition. Adimora-Ezeigbo explores a strand of feminism that is revolutionary in its challenge to a system that incorporates both class and patriarchal domination. Niyi Akingbe’s assertion strengthens the above comment when he states that

This meant that they are not only portrayed negative, social, political and economic conditions like the non-ideological predecessors, they also sought to show explicitly how much negative situations stemmed from the inherently flawed, unjust and unsustainable economic system inherent in capitalism and replaced by a socialist oriented system of governance that would guarantee the fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, to every members of the society, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity and state. (54)

Women have no need to feel inferior to men because their roles on earth have the same significance as their male counterparts. Adimora-Ezeigbo’s poem is an independent contribution amidst multifaceted voices calling for a humanistic and down-to-earth disburdening of the women economically, politically, culturally, and socially. Confident, the poet persona speaks:

Let the winds blow the word, spread far and wide  
There will always be a wind to drive our course  
We are here to say, our sun shines, brightly  
With the pen we clear the undergrowth  
Writing ourselves out of extinction  
Into the hallowed hall of fame. (*Dancing Masks*, 35)

What do we make of a country where women are given little or no relevance at all? What do we make of a country where the wealth of the country is owned by men alone? For reformation of the African society to become feasible, women should be included in the scheme of things.



Angelou deploys the use of intelligent poetic convention and language packed messages to interrogate the temperament of women. The use of different language styles emerges as result of her kind of message she intends to convey. "Our Grandmother" is Angelou's poem that fervently interrogate the locus of womenfolk in a sullied and dwindling American society: "she lays, skin down in the moist dirt..." (4). The verse is written in such a way that the woman is dehumanized and dwarfed by some alleged white supremacists. The bard's utilization of "she", implicitly refers to a woman and slave on her way to survival.

She muttered, lifting her  
head a nod toward  
freedom,  
I shall not, I shall not be moved. (4)

The poem as enunciated by the poet is been told from an escapee's and feminist's point of views to drive home her desire to launch her herself in the restrictive male space. The title of I shall not be moved reverberates as a collection and is a major elixir of defiance and optimism to smother and choke the male superstructure and a rancorous and vicious system that annihilate women in the society. The poet persona observes that she can vicariously live through her children. The poet persona is standing out of the world of injustice and irrationality as she voices her belief " Her universe, often/iniquity has bound me to his bed/...I must not be moved" (4). As a subjugated woman of colour, the poet persona is made to bear the brunt of slavery, the spank of patriarchy and an outsider in a country she labored to build. The poet persona also brings to the fore deprecating names meted to women as sub-humans: "swirling ribbons of history" (4). These atrocities she derides with passion as she maintains her ground that she shall not be moved. The main aim is to uproot and reconstruct the society in favour of women. Each of these women, however, has enormous resistance and resilience. Indeed, the poet presents inhospitably picture of black life; coupled with humour and the attendant triumph in the society. The poem is filled with fire invoking imagery.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's "Chicken Gizzard" berates the male controlled hierarchy for their policies against women in the society. The poet sarcastically bemoans the African traditional culture that plays down the role of women in the society. She sees it as "the rugged terrain of patriarchy with its restrictions and inhibition" (1). She avers that "women are strategizing and negotiating with the men in their determination to survive and make imprints in the socio-political, cultural and economic landscapes of the country" (1). The poet persona sees

the chicken gizzard phenomenon as subjugating and dehumanizing. The denial of women's right to eat chicken gizzard portrays the limitation and embarrassment of a woman psychologically, emotionally and economically as shown in the lines below:

Gizzard culture  
Guarded ritual  
of an ancient culture  
bizaare cult  
'O woman  
this meat is a taboo for you'-  
his vulgar spite-suffering ears  
chastised by a din of dos and don't (*Heart Songs*, 58)

The thematic focus of the poem is to achieve an unprejudiced and an egalitarian society. Adimora-Ezeigbo presents women who refused to be subdued in a male dominated society. For a woman to be "chastised by a din of dos and don't" reveals how women are psychologically battered. The women frown at the way they are relegated to the background and decisions are taken without their knowledge. Most times, the men assume the prerogative of giving their daughters out for marriage without their approval. The above extract presents a situation where women are meant to be seen but remain voiceless, not heard and disadvantaged. Such women according to Patricia Hills are "... twice victimized, first by actual rape, in this case rape under slavery... But there are victimized again by family members, community, residents and social institutions such as criminal justice systems which somehow believe that rape victims are responsible for their own victimization" (147). This ancient custom in Adimora-Ezeigbo's vantage point should be challenged and abrogated. The important thing is that positive women in her poem protest and resist this humiliation by paving their own way to progress, self-realization and self-emancipation. The poet persona speaks:

Grim faced, she stares aghast  
eyes scavenging for victims' carrion  
mind excavating centuries of oppression  
unnumbered seasons of suppression  
unprovoked to say the least  
gizzard monopoly is but one  
of several inhuman games, acts  
of malevolent posturing. (*Heart Songs*, 58)

