

African Feminism in the Nigerian Context: A House of Affirmations and Denials

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Abstract

Theorizing the roots of feminism in the specific African experience has been a quest by a number of prominent African female writers. They have avidly reflected on it in their various creative and critical outputs. The inherent ideological differences among these writers in their quest for an African variant of feminism, owing to the peculiarities of their respective sociocultural settings, has led to what critics have contentiously regarded as 'voices' in African feminism. Against this backdrop, on the one hand, Charles Nnolim (1994) [2010] argues that feminism in African literature is "a house divided". On the other hand, Chioma Opara (2013), in contention with the former, posits that it is rather "a house integrated". The present study thus establishes the two critical poles as wherein the entire gamut of critical and theoretical points of contentions in African feminism is largely subsumed. Neither of the two paradigms is discredited in favor or defense of the other, noting their huge critical substances. This paper rather attempts to strike a balance in-between, ultimately with a view to delineating its own critical perspective. By drawing instances from three prominent Nigerian female writings, the study moves away from the aforementioned established critical patterns to a novel paradigm which conceives feminism in African literature, with specific reference to the Nigerian context, as rather 'a house of affirmations and denials.'

Keywords

African Feminism; Nigerian Female Writers; A House Divided; A House Integrated; A House of Affirmations and Denials.

1. Introduction

Providing a unique definition of feminism has always constituted a challenge because of the term's various conceptual ramifications and connotations. Its definitions and meanings differ from one theorist or feminist to the other, depending on his or her ideological assumptions and socio-cultural beliefs, leanings or realities. In view of this, Mobolanle Sotunsa defines feminism as "a historically diverse and culturally varied international movement probing 'the question of women'" (3). As a field of study, deCaires Narain posits that

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feminism has “always been an anxious and contested field of study characterized by endlessly permutating boundaries and an acutely self-critical praxis. We now speak of feminisms, plural, rather than feminism, singular and of ‘woman’ rather than women” (95). Evidently, the underlying thrust in feminism is that, in comparison to men, women are presumably unequally treated and are thus significantly disadvantaged. Hence, they seek to challenge, as many have claimed, such culturally constructed patriarchy in the bid for inclusiveness.

Maggie Humm avers that “the growth of feminist movement itself is inseparable from feminist criticism. Women become feminists by becoming conscious of, and criticizing the power of symbols and the ideology of culture” (4). It will, therefore, be logical to conceive of feminism as an ideological phenomenon which tumultuously grew out of the claimed patriarchal paradigm or culture in specific socio-cultural settings. By this, syllogistically, it means feminism is non-existent without the so-called patriarchy which it seeks to undermine. In other words, like a mass of destructive cells (tumor), feminism can be said to have ideologically grown out of a body – patriarchal culture or structure – primarily to destroy such a body structure it perceives as inhibiting to its development and growth. This condition is what Charles Nnolim likens to the parable of ‘chichidodo bird’ in the famous African novel, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*:

But be that as it may the concept of feminism both at the local and international levels has a worm that squirms at its core and is maggot-ridden by its human condition, because the dilemma of a feminist is the dilemma of the proverbial chichidodo which hates excreta with all its soul but thrives on maggots that breed inside faeces. The dilemma is this: woman hates or at least, confronts man, her vaunted oppressor, but needs love; and the love she needs for emotional fulfilment can only be provided by “enemy” man. (114)

To this end, the critical question is, to what extent has this been attained by the movement? The answer to this paramount question is largely fluid and indeterminate. This is because, as noted above, the general conception of feminism, or the feminist tradition, has been bedeviled with fundamental ideological variations from one socio-cultural milieu to another. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo notes that, arguably, “feminism does not have a universal application, that is, “an all-encompassing theory that would unite women across national, racial, ethnic, socio-economic and other boundaries” (13). Specifically, in terms of theory and practice, its status in the African context is indeed an enormous pointer to this development, such that, over the time, it has generated series of critical debates and controversies as to which variant, out of the plural variants theorized by African female writers, is best and most suitable to the African socio-cultural context (Sotunsa 32-35; Adimora-Ezeigbo 11-14).

