

Original Article

**Nigeria in the Colonial Era: A Historical
Interpretation in Akachi Ezeigbo's Novel
*The Last of the Strong Ones***

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Abstract

*This paper examines the historical reconstruction of the colonial era in Nigeria by focusing on Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. The duty of the historian is to present and interpret events as factually and objectively as possible. However, the historical novelist is not under such an obligation; for he is at liberty to interpret history to suit certain purposes. He could manipulate events without necessarily watering down the credibility of the historical account. Hence, a historical novel is not a text of history, but an imaginative remodelling of history for aesthetic effect. It is the intention of this paper, therefore, to illustrate how Ezeigbo presents a new interpretation of colonial history in Nigeria by bringing women into the centre of the imperialist discourse. The novel is basically the story of the exploits of women who are of great repute, resourceful and intelligent, diligent and possess a very high sense of responsibility. The novel is set in a traditionally patriarchal society, yet women resisted colonial domination and political oppression to emerge as models of strength, resilience and honour. The story depicts the active participation of women in the social, economic, cultural and political emancipation of the nation under colonial subjugation. However, the essay concludes by showing that Ezeigbo re-tells the history with a large dose of creativity and thus risks the chances of losing the main substance in the historical facts.*

Key words: *Akachi Ezeigbo, The Last of the Strong Ones, Nigeria, African literature, women's social roles, motherism*

Introduction

Literary expressions emerged in Nigeria from the early 1950s and continued to flourish till the contemporary period. The first generation of writers in Nigeria were inspired by colonial socialization. The writings of Amos Tutuola,

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Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwenzi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and several others were intended to reconstruct the social identity of Nigeria. Having experienced the harsh degrading and debasing force of colonialism coupled with the wicked dehumanizing weight of slave trade from the 15th century to the early 19th century, the writers had enough to narrate with a view to exposing the evils perpetrated by the colonial authority. Ngugi captures this feeling when he asserts:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and neo-colonialism. There is no area of our lives which has not been affected by the social, political and expansionist needs of European capitalism (Ngugi, 1981, p. 23).

In view of the effects that colonialism entrenched on the Africa continent, the history of Nigerian literature tells the story of the black man's attempt to re-assert his political rights and defend the integrity of his culture. The need to re-build the historical past of Nigeria began with the novel of Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958. Achebe's novel dramatizes the disintegration of the native community, partly because of its internal weaknesses and its naïve villagers, and partly again because of the sheer power and craftiness of the European colonizers. Achebe's effort to reconstruct the social identity of the Igbo has been carried forward by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's in *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996). The novel, which is written from a feminist point of view, attempts to reassert the cultural and political rights of Nigerians. It also defends the integrity of women in their vanguard for political emancipation and re-examines Nigeria's past relationship with Europe. It condemns the alien political and social institutions which the white man imposed on the nation.

In projecting her vision, Akachi adopts a literary form that deconstructs the male-centred Igbo world view. Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta have earlier re-created the Igbo society through a feminist approach but Akachi's participation in the counter discourse does not only deflect the male-authored discourse but also makes women superior to the

male characters in the novel. This approach to feminism, according to Egya (2013, p. 2), is something beyond equality or complementarity. Akachi projects a more ambitious counter-discourse in the form of transcendental heroism of the Igbo woman. Egya (ibid.) citing Osofisan affirms that Akachi's novel de-authorises (the Achebean) versions of history and identity, and inscribe the female figure in the historicisation of the pre-colonial Igbo cosmology.

Historical Criticism

This paper adopts historical criticism as a theoretical approach. This form of literary theory examines the technique adopted in the treatment of history in a given text. Thematically and aesthetically, writers have always been influenced by past and contemporary views of history and the interpretation of the past often indicates this influence. History is a cogent tool of documenting the past. For centuries, theorists and philosophical historians have attempted to broaden the line between history and literature. Hamilton's *Historicism* (1996, p. 3) reveals Aristotle's conception that while literature is completely open to criticism, history requires more than that. In comparing history with literature, critics affirm that history teaches so does philosophy, but the poet is superior to both. Since history is concerned with facts and records and the philosopher concentrates on abstractions that usually do not relate to the world the way people understand it, the unrivalled poet performs both. A creative writer functions as an historian and a philosopher. Critics, thus conclude that a poet is a better historian and philosopher.

