

EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT AS A TOOL FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC LIBERATION IN AKACHI ADIMORA- EZEIGBO'S SELECTED NOVELS.

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Abstract

The pursuit of education and socio-economic liberation foregrounds the thrust of Ezeigbo's selected novels. This paper raises these vital issues as it affects female characters in the novel. Hinged on the feminist framework, the study reveals Ezeigbo's sensitivity to the plight of women in patriarchal/traditional African societies and places these heroines in the positions of vocality, visibility, economic liberation, and self-actualization via the instrumentality of education. This paper therefore argues that, educational empowerment is pivotal to the economic growth and liberation of women in Nigeria and at large, therefore every member of the society must come together to support female education as this will accelerate their development and contributions to their families and communities.

Keywords: Education, Economic, Empowerment, Liberation

Introduction

Education is important to everyone, but is more important to girls and women because the educational achievements of women have a multiplier effect on the family, community and the nation in general. It not only gives them the opportunity to earn but also helps them to support their family since they are responsible for the overall development of the whole family. Education also gives the women vocality in the society and empowers them to react to rules and

regulations affecting them. Grace Okereke views education as “a formal Western Education, a colonial heritage, which has been positive liberating force for Nigerian women. It has equipped them for self-definition by raising their consciousness...” (Education as Colonial Heritage ... 133). This formal education have given women the power and voice to assert themselves by speaking in different spheres such as political, religion, various organizations and in the business world. Hence in their article titled “Vocality in Sefi Atta’s Women...” Ifeoma Odinye and Beatrice Ebingha assert that “Sefi Attah...uses education as an instrument of vocality” (18). Aside giving the women a voice, education also serve as liberating force and equips the women for self-definition. Hadiza Adamu collaborate this fact when she states that “Education provides a woman with communicative, computational and occupational skills needed for her to participate in the social economic and cultural life in her community” (www.globalacademic). Bariaala Fabian Baage posits that “No individual can claim to have fully realised his or potential without education” (650). Education is therefore essential for women in actualizing their economic liberation and financial freedom. Thus, this article explores the economic strength gained by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s characters in her novels through educational empowerment.

Women economic empowerment is crucial to societal development and one way to deploy the empowerment of women is through economics. When women are economically empowered, they see themselves as members of the society who have equal opportunities and privileges. Through this, the women achieve more self-confidence and are able to contribute meaningfully in their families and communities. Rekha Mehra, et al posits that “A woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions” (www.themimu.info/docs).

Women need basic skills, resources and favourable conditions to compete and succeed in the economic sphere. Therefore, the need to access economic institutions becomes paramount. For the women to benefit from these economic activities they also need to have the capacity to make decisions, act on them and control resources and this can be achieved through educational empowerment, informal or formal. From the above, it is pertinent that we define what economics is and

how it affects women's empowerment. Simply put economics deals with the production, distribution and consumption wealth (Iyoha 1). This production, distribution and consumption of wealth are the right of everyone, both the men and women and imply that everybody should be involved in the activities that empower them economically. The lack of education will deprive women from attaining the desired economic liberation, hence the need for women's education.

Educational Empowerment in the novel

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in her trilogy emphasizes the importance of formal education and its effects on the lives of the women especially the lives of children of Eaglewoman. In the novels, there exists informal and formal education, informal which made the women at the local level gain their economic empowerment and the formal which made the children of the Eaglewoman stand out in the larger modern society where patriarchy is the order. Ediyne E. Anugwom notes that "Education is first and foremost a social tool that is imperative for the continued survival and growth of the society. Against this background, education whether formal or informal, assumes a social heavy context" (128). In *Symbols*, Eaglewoman has little education and uses it to assert herself. The narrator reveals: "She in Class Four.... At sixteen, Eaglewoman felt grown-up and independent, resentful of anybody who had power over her or told her what to do and what not to do" (*Symbols* 6). Eaglewoman becomes one of the few females who embrace the white man's (Kosiri) culture courtesy of her mother Aziagba. Aziagba loses her father and lover to the British invaders of Umuga and gives birth to a set of twins (Nnamdi and Edochie) which at that time was a sacrilege in Igbo land and tradition demanded that the twins must be killed. Aziagba has no option than to join Christianity where her twins will be protected; this offers her a new culture leading to her daughter, Eaglewoman, joining the new way which most parents forbade their children to go. The result of Aziagba's decision is the education of her daughter – Eaglewoman (*Symbols* 61 – 62). Eaglewoman becomes literate and is able to read and write but is limited to domestic chores and trading. According to Okereke, "When they were opportune to go to school, girls were taught different subjects from boys. While boys were exposed to all fields – sciences, social sciences, arts – girls were taught subjects like domestic science, the Bible – that helped to improve their