In view of the above, two critical poles or polar paradigms are being considered in this study as highly insightful, and indeed, wherein which the amalgam of the entire perspectives or discourses of feminism in African literature is subsumed. These are embodied in the two critical essays: "A House Divided: Feminism in African Literature" and "A House Integrated: Reflections on the Nuances of African Feminism" by Charles Nnolim (1994) [2010] and Chioma Opara (2013), respectively. Fundamentally, the two essays assume deconstructive criticisms but which substantially overlap as opposing forces. Hence, relying on the polarity paradigm established therein, this study attempts to, by extension, mediate feminism in African literature, specifically drawing from selected Nigerian female writers, and hence the Nigerian context, with a view to ascertaining another paradigm, known as the paradigm of affirmations and denials, thereby further yielding a novel perspective beyond the two identified or identifiable critical poles in the larger discourse of African feminism.

2. Theorizing African Feminism

The theorization of African feminist discourse entails accounting for the diverse concepts used by African feminists or writers themselves to develop their own indigenous thoughts about African feminism or theories, as opposed to the western universalist conception, which purportedly excludes the peculiarities of African women experience (Ogundipe-Leslie 7; Sotunsa 31). In their attempts to establish a genuine and more convenient theory for female experience in Africa, several concepts have been developed by African women writers. These are Womanism, Africana Womanism, Motherism, Stiwanism, Nego-feminism, Snail-Sense Feminism, among others. Obioma Nnaemeka coined the concept of Nego-feminism to denote the kind of feminism which thrives on negotiation. In her submission, she explains that:

In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance. [...]. African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. (359)

Nnaemeka is an African feminist who believes that African feminism should consist of creating a kind of third space wherein everything in relation to African women should be discussed and negotiated through compromise. This negotiation is mainly done with and around the patriarchal values and practices that subalternize and exploit African women. For her, African men and women

are complementary because they need each other in order to survive and develop their society. In short, Nnaemeka theorizes African feminism as a feminism of negotiation which focuses on mutual understanding and compromise between African men and women instead of fighting against each other like fierce opponents.

The concept of Africana Womanism was first used by the African American feminist, Clenora Hudson-Weems in 1987. It was employed to refer to a form of feminist ideology that has a wider applicability in respect of all women of African ancestry. It is largely rooted in the value of African culture and Afrocentrism. Similarly, the term African Womanism was used by Chikwenye Ogunyemi in the early 1980s to account for or aggregate the African female experiences in all the spheres of patriarchal societies; their yearnings, needs and social recognition. Ogunyemi thus defines the concept of African Womanism:

Womanism is black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. (65)

Like Nego-feminism, Ogunyemi's Womanism also promotes the complementarity between men and women of Africa in their struggle against racial discrimination and exploitation. It is therefore clear for womanists that the African man is neither the enemy nor the problem but rather an ally with whom to collaborate in order to get over their predicament due to colonialism and neo-colonialism. Similarly, to a considerable extent, Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana can be regarded as an African womanist vis-a-vis the following assertion of hers:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and everyman should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African development. (Aidoo 47)

This assertion of Aidoo indeed reinforces the same views of Ogunyemi about African Womanism and it is worth noticing that this concept of African Womanism differs from Alice Walker's Womanism as well as that of Clenora Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi is the first African feminist theorist to use the term Womanism to refer to the type of feminism that is more appropriate and suitable to African female context. The disparity between African Womanism and Africana Womanism lies in the fact that the latter focuses on the experiences, needs, desires and struggles of all Africana women of the African Diaspora whereas the former focuses on the African women experiences in Africa and the value of their culture (Sotunsa 25-27). Her womanism is mainly different from

that of Alice Walker and Hudson-Weems in terms of her four Cs: conciliation, collaboration, consensus and complementarity (Opara 66).

For Mary Kolawole, another theorist of Womanism, Alice Walker's theory of Womanism cannot and shall not be used as a true feminist theory for African women. The reason adduced is that Walker's theory promotes lesbianism which is abominable and intolerable for African women. African womanist theory therefore has its weight in terms of promoting the importance of heterosexual marriage and family life for African women by advocating for solidarity, complementarity and equality between men and women.