From the exposition so far, tradition has proven to be very detrimental and antagonistic to the growth of women and societal reformation. This practice as enunciated by the poet should be discarded and thrown into the dustbin of history. The conscious woman rages on

...sheepishly  
then raw rage changing forward  
teeth grinding, she grabs the gizzard  
wrenching with might, freeing it  
from bloody carcass  
of the just slaughtered super chicken. (*Heart Songs*,  
58-59)

For women to empower themselves, they need courage and resilience to stop the marginalization camouflaged by tradition: “teeth grinding, she grabs the gizzard/wrenching with might, freeing it”. Hence the triumphant victory over oppression is further viewed in the following lines:

Plunk! With passion, into the bin  
She flings it, eyes fuming, nose flaring  
‘Yah! There goes your grisly gizzard!  
And your cruel custom as well! (*Heart Songs...59*)

This underlines the revolutionary impulse of the poem for reformation of gender division in our society. Adimora-Ezeigbo’s vision for gender reformation is not just to create an egalitarian society but “relocating the self out of the male perspective into the female perspective. It is a claim for the right to authentic self-definition, rejecting both male conception of female otherness, and narrow boundaries of cultural conceptions of female roles” (Helen Haste’s *Sexual Metaphor...101*). Adimora-Ezeigbo succeeds in creating women who rebut to be willing tools in the hands of men. She has also shown the assertiveness, determination and independence of the mind. Having demolished the foundation of patriarchal terrorism, Adimora-Ezeigbo has been able to reclaim the social equilibrium lost during the era of patriarchy.

Adimora-Ezeigbo seems to be saying enough is enough to those self-acclaimed chauvinists whose hatred for women are likened to the torrent of hurricane in “Your Choice and Yours Alone”. Adimora-Ezeigbo declares her uncompromising radical disposition in her desire for reformation on the way the society look at women in Nigeria. The persona observes:

The time of playing truant is over;  
gone are the season of deceit  
when you cheat on me,  
consorting with faceless other  
I say, choose today  
whom you will love  
me or the one by the wings? (*DancingMasks*, 53)

In the first instance, colonization helps in perpetuating the colonist discernment of the “other” myth index of the African woman as the other raise to power three: the “other” “other” “other”. Again, the white woman examines the black woman as the other’s other. This ideology has made patriarchy in African cosmology to classify women as the “faceless other”. Although these women are subjected to dehumanizing patriarchal ideology, Adimora-Ezeigbo has shown women’s resolute and recalcitrant posture in subverting the cultural walls of patriarchy in the lines below:

I am fed up with your philandering  
Pissed up by your prevarication  
Just how far can one go in the game of tolerance  
How long can the virtue of patience endure? (*DancingMasks*, 53)

Expressions like “philandering” and “prevarication” are used to expose the handiworks of men and ascertain their desires for change in the society. It is evident that “...many derogatory images portrayed of women have been guarded by prejudice, ignorance and sexism which characterized patriarchy” (Uko, 191). It is also interesting to categorically state that Adimora-Ezeigbo’s women are endowed with strengths and potentials that vehemently subverts the phallogocentric walls of patriarchy. The poet persona affirms that:

Your invocation to fierce Cerberus or deadly medusa  
Does not frighten me or shock my resolve  
I’m not Stygian-bound nor will I sail on the water of Lethe  
There are frightful crime that call for execution-  
murder, robbery by violence, treason, parricide, farricide  
and incest-  
non shall be laid at my door in my drive for justice,  
my battle to know where I stand with you! (*Dancing Masks*, 53)

The concomitant rebellious language by the poet persona provides both psychological and physical therapy for the women in strengthening and reforming the society. The growth of female consciousness has weakened the patriarchal bond and has given the woman a voice, power and choice to interrogate capitalism. The above extract thematically confronts oppression. It gives hope and confidence to the woman on the way forward. Adimora-Ezeigbo has convincingly hammered on the socio-political and cultural foundations on which cultural values and societal norms can be rebranded for the good of men and women in the society.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Angelou and Adimora-Ezeigbo are the “enfant terrible” of the female literary stage. The poets’ use of feminist idiolect or language is radical and confrontational. Their contributions have made the men retire too early in their literary chauvinistic dispositions. Their poems are major indicators of a woman’s quest to be freed in a debilitating white and black hegemonic society. The writers deploy their poetic claws and arsenals to bite the sensibilities of this offensive patriarchy, choke and asphyxiate their space to accommodate the women. The deployment of feminist idiolect or language helps tremendously in stifling the mental and physical space of men. It is this use of language that has projected women in the political, social, economic and psychological spheres. This has actually reaffirmed Chinweizu earlier stand in *Anatomy of Female Power* that women are the neck that control the head.

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