Since the emergence of African literature, history remains a consistent material for creative writers. History has served as a very useful tool in the hands of prominent Nigerian writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan to mention but a few. Using history for literary purposes is of great significance to the society. History as a tool for creativity helps in foregrounding the richness of culture and tradition. It helps to recreate the age long ways of life which civilization and colonialism had pushed to the rear, especially in Africa. Historical criticism is predicated upon the assumption that African literature is historical. The relationship between liter-

ary writings and historical circumstances is a recurring phenomenon in African fiction. Colonialism, for instance, constitutes an integral part of the African historical experience and it is in the light of this conviction that Nnolim (2013, p. 26) declares succinctly that

Having lost her pride through slavery and colonialism, modern African literature arose from the ashes of the past experiences. It became a literature with a strong sense of loss, loss of our dignity, loss of our culture and tradition, loss of our religion, loss of our land and our very humanity (Nnolim, 2013, p. 26).

The Foundation of Historical Novel

The historical novel refers to an artistic work in which the events, settings and characters are taken from the past. Ezeigbo (1991) cites David Daiches who identifies three kinds of historical fiction and maintains that:

A historical novel can be primarily an adventure story, in which the historical elements merely add interest and a sense of importance to the actions described; or it can be essentially an attempt to illustrate those aspects of the life of a previous age which must sharply distinguish it from our own; or it can be an attempt to use a historical situation to illustrate some aspect of man's fate which has importance and meaning quite apart from that historical situation (David Daiches cit. in Ezeigbo, 1991, p. 35).

The historical novel in Nigeria seeks to probe and interpret the collective experience of a people – reviewing their whole process of communal self-retrieval or discovery. Writers adopt the technique of the historical fiction, by which, history as given, is re-assessed, recast and returned to the people. Abdul Raheem (2007) maintains that the third generation of Nigerian writers, of which Akachi Ezeigbo aptly belongs, sets out, beyond anything else, to create verisimilitudes of human, social and historical experience which the writers intend to preserve as an expression of beauty even if the ethereal concerns of the moment are not so edifying. He states further that:

Beyond the Achebean literary expeditions of historical retrieval, Adimorah-Ezeigbo embarks on an excursion of historical interrogation and reassessment. And appropriately, she renders the novel, symbolically as a story of reunion of the ancestral hearth. Through that medium, she probes the treasure-house of communal history which she

deploys in the service of a clearly women's rights advocacy and emancipation projects. Through the individual and collective life's experiences of the daughters of Umuga, the novelist weaves subtle pattern of a people and culture emerging from the trauma of collision with European culture and religion (Abdul Raheem, 2007, p. 34).

One observes that the corpus of African historical fictions falls within the purview of protest literary tradition. The epoch of such protest can be traced to the overall negative effects of colonialism. The first generation of Nigerian writers who emerged in the 1950's was disgusted with the institution of colonialism. Nnolim captures this feeling better when he remarks that

Is it any wonder that the titles of our most celebrated literary works highlighted these losses? Have we forgotten Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Weep Not, Child*; Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. And protest literature over Apartheid further irrigated Africa's tears because of man's inhumanity to man, to a people dubbed the wretched of the earth (Nnolim, 2013, p. 26).

The entire African continent was virtually colonized by the second half of the nineteenth century and remained under imperial domination until the middle of the twentieth century. The advent of colonialism ushered in a new style of life completely alien to Africans. Nigeria shared the common historical experience of colonialism. It also witnessed the emergence of a capitalist economy, colonial education and religion. The colonial intrusion resulted in cultural alienation and conflicts.

One important aspect of the African culture affected by colonialism is religion. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Homecoming* (1972, p. 28) remarks succinctly that the coming of Christianity put in motion a process of social change which involved a rapid disintegration of the tribal set up and the framework of social norms and values by which people had formerly ordered their lives and their relationship with others. Ngugi sees Christianity as part of colonialism which was founded on inequality and hatred among men contrary to its basic doctrine of love and equality. Colonialism therefore represents a weapon for the subjugation of the black race and a means of robbing the people of their souls. The missionary and imperialist ensured an outright rejection of all the African customs.

Given this antecedent, the historical fictions in Nigeria are informed by the notion of the African masses as victims of colonial exploitation. The writer's philosophy of history is predicated upon the idea of the growth and fall of civilizations through internal and external stimuli (Emenyonu 2004). Literature thus depends on historical realities for nearly all its constituent elements: from the theme to narrative structure. All works of art relate to history by being a product of history, from which they derive their various constituents. Literature takes from the historical past to reconstruct history according to the vision of the writer. Amuta (cit. in Marshall 2007, p. 6) argues that it is through African history that African literature can be well understood. He affirms that African literature has been a reactive stance towards major historical experiences such as slavery, colonialism, cultural disruption, political corruption, apartheid, class antagonism and imperialism. Amuta thus considers a literary text as a product of an attempt to reveal social-historic experience through various texts such as novel, play and poem. Writers recreate history through creativity. Art cannot ignore the relationship between context (the realm of determinations) and the content and form, the realm of ontology of the art work). Amuta argues further that:

To insist on the importance of context in a dialectical theory of literature is to insist actively that critical practice especially in relation to African literature, must abandon its predominantly isolationist approach (the study of individual works and writers) and move towards a wider perception in which criticism is informed by the issues in history of society. Only by doing so can our criticism shed its prodigal western modernist heritage and re-integrate with political discourse, which is where it rightly belongs (Amuta, cit. in Marshall, 2007, p. 6).