Catherine Acholonu conceptualises 'Motherism' as the alternative to feminism. As the name of this African feminist theory may indicate, this type of African feminism which is Motherism primarily focuses on motherhood experience in Africa. For Acholonu, patriarchy and matriarchy are purely western creations and inventions which have indeed nothing to do with African social realities. She therefore dismisses them by creating new terms which can faithfully be used to account for African socio-cultural realities without any exaggeration or distortion. Instead of using patriarchy or matriarchy in her African feminist theory discourse, she has rather coined two terms which are "patrifocality" and "matrifocality" to replace the western conceptions of patriarchy and matriarchy. For this theorist of Motherism, these two terms can be used to explain the complementarity between men and women in society with no recourse to a specific gender domination of the social life of people. Acholonu gives the examples that the socio-political spheres of African societies are predominantly peopled by men whereas the spiritual and metaphysical segments are dominated by women. For her, the economic sphere is not restricted to any gender; it is rather an open space for both sexes wherein respect and power are sometimes gained. The concept of Motherism can be summed up in the following words of Catherine Acholonu:

Patriarchy, the system that places men on top of the social and political ladder seems to be an inappropriate term for describing the organization of the social systems of the African peoples. This is because several African societies reflect systems with ranging degrees of dual-sex hierarchies in which men and women exist in parallel and complementary positions and roles within the society. (233)

The 'motherist' theory is targeted at empowering the African woman as mothers by praising and promoting the value of motherhood as the true expression of Africanness. This is contrary to some slightly radical African feminists and most white feminists who may consider motherhood as a serious obstacle to women's progress and emancipation in society. Such a thought is well-developed in white universalist feminism.

The acronym STIWANISM was developed by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie in her search of a relevant theory for African feminism. She asserts that:

“Stiwa” means Social Transformations including Women in Africa! I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It’s not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. (1)

Ogundipe-Leslie’s theory of Stiwanism signifies the process through which social transformation can be achieved. According to her, such a process can never be attained if African women are not given active roles in the different social spheres. She stresses on the fact that both sexes have complementary potential. If they work together without subverting roles or fighting against each other, African societies will therefore experience true social transformations for the well-being of all African peoples. Ogundipe-Leslie believes in marriage and family life because it is there that the union between men and women takes roots. She is above all aware of the fact that the African woman must realise and be conscious of not only the fact that she is a woman but that she is also both an African and a third world individual. She implies here that the African woman should know the socio-cultural context in which her feminist thought is born and it should not reproduce the same western thought and attitude against the customs and traditions of Africa even if it should point out the various flaws inherent in African culture that subalternize the African woman at the profits of males.

The African feminist or stiwanist rightly offers an interesting model of African feminism which redresses the economic inequalities between the African woman and man and her coining and use of Stiwanism as an alternative to feminism does concretize the extent to which the term of feminism cannot account for the socio-cultural context of Africa without distorting or duplicating an antagonistic white western discourse to African men. Ultimately, it is theorized that Stiwanism is not only about the transformation of society for the benefit of one sex, but for both sexes, and a Stiwanist can either be a woman or a man provided that each of them understands that they are indeed and naturally “co-partners” in the positive transformation of Africa wherein there will no longer be any antagonism or gender ideological binary oppositions between the African woman and the African man.

Snail-Sense Feminism is a relatively new African feminist theory propounded by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. She develops this new African feminist theory because of her conviction that there might be several feminist theories; they have

really never been able to help the subalternized, oppressed and exploited African Woman to get out of the predicament in which they are in a patriarchal society like Nigeria. Accordingly, Snail-Sense feminism conceptually relies on African women's clever use of negotiation and diplomacy in patriarchal systems of socialization to assert and affirm their self-actualization and empowerment. She insightfully explains:

The snail carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe. This is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria's harsh patriarchal culture. It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men that informs this theory which I call snail-sense feminism. (21)