roles as wives, mothers and housekeepers” (132). This is evident in Eaglewoman’s profession as baker, tailor, good cook, housekeeper and a good wife. Another advantage education offers Eaglewoman at the age of sixteen is the boldness to assert herself and break out from the chains of her early betrothal to Nathaniel Okeke at an early age of eight without her consent. Odinye and Ebingha asserts “Women’s vocality in women’s fiction has moved them away from the status of docility, subservience, passiveness and powerlessness to becoming aggressive, powerful...” (22). The narrator states, “Sixteen is the age. Ten plus six. Age of awakening. She was in Class Four when he was appointed choirmaster by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) at Umuga”... By this time she was sixteen, the cord of his desires were choking her” (*Symbols* 6). Thus, the power of knowledge which come only through education and vocality gives Eaglewoman the courage to abandon the one-side engagement despite her mother’s fears. A woman can greatly achieve economic empowerment if combined with knowledge gained through education. This gives Eaglewoman the boost to succeed in all her business endeavours. According to Umoren and Esu, “Women need education to broaden their idea, knowledge, attitudes, values and perceptions on which they can build a better life” (226). Eaglewoman also pays attention to her daughters’ education, “School is beckoning to my daughters” (*Symbols* 133). And as her daughters argue over a song they learnt in school, Eaglewoman who knows the importance of education ponders about their future: “Like every loving mother she worries about them, about what fate has in store for them” (*Symbols* 134).

Educational empowerment also means that women will go ahead to acquire as much education as men are encouraged to acquire (Umoren *et al.*, 225). It is for the above reason that Eaglewoman’s five daughters decide to go to school. They have great visions to become great women in future. And in her reminiscence, Obioma recalls:

My sisters and I nursed our big dream of becoming university graduates, refusing offers of marriage. Papa and mama shared our dreams, gave us what financial support they could muster at the period of terrible deprivation (*Children* 232).

After the civil war, Eaglewoman and her husband Osai are impoverished and it becomes difficult to support their daughters' education. Although resources are lean, the five girls make up their minds to pursue their studies vigorously until they attain great heights in their different endeavours. Mariama B in *So Long a Letter* affirms in her reaction to the patriarchs that, "We have a right, just as you have, to education which we ought to be able to pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. We have a right to equal well paid employment, to equal opportunities" (61). Education, therefore, comes with power and knowledge and empowers both sexes to know and fight for their rights.

Eaglewoman is the secretary of her church Mothers Union. Her educational empowerment gives her the privilege to assert herself among her peers, serve her community and church. It also serves as an encouragement to her daughters who look up to her as a mentor and role model. The education of Eaglewoman daughters produce graduates in different fields. Ogonna, the first daughter, is a secondary school teacher who graduates with a good degree in Biology from the University of Ibadan and becomes a business woman who travels to Awka and Coal City from Lagoon City to supply clothes. She tells us: "I bought a van... I was able to meet my needs with the money accruing to me (*Children* 307 & 313). Ogonna is both educationally and economically empowered.

Nmenne the second daughter studies and becomes a senior lecturer at the University of the South, Lagoon City. During her school years, she stands out among her classmates, knowledgeable in her field of study – English. Her classmate in secondary school calls her "Nnenne the avid reader! A caterpillar that devoured the leaves of books" (*Children* 368-369). Nnenne's academic excellence catapults her to the post of a professor at a very young age and the position of a professor means better pay. The benefit of Western education on Nnenne and her siblings offered them great economic empowerment and financial freedom. Juliet C. Alex-Nmecha and Florence I. Archibong opine "Education is an important instrument for knowledge, skills, and building self-confidence. Through education, women are able to contribute most effectively to the transformation of their environment and improve the socio-economic status of their families" (70). Obioma, the third daughter of Josiah Okwara, suffers hunger in school because of the civil war and succumbs to her friend's pressure of having a

boyfriend in the barracks, a relationship which results in her pregnancy. But Obioma's determination to become a graduate along with her family's support gives her the opportunity to return to school as seen in her reminiscence:

My sisters and I shuffled or limped back to school – cold, hungry and almost naked. Some children actually refused to return to school.... Many girls slunk back home, like whipped dogs and got married to men who could hardly take care of them. Some eloped with soldiers in the Federal army. My sister and I nursed our big dream of becoming university graduates, refusing offers of marriage. Papa and Mama shared our dreams, gave us what financial support they could muster at the period of terrible deprivation. But what they gave use was not enough (*Children* 232).