In consonance with Amuta's postulation, literature in Nigeria shows a keen awareness of socio-historical developments. Creative writing provides a platform for history to be enacted and reconstructed so as to give the future a desirable direction.

Socio-Historical Analysis of *The Last of the Strong Ones*

The novel begins with a prologue, an introductory speech that reveals the happenings to be narrated. It is a statement about Umuga community at the

verge of colonialism.

All is not well with the land. The sky was overcast with heavy clouds and the rumbles of thunder echoed the chaos that threatened Umuga. The people clamoured to be left alone. It was a season that called for meetings and meetings. At one gathering of the Umuga, a thought struck me, hammering insistently, on the need to recall the past, record the present and all other events yet to unfold. It was a season when a lot of troubles were occurring with lightning speed. Change, by itself is not a threat but what lay heavy on our soul was the nature of change sweeping through the land, like rain bearing winds. Positive change is creative and constructive; it is not seen as disruptive. But the manner of change in Umuga was not positive on many reasons, I mediated on the nature of change in the lives of the people. My soul cried out against the violation our tradition had suffered and would suffer for a long time to come, if nothing was done to counter the headlong rush to destruction. Umuga had a rich history, full of heroism (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 1-13).

The narration presented above is not just a description of the topographical features of Umuga, it is also a revelation of the state of affair in the community. It symbolises the anticipated disorder which colonialism would leash on the community and its institutions, traditions and customs. Colonialism, as observed by the narrator is, in every sense, an aberration, an abnormality, and an absolute state of confusion (Emezue, 2012, p. 59)

The narration presents Umuga as a society in a state of violent flux. It is a society that is grappling with modern but alien cultural invasion foisted by the Europeans. This is mostly in the aspects of culture and religion. The colonial move to submerge Umuga's historical identity is resisted by both the Obufo and the Oluada. One noticeable feature of the story is its recreation of actual historical landmarks in Nigeria. The novel locates the struggle of women in the political evolution of the nation. It narrates the women's quest for power and authority. The female characters assume the roles of strong community leaders and figures of authority around which the destiny of the society is constructed. The need to protect the women explains why the male characters in the novel are in the fringes. The projection of women at the centre stage of struggle against colonialism is a radical departure from the events in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

The plot structure of the novel shows clearly that the novelist adopts a communal approach to characterization. The role of resisting the colonial invasion is literarily assigned to two prominent age grades; namely Oluada and Obufo that were made up of men and women. Through these characters, the novel shows the pain, anxiety and uncertainty that Umuga passes through in its historical development and social change. Akachi undertakes a historical account of colonial resistance with considerable narrative depth by putting women at the centre of struggle for liberation and freedom from “Kosiri” i.e. the white man.

The Last of the Strong Ones examines a pre-colonial Umuga society at the verge of transition compelled by external forces of colonialism. There are several instances of war, adventure, slavery, trade, commerce and displacement of social traditions. The novel projects the social and personal tragedies that social change generated. The community agonizes under the tyranny of a powerful incursion of colonial activities. The importance of this narrative lies in its re-visitation of cultural assertion as an aesthetic mode of depicting historical dislocation. This is why Akachi’s novel has been described by critics as a narrative of memory, the memory of colonial oppression and the struggle for liberation.

The people of Umuga, with females as opinion leaders, engage in war with the colonial masters although they do not win. There are men among the larger forum but they are not assertive. They are reduced to subordinates with a fatal consequence awaiting any of them not amenable to women’s superiority. This reversal of role makes critics observed that the success of women asserting themselves, and dictating the path to social equity is mystical as it is fictional. Akachi’s novel, in spite of the bursting enthusiasm of its author, fails to convince us that such a woman-piloted, feministically impartial society ever existed in the pre-colonial Igboland. For this reason Egya observes that

Against our expectation, women not men, take the centre stage in tackling the daunting crisis the community is thrown into. Umuga is facing a threat from the white colonial masters who are unnecessarily headstrong, uncompromising and irrational, they should therefore be crushed (Egya, 2013, p. 221).

The community attacks the church and school which symbolize the presence of white invaders. The people's confrontation with colonial institutions badly affects the relationship between the community and the colonial master. The letter which the people of Umuga write to the white man is another source of annoyance which compounds the anger of the colonial authority as a result of which the people are dealt with. The activities of the warrant chiefs and even those of Christian converts affect the possibility of achieving a mutual cohesion among the traditional inhabitants. Through the entrenchment of Christianity, the white man lays the foundation of divide and rule and succeeds in setting the people against themselves.