In the manner of the snail in real life, this theory of Snail-Sense feminism therefore consists of developing strategies for women that can help them survive in societies where they are not trusted, considered and heard. This entails that women should learn survival strategies to "overcome the impediments placed before her and live a good life. She has to be proactive and strong", as it has been uttered by this snail-sense feminist herself. Although this new African feminist theory seems to resemble other African feminist theories already mentioned in this paper, snail-sense feminist theory is however greatly particular in terms of strategy and focus. Whereas all African feminists, womanists, motherists, negot-feminists, and Stiwanists theorize their feminisms with heavy reliance on the African concept of cultural communalism, the snail-sense model pays particular attention to the individual within a group or the community. In this vein, Adimora-Ezeigbo expounds that:

The individual must empower herself before she can empower others. She must stand before she can help other people to stand. The pursuit of individual success and development is central to snail-sense feminism. The woman should not just accommodate others, but should ensure that she achieves recognition for herself because self-preservation and self-actualization are crucial to a woman's success in life. (27)

Like other prominent African female writers and critics who have made significant marks in the discourse of gender in African literature, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is no exception with her numerous creative and critical outputs in this regard. Particularly, her philosophical presumptions and examination of feminism in the Nigerian environment, shaped by her vision in her creative works, has largely informed and culminated in a theorization of a distinct indigenous (Nigerian) feminist theory of her own known as "Snail-Sense Feminism". The theoretical model emerged, according to her, out of her awareness that despite the substantial level of theorizing and analysis in place

over the years on feminism, “the problems women experience in society still persist” (Adimora-Ezeigbo 26). In view of this, a necessary modification to the outlook of feminism, specifically within the Nigerian context, is inevitable. She thus constructs her indigenous model of feminism on the habit of snail to reflect the relationship of men and women in a typical Nigerian environment.

Apparently, this notion could be argued to have been informed by the accommodating and tolerant propensity of the Nigerian female folks by which many have been able to survive the kind of harsh patriarchal culture in Nigeria. In this sense, Nigerian women are acknowledged as “wise, sensitive, resilient and dogged or determined” (Adimora-Ezeigbo 28). As frail as the snail and its attitudes are, however, it is maintained that they are virtues that “must not be seen as a weakness on the part of the woman. Rather they should be seen as a way of strategizing to complement the man and join forces with him to develop the society for the benefit of all” (29).

Although the model is distinctly hers, it is acknowledged that it cannot be perceived as a completely novel concept because it shares peculiar traits or features with other variants that have been theorized by other women scholars. Nonetheless, what distinguishes it from others and how it further enriched feminist theory is the emphasis it places on the individual, who must strive towards self-empowerment in order to wield the capacity to empower others. To this end, central to snail-sense feminism is the yearning for individual development and success (Adimora-Ezeigbo 35).

3. The Critical Poles of Nnolim and Opara: The Embodiment of Voices

Ruth Meena posits that “[f]eminists from the African continent have... been inspired to construct knowledge from their own point of view” (3). For African feminists, “their politically committed discourses and various theorizations engender praxis and colloquies of feminism which capture the specificities of African cultural imperatives” (Ladele 59). This is consequent upon the consciousness of the fact that the Western feminist ideology has failed to capture the conditions of the African women as obtained in their various social backgrounds, hence the need for an African feminist strand. In this wise, Aduke Adebayo offers an insight that “while accepting the emancipatory nature of feminism, the African feminist has discarded its violent and militant approach ... in carrying out their project the African feminist writer and critic were combative for justifiable reason” (4). Against such a background, in addition, Chioma Opara contextualizes this, specifically vis-à-vis western imperialism:

African feminism in all its complexities cannot be shown of political activities on the continent as well as the international economic order. Surely, the socio-psychological concerns of Betty Friedan in *Feminine Mystique* do not fit into the predicaments of

the typical African woman who is the Other of the colonized African man-the Other of a colonial master/mistress. (62)

Within the quest for the African mainstream feminism, the development has largely led to what critics have termed variegated 'voices' in African feminism, consequent upon the perceived inherent ideological differences among the African female writers and critics. The African female writers generally refer to the group of early African women who got the chance to be educated and published novels either in English or in French mainly. This group also refers to the first educated African women who early understood the need to struggle for the emancipation and empowerment of African women through writing. Mary Kolawole's account of the development largely points to the fact that its evolution was a conscious desire or move:

Many of the [women] writers have confessed that they are motivated to write by the impulse to change the status quo, interrogate patriarchy, imperialism and western feminisms. This is closely related to the desire to liberate African women, change their consciousness and recreate a positive self-perception to enhance progress. (153)

Despite the surface homogeneity in the African female literary writings that are targeted towards a unified African feminist ideology, as noted above, it is axiomatic that certain ideological (individuals and groups) differences are explicitly decipherable from their writings. This development is largely attributable to two factors: the peculiarities of their respective socio-cultural settings and the magnitude of the impacts of patriarchy across the various African societies. One of the foremost critics of African literature, Charles Nnolim, has been unreserved in his open critique of such development. Fundamentally, he criticizes the core tenets of feminism, which he claims is more of individualistic ideological movement than communal, vis-a-vis its suitability to the African philosophy that is acknowledged as communal rather than individualistic:

Feminism, as a movement and ideology urges, in simple terms, recognition of the claims of women for equal rights with men – legal, political, economic, social, marital, etc. Its tenets are more individualistic than communal and thus it places more premiums on individual self-fulfillment than achieving, in the African context, the collective needs of the community. [...] Much doubt whether it does not subvert the African philosophy of thought, whether this is not a chink in its armor. (114)

On the foregoing, feminist ideology in African literature is specifically critiqued as a purported group movement whose individual components inhabit an ideologically divided house. As he rightly puts it, "it is a house divided against itself" (Nnolim 115). This is asserted consequent upon what he describes as a confusion-ridden feminist ideology amidst which the foremost African female writer, Flora Nwapa evolved, and whose steps the current status and

development of the feminist agenda has doggedly followed. According to him, “Nwapa’s daughters never quite freed themselves from her Janus-faced, confusion-ridden feminist ideology as all seem to be condemned to follow this erratic, con-fused course” (Nnolim 119). Giving the contexts of the various and diverse categories of ideologies in African feminism, he concludes that the future of the movement in Africa is predictably bleak “with so many African female writers unsure of the future of feminism and of their rebellious female characters whom they most often destroy or make mad.” (125)

In an explicit effort at assertively negating Charles Nnolim’s viewpoint, an equally strong voice in gender criticism in African literature, Chioma Opara rather critically integrates the various ideological categories identifiable in African feminism by showing that some parallels, and even intertextuality, are the hallmarks of African female writings. It is an “integrated house constructed on a foundation, consisting of myriads African feminist thoughts” that, expectedly, will “weather the raging storms and robustly play out amidst a panoply of concepts and dialectics” (Opara 73). While equally acknowledging the inherent ideological variance in African feminist discourse, Chioma Opara strongly negates the assertion of ‘a divided house’ by contending that:

Both the African female writer and critic are committed to fusion rather than fission. Much as there may be subtle and sharp divergences of viewpoints, vision and fervour the glaring goal is that of integration facilitated by the optimal devices of negation and accommodation. These are immanent in the varied strands of African feminist theory. (57-58)

Upon making references to the various ideologies which are immanent in African feminist theory, as embodied in the various literary texts, she analytically concludes that they are rather considerable indices of integration than division or fission, as claimed by Charles Nnolim:

Nnolim maintains in his concluding segment, “If the female writers are in a house divided, their counterparts who are critics are much more united in a single-minded effort to carry the fight to the court of the male writers who are their bete-noire...” [...] In actual fact, the writers, including the critics, are united, not in vituperation against the male writers, but in accordance with the promotion of a holistic African feminism, given the prevalent realities of globalization. (72-73)

A critical observation of the two critically polar essays; the logicity, aptness and depth of analyses therein, will substantially yield and corroborate the assertion that the two essays are indeed the embodiments of the entire gamut of criticisms, discourses and contentions in African feminism. On the one hand, Charles Nnolim offers a context of feminist disintegration resulting from variegated or disparate voices and ideologies which fundamentally pervades the discourse. On the other, Chioma Opara undeniably makes an insightful effort at

ordering the 'voices' into an integrated ideological whole that is ultimately geared towards achieving a common goal of female emancipation in African feminist discourse.