In spite of Obioma's pregnancy, certain factors like her parents' support, her determination and strong will to succeed, earn her a good result in her School Certificate Examination (*Children* 268). This eventually elevates her to fulfill her dream of becoming a graduate. She becomes a Pastor after acquiring sound education, a rare profession for the women in her time as she recalls, "When I introduce myself as a pastor and evangelist, many of them stared at me as if I have said something unusual.... However, I have no problem operating my church. Our religion believes that God uses both man and women to accomplish his plans" (*Children* 136 – 137). The above depicts that a woman with sound educational background and requisite training should not be discriminated against but encouraged to assert herself. As the leader of New Age Church, Obioma's ministry is prosperous; the ministry's vision is on men, women and children but with emphasis on women because of their vulnerability to vices instituted by the menfolk (*Children* 205). The ministry being prosperous includes their financial status which helps the church to cater and support her members.

Chiaku, the fourth of the children, like her siblings studies very hard and obtains a very good school certificate. Her excellent performance fetches a scholarship scheme for her to study in England. She eventually graduates as a medical doctor and practices in England

(*Children* 401). With degree in journalism, Amara, the fifth daughter of Eaglewomen gets a well-paid job with Coal City's *Daily Post* as a journalist (*Children* 185), thus gaining economic independence as a result of her educational empowerment. Alex-Nmecha and Archibong notes that "Education is the most important ingredient for human improvement and advancement in this modern life. It is the fundamental means of transformation and empowering the individual to effect vital developmental changes in any society (69). The battle for self-assertion and survival has been a long struggle for the woman, which must be won. Hence, the importance of education cannot be overlooked for the liberation of women. There is need for total support for the traditional woman in the rural community who is still wallowing in ignorance and is denied education due to early marriage and childbirth. Therefore, the struggle for true emancipation mandates all stakeholders to come together to ensure that every female is educated for a total economic emancipation.

Adanna (Pa Joel's daughter and Nnenna's friend) is also privilege to attain great academic heights as a female child. She graduates and becomes a lecturer but is denied her promotions due to favouritism. Having gone to school, she uses her educational attainment and exposure to start her own Non-Governmental Organizing – Gender Equity Watch which promotes the advancement of gender equity in the country. She collaborates with both international and regional organisations such as the United Nations, Organisation of African Unity and ECOWAS to struggle for the change and the improvement of women lives in Nigeria and Africa (*Children* 220-223). Her educational power takes her beyond the shores of her country to get support to fight the gender cause. Her educational empowerment also leads to her financial independence.

Having gone through Secondary School, Obot (Okon's wife) is encouraged by Osai to attend the Umuga Teachers College for a professional certificate. At the end of the training, Obot becomes the head teacher of a nursery school thereby gaining both educational and economic empowerment. The author portrays the woman as having the same capabilities as the man and as being capable of doing better. The narrator states: "... and this has placed her even much higher educationally than Okon, who only got as far as primary six" (*Children* 45).

The feminist theory advocates for women empowerment through education which culminates into economic liberation. Itang Egbung asserts that “the aim of feminism is to raise consciousness among women despite their color and race” (17). This consciousness that has been raised among women from different feminist have resulted to some level of educational empowerment and economic liberation for women in Africa and the world over.

Conclusion

From the analysis above, the importance of education cannot be over-emphasized. Akachi Ezeigbo successfully creates and elevates women in her novel who excel in their various academic fields and careers. She celebrates their sterling qualities – dedication, commitment, sense of purpose and hard work. Educational empowerment for the women should be encouraged and non-negotiable as this will help them attain economic care for themselves and their families. It is important to commend female literary artists like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali and Akachi Ezeigbo who through their writings enlightened the women and the general society on the importance of training a girl child. It is a fact that when you train a girl child, you train the nation. Feminist will continue to advocate and support the education of women because this will lead to their economic emancipation thereby contributing to the growth of their families and societies at large.

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