Akachi's literary creation clearly shows a direct reaction of Umuga to European incursions in Africa. The novelist is concerned about the disruptive role of European intrusion in her depiction of the colonial world. The crises of culture are not only a reflection of the theme of the novel but also an indication of the writer's displeasure with socio-political change in the society. The novel ends on a note of despair.

Characterization

The role and nature of fictional characters in any literature is highly essential for aesthetic effect. Good characterization gives the novel its very beauty. Conscious of this fact, therefore Ezeigbo prefers collective heroism to a single protagonist. We see a group of individuals who are united in their concern for resisting colonialism. The characters in the novel are human beings who can display grit, stand up to adversity and challenge circumstances. Of particular significance is the superior position which Akachi assigns to female characters. Women are confined to the traditional roles of motherhood and house-keeper in most African novels written by men Abodunrin observes that:

In Adimorah-Akachi Ezeigbo's still evolving oeuvre, *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) is the first of the trilogy dub the Umuga saga – a recreation of the lives of women and men born into four generations of two remarkable families and some other individual whose lives touched or scorched the lives of the former positively or negatively, within the period under exploration (Abiodun, 2008, p. 16).

The women represent a class of articulate and politically conscious individuals who participate freely in public affairs. The authoress recognizes women as an essential factor of socio-economic transformation. Their historic achievement as seen in the novel manifests their revolutionary potential. The presentation of these active female characters has enabled Akachi to reflect social relations and their determinants in colonial Africa. By making women the purveyors of colonial resistance, Akachi articulates the concern of African women for freedom and justice. Abiodun (2008, p. 16) rightly asserts that the narrative is further poised against the backdrop of a war of conquest waged by the colonial power. The novel is fulfilment of a long standing prophecy of the seer, Ezeogu, revered son of the land who saw ahead of time and warned that the coming of the stranger would upturn their world and rend the fabric of Umuga tradition.

From the narration, the emerging picture of Ezeigbo is that of a feminist of a doctrinal kind. She presents women as the custodians of the people's history against the apparent historical reality that men are actually the forerunners of every society. Even though, it is necessary to recreate a memorable account of the lives of a few exemplary African women, it is inappropriate to render men at the fringe of the struggle. This is not to say that women who did exceptional things are not part of history. Even though, Nigeria is a patriarchal society, the nation has a rich history of women breaking out of the entrapped position they were said to be confined. A worthy example was Queen Amina who led armies to drive out invaders from Zaria as well as Moremi of Ile-Ife whose wise sacrificial exploit testifies eloquently to the altruistic leadership of African women (Ewejobi, 2012, p. 91). Akachi's novel thus re-tells history with a large dose of creativity and thus ventures on the chances of losing the main substance of the historical facts. From history, men go to war, their women hide. Why then did Ezeigbo have women directing the affairs of war? Probably, she seeks for a way to correct her misrepresentation of history and decided to have men fight the war.

Ewejobi (2012) reminds us that in drama, women's roles were seen as insignificant when compared to that of men. Yet, women were often written as major characters in tragedies without reducing men to the fringe. Most of

the popular Greek plays have female characters taking up the roles of Valians, victims and heroines. Some of these great female characters include Chytemnestra, Cassandra, Antigone and Medea. The configuration of history in novel should be a declaration that no society can survive without each of the sexes playing divine roles.

There should be a clear acknowledgement that neither the men nor the women are complete without the other. For ideological reason, Akachi's novel fails to display a coherent system of clearly defined duties and responsibilities for men and women, distinct and separate duties which are complementary. Ogwude (2013, p. 124) believes that the Nigerian society, like any other, is dynamic, persistently transforming in response to social realities and experiences. The social truth of the pre-colonial experience can only be expected to differ from those of the present. And for a writer who is interested in social realism, the gradual process of change needs to be recognized.

Conclusion

The essay examines Akachi's novel against the background of the reclamation of the place of women in the pre-colonial history. The author critically reconstructs the colonial history of the Igbo ancient society, where unlike what is available in other existing works; women are not only superior to men but become exclusive players in the affairs of the community. The contention is that the novel places the Igbo women in the schema of the socio-political landscape of the African world view while the man, in contrast to what is familiar, made insignificant. The novel thus presents a radical reversal of the gender identity. Men are only significant in the text in so far as they remain appendage to their wives. Men themselves are not cut for greatness independent of their wives. For instance, the novel indicts Abazu, the quintessential anti-hero of women supremacy. Most of the existing critical reviews of the text doubted if such a feministically impartial society existed in the Igbo pre-colonial history. Critics have rightly accused the novelist of having re-configured the socio-historical matrix that reduced men to a second status in an apparently a patriarchy society.

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