4. Marriage Institution in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo

It is traditional for African women writers to give great importance to the female voice by making their language a feminine one. That is, the female authored works are usually centered on female experiences in the society (Sotunsa 84). Accordingly, the protagonist or the speaker of their works is no longer a male character but a female one who is portrayed as active, determined, outspoken and ambitious, especially in the processes of driving social developmental goals. Flora Nwapa puts this array of feminine project in African literature into perspective thus:

The woman writer cannot fail to see the woman's power in her home and society. She sees her economic importance both as mother, father and trader. She writes stories that affirm the woman, thus challenging the male writers and making them aware of woman's inherent vitality, independence of views, courage, self-confidence, and, of course, her desire for gain and high social status. (364)

The above indicates the salient aspect of the female writing projected towards re-creating African women lives and traditions from a purely woman's view point. The literary tradition essentially advocates for the emancipation of African women. Like male writers, African women writers also use oral narrative tradition such as: irony, repetition, dialogues, riddles and proverbs, use of images of animals, metaphysics (the world of the spirits) and others to critically discuss the predicament of African women within their immediate socio-cultural environment. The totality of this is an indication of a peculiarity in African female writings – to dismantle male stereotypical representations of women in their writings and challenge the patriarchal ideologies which are perceived as indices of degradation as well as freedom-denial to African women. In so doing, African female writers have established a new feminine discourse which seeks to accurately represent African women's qualities, attributes and potentials. In addition, it is also a tradition for these crops of writers to account for the various ways through which patriarchal societies oppress, marginalize and exploit African women and girls and, at the same time, show how the African woman can be empowered, emancipated and freed – socially, economically, politically, and even intellectually. This paramount and foremost objective is universal, as illustrated in the following thought of Ketu Katrak:

Women writers' uses of oral traditions and their revisions of Western literary forms are integrally and dialectically related to the kinds of content and the themes they

treat. [...] Their texts deal with, and often challenge, their dual-oppression – patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism and that inscribes the concepts of womanhood, motherhood, traditions such as dowry, bride-price, polygamy and a worsened predicament within a capitalist economic system introduced by the colonizers. (240)

The ‘non-homogeneous’ nature of African culture has largely accounted for the multiple voices in the gender discourse. To this end, Mobolanle Sotunsa maintains that “The difference in the cultural backgrounds of African females necessitates a difference in the outlook and worldview. This difference in turn affects the ideological positions and attitudes towards problems facing women in Africa. (32)

What could be accounted for as the disparate ideological positions of the three Nigerian female writers, Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, are observed in their works including *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *The Stillborn* (1984), and *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1990), respectively. A careful examination will yield a far-reaching interpretation within the context of the larger African feminist discourse. The uniformed atmosphere presented in the three novels is that of a particular and highly sensitive concern for the condition of women in a typical African social system or structure that is believed to be essentially patriarchal. However, what underlines the differences in their approaches is in the area of the ‘degree’ and/or ‘intensity’ of the concerns with women situation in the novels (being herein established as their individual paradigms of their dealings with women issues). It is worthy of mentioning that these divergences are culturally definitive.

Buchi Emecheta’s approach to gender issue is describable as somewhat inflexible and too prejudiced. This underscores her criticism as being radical in this work. Her focus is mainly and only women potentials and liberation. Despite her just criticism of the social structure as being responsible for the denigration of women, she fails to look at how the system is also unfavorable to men. And this is the area in which there seems to be a major difference between her approach and that of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Zainab Alkali despite that it is the same ‘gender war’ that is being fought in their respective texts. Unlike Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo appears to be relatively liberal in her approach. It is discernible in *The Last of the Strong Ones* that her concern with women is that which provides such grounds which translate to having the problem of one gender being subsumed in the other. Women’s problem is also men’s; such question is thus solved with a collaborative measures and/or efforts by both genders.

The institution of marriage is a peculiar instance. The choice of this context in the texts is underscored by the fact that it constitutes the larger context in which female discourse in Africa is situated. The marital atmosphere created by Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* is that which holds the stand that marriage is secondary; that is, an optional institution for women, by seeming to be focusing more on the negative side of it as an experience. And this would indeed corroborate her view, as noted by Mobolanle Sotunsa, that personally she would like to see “the ideal, happy marriage. But if doesn’t work, for God’s sake, call it off” (41). What the reader is therefore confronted with in the novel is that of a non-working marital institution; hence, it is inferentially construable that a separatist ideal is what is being put forward by the writer.

The above is implicitly conveyed in the tragic end of the protagonist, Nnu Ego. The tragic flaw of the protagonist lies in the fact that she is abandoned by both her sexist husband and her own sons who should rather assume the symbols of her ‘joys of motherhood’. In this vein, the story of this novel closes on a very sad and touching tone with the death of Nnu Ego alone by the side of a road and with the return of her estranged sons from abroad to organize the burial ceremonies of their abandoned mother. The ending of this story is critically significant in that it is highly ideological, stylized and statemental. This is because it gives the reader the idea that such women, who unquestionably obey and respect the dictates of traditions and customs of their societies without judging those which are good for them or not, would, ultimately, end up like the protagonist of this story. This expounds that such kinds of traditional women will always be defeated, or end up being losers, because they will never be able to achieve the happiness, the respect and the tranquility that they may have expected or wished by abiding by the laws of ‘patriarchy’. Evidently, a separatist ideal is being advocated for, in the event of a seemingly non-working marital institution in the novel.

In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, an enabling ambience of marriage is created by Adimora-Ezeigbo. Even when it seems not to be working any longer, it is circumstantially accounted for; it is neither on the system nor on the male counterparts. This is evident in the characterization of Ejimnaka. Despite that she abandons her first marriage with Alagbolu on account of undue infringement on her freedom; in no distant time, she enters into another marital contract with Obiatu, wherein which she eventually finds succor. She stands by him during his trials and ensures they both find lasting solution to the problem of his indebtedness that almost got his name immersed in mud. This underlines one of

the areas in which a reader could point out a difference in this writer's ideology and that of Buchi Emecheta. This is because, ordinarily, the denigrating experience of her first marriage should have dissuaded her from getting re-married. If the narrative had travelled in that direction, the ideological projection therein would have reversed considerably, such that a point of contrast between the two writers' ideologies may not have been possible. To lend credence to this, Harry Olufunwa submits that:

Buchi Emecheta and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo both consider marriage an important theme, given its significance for the delineation of gender relations, but they approach it from different perspectives. For Emecheta, marriage is no man's land (or, more appropriately, no woman's land); for Adimora-Ezeigbo, it is proving-ground and, ultimately, promised land. Such spatial metaphors are appropriate, considering the general idea of marriage as a "state" or "condition," a privileged social/sexual sphere which confers enhanced social and sexual status upon those within it. (105)

A quintessential trend is indeed embodied in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, as captured by Aduni Joseph. She asserts that the novel is a portrayal of "societal growth that results in the co-existence of both male and female with none gaining ascendancy over the other" (36). Such consciousness of gender roles in a patriarchal society, she maintains, nourishes the growth of African feminism that would be adjudged distinctive in nature as well as accommodating rather than separating both sexes in societal growth. Evidently, this ideal is eloquently conveyed in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's indigenous (Nigerian) feminist theory – Snail-Sense feminism. This theory is modelled on the habit of snails, having found a correlation between it and what she considers as the peculiar attitudes that she contends most Nigerian women adopt in their relationships with men, "a conciliatory or cooperative attitude" (Adimora-Ezeigbo 12). This ideological patterning is almost uniformly presented by Zainab Alkali in *The Stillborn*. Hence, unlike Buchi Emecheta, an ideological consonance could be contextually ascertained in the positions observed to have been held by Zainab Alkali and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo.

As acknowledged of others, Zainab Alkali also belongs to the group of those African women writers that passionately decry the oppressed and poor condition of women in Africa. She advocates this within the confines or principles of "understanding between men and women, togetherness between husband and wife" with the intent to "upholding God's law of mutuality, coexistence" (Otonio 148). In the novel, the reader is confronted with the predicament of women in a society where they are accorded with demeaning values. It is a kind of social setting, as observed in the text, where women are not only deprived of education

and financial autonomy but also have to struggle against patriarchal structure. However, certain level of education and financial independence are only viable means of survival. The various assaults, physical and emotional sufferings the central character, Li passes through, especially in her marital world, is significantly presented as the catalyst for consciousness-raising.

Accordingly, when her marriage seems to have failed, she decisively resolves to seek for a kind of freedom and independence that she thinks would breathe enduring happiness in her life. In Li's view, education seems to hold such a crucial key. Hence, at the Advanced Teachers College, Li successfully completes her study. She eventually attains the status of being the man of their house (101). Indeed, typical of women characterization, the development is an indication of an empowered woman figure, who now stands to be seen in contrast to the traditional conception or perception of womanhood in their social setting. In spite of this attainment, in the end, Li nevertheless still feels lonely, empty and unfulfilled: "For ten years she had struggled towards certain goals. Having accomplished these goals, she wished there was something else to struggle for. For that was the only way life could be meaningful" (102). This is reminiscent of Alice Walker's womanism. In her view:

A black feminist or feminist of color... appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes love individual men, and/or non-sexually, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. (xi-xii)

What Li's state of mind points to is not that far-fetched. Given the room for the necessity of co-habitation of both sexes in African cultures, as conveyed in the above cited ideals, it is nothing but her husband, Habu Adams. Unlike the feminism model associated with the western women, which, according to its African critics, is acknowledged as radicalist and separatist, and to which Emecheta's approach can be identified, Alkali in a domesticated model sees the need for the co-habitation and partnership of men and women in the social transformation:

She knew now that the bond that had tied her to the father of her child was not ruptured. And in spite of everything, in the soft cradle of her heart, there was another baby forming. This time Li was determined the baby would not be stillborn. (Stillborn 104 – 5)

Giving such a mindset, it is a clear pointer to the fact that the protagonist already understands her societal context as inherently patriarchal, and thus

makes no attempt at denial of this fact under the guise of female liberation. Rather, with a view to forging stronger bond that will enhance sustainable marital cohabitation, she expounds “love, endurance, forgiveness and tolerance as the principles of true marital happiness” (Sotunsa 75). In Charles Nnolim’s words, “every responsible normal woman [like her] needs a stable home as base, and a home (not a house) is the normal dwelling place of man as the head.” (115, emphasis added)

From the above ending, while a correlation could be established between it and that of Adimora-Ezeigbo’s story, it is evidently counter-discursive to the ending of Emecheta’s story. This notwithstanding, the manifestation corroborates Mary Kolawole’s view that “in African worldview, there are many roads to the same goal”; hence “counter-discourse is a healthy approach in African women’s search for acceptable feminine aesthetics” (5).

5. Conclusion

The paper has attempted ideological comparisons of the way and manner in which women writers in Africa address the question of gender, particularly in relation to their various individual socio-cultural settings. To this end, specific reference is made to the Nigerian context, citing the instances of three major female writers: Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and Zainab Alkali within the context of their respective ethno-social structures. While Emecheta could be described as African Marxist feminist who is somewhat radical in her approach, the other two women are describable as African liberal feminists who deal with gender issues in a more complementary manner, in terms of the roles men and women play in their co-existence to battle the socio-cultural, economic and political challenges confronting them. Primarily, emphasis has been put on the relationship between culture and gender perceptions and connotations, especially in the context of the Nigerian Igbo society and that of the Hausa’s, and how the novelists represent or project the image of African women in their daily activities and interactions with men in such African societies considered to be dominated by patriarchal values or masculine ideologies.

The ideological pendulums continually swing between affirmations and denials of patriarchal structures against which they all set out to confront and challenge. As recognized and acknowledged in several studies, culture and society are the main phenomena which have occasioned the cracks in the walls of the methodological and theoretical consciousness of African women writers to their purported patriarchal challenges. As a result, because of the much value they all, individually and collectively, hold to their various societies and cultures,

they have found themselves inevitably in-between denying and at the same time affirming what their various socio-cultural structures offer. While it is denied and attacked in some quarters, it is being acknowledged in the others, as that which should indeed recognize the right as well as the complementary or joint roles of the women folk with men in the huge task of societal regeneration and nation building. This consequently breeds an atmosphere describable as inter- and intra-self-contradictions; that is, between their women writer counterparts and individual selves, respectively.

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