

**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN TRADITIONAL IGBO SOCIETY: A STUDY OF
AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONE***

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Abstract

This paper explores the empowerment of the Igbo woman before and during the advent of the colonial masters. It examines the empowerment roles of the Igbo women in traditional society and how they fair in the power equation defined by dominant patriarchal principles that restrict them. Using a qualitative approach which requires a literary text analysis of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *THE LAST Of THE STRONG ONES* and relating it to other research findings by renowned scholars in Igbo traditions and cultural heritage, the researcher discovers that women's empowerment was driven by the financial strength of the traditional Igbo women in their social environments.

Keywords: Cultura heritage, Empowerment, Igbo, Patriarchal principles and Traditional

INTRODUCTION

Most studies of women's empowerment in the world look as if it started in the western world, whereas Africans especially their Nigerian counterparts have been empowered right from the outset. It was the advent of the white men's acclaimed civilization' according to Obbo (1980) that 'the need to control women and their activities has been an important part of the male success in most African societies (p.4). This has been instrumental to the backward position in which women find themselves today.

Research has shown that women have been empowered in the history of Nigeria right from the start Amadiume (2015), Mba (1982) and Ezeigbo (1990) just to mention a few, where

women were discovered to be kings, regents, great warriors and nationalists. For it was women who first resisted colonial rule, and there are also ample data to show where women who were not even chiefs had to dethrone kings in the history of Nigeria's traditional society. Names such as Fajimilola, the first 'Erelu' of Lagos, Efunroye Tinubu, popularly known as Madam Tinubu, Mrs Olufunmilayo Kuti, Queen Amina of the Zazzaru Kingdom and so on. In the Eastern part of the country, as opined by Mba (1982) that the Igbo women also formed strong organizations, knowing that hard work and recognition play an important role in all Igbo society. The Igbo women formed and organised strong unions which gave them control over their affairs and enabled them to possess political and economic influence. This brings to mind their activities in the 1929 Aba Women's Riot, in protest against tax payment, after all, their tremendous economic contribution to the nation, they felt tax payment by women was a taboo. They fought a battle with the then Eastern Regional Government and won. Their organisational acumen and sense of integrity were applauded by onlookers and social critics and this led to the reversal of tax payment in the whole of the Eastern Region.

Commenting on the development, Amadiume (2015) asserts that '...In the history of anthropological literature, Igbo women of Eastern Nigeria were among the first to gain the attention of researchers as a group distinct from Igbo men' (p.13).

The roles women played in traditional Igbo society during the colonial period in the novel will be examined by analysing the novel briefly, looking at the socio-cultural background of the novel and some influential characters portrayed and their relevance to women empowerment.

ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL: *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES*

The novel, *The Last of the Strong Ones*, is an engrossing saga of recreation of the old times in the Umuga community in Eastern Nigeria in the 19th century when British colonial administrators interfered and prowled the hinterland of Umuga, plundering, killing, maiming and spreading false rumours and destroying the nature, people's culture, traditions and way of life. These have brought about a change that is not pleasant or progressive, because the people had a well-organised way of life which the white man frowned at, for the people themselves do not oppose change, but the negative way it was being propagated was what they were against as seen in the statement below:

...change, by itself, is not a threat. But what lay heavy on our soul was the nature of the 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, for many moons, we mediated on the nature of change in the lives of our people. My soul cried against the violation that our tradition had suffered and would suffer for a long time to come if nothing was done to counter the headlong rush to destruction (p.1).

These statements influenced and informed the decision to form themselves into an association that will oppose the evil that was about to engulf this erstwhile peaceful community. So the people organised themselves into an association filled with the best and most respectable citizens of their community called Obufo, and in this Obufo existed four distinguished daughters of the community who are called Oluada. Their involvement in the Obufo represented women's interests and idealism. It is a story of women's unity, the erstwhile society portrayed by prejudiced observers as purely patrilineal.

SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL

The focus here will be on Igbo women's activities before the advent of the white men and their empowerment role during the colonial period when the white men's reign in the Igbo hinterland was well felt, and the consequences of this on women's empowerment.

The research finding of Mba (1982) and Amadiume (2015) have gone a long way to prove white scholars' writing about African women to be wrong. Their finding showed that the status of women had changed drastically from what they used to be in traditional society, to the subsequent political, cultural and economic powerlessness that characterises the contemporary period. Ezeigbo (1990) acknowledges this statement as true considering how the white men have disrupted the traditional system of Africans due to their chauvinistic patrilineal system, which they introduced into the traditional African society via their religion (p.149).

Mba (1982) discovered that Igbo women right from the pre-colonial era have always stood up to their rights and responsibilities and fought to defend these rights or any decision which

when contrary to their cause in their community be it political or social: through social and political organisations like 'Association of Daughters' called 'Umuada' and 'Association of wives' called 'Alutaradi'.

Their strength relied on these strong organisations which 'controlled their own affairs and possessed political influence based on their collective strength' (Mba, 1982). It was also stated that in the various meetings held by the Umuada it was through these organisations, or societies that women were able to retain power in the patriarchal communities that were designed to marginalize them. (Mba, 1982)

Scholars have also noted that 'Igbo women have the same kind of network of associations and sex solidarity which enable the women to mobilise across boundaries into a united body' (Mba, 1982, p.92). These organisations could relate and cooperate with other similar organisations in the Igbo communities, and this was instrumental to the wide coverage and gathering of the Igbo women during the 1929 women's war against taxation of women in Igboland.

The power of the Umuada is strong in their natal homes, so much so that their decisions and advice were accepted with little opposition from their male counterparts. According to Ezeigbo (1990) even though women had little power in their marital homes, they had the right to 'come and go' as they wished. The Umuada had the power to discipline erring wives in the patrilineage and impose punishment on such offenders. The Alutaradi constituted the weaker of the two organisations, but the strength of its members lay in their unique ability to cooperate fully amongst themselves, to make their grievances and wishes heard and implemented by their men. According to Amadiume (2015):

...at the worst, if lineage men proved stubborn, wives went on strike, in which case they would refuse to cook for or have sexual intercourse with their husbands. In this culture, men do not cook; control of food was, therefore, a political asset for women. In sexuality too, gender realities were such that it believed that females provided sexual services, hence

the political use of the threat of collective withdrawal of sexual service of women (p.65).

Findings by Amadiume (2015) showed that Igbo women also exercise power through the institution of Nluikwa (means 'remaining at home') which allowed a patrilineage daughter from a lineage without male offspring to 'remain at home' to produce male children (males, it was hoped) who will inherit their father's property, especially land. According to Ezeigbo (1990, as cited in Emenyonu, 1995), men were the ones who provided land, built houses and hunted wild game in the pre-colonial Igboland. Such a daughter had power (though limited) in the lineage to control and preside over her father's property until her son/sons grew up to take full control. These women are often referred to as 'male daughters' according to Amadiume (2015, p.30) and as seen in the novel, where Ejimnaka's daughter Aziagba remained at home to carry on the father's lineage.

Women also exercise power in marriage through what Uchendu (1988, p.143) described as 'woman marriage' whereby a woman with or without children could 'marry' another woman who then owed her allegiance, and any children the 'wife' might bare, belonged to the woman whom Amadiume (2015) referred to as 'female husband'. This type of woman marriage becomes one of the ways a woman could rise in social status and prestige in her community. And this kind of marriage could only be practised by wealthy women with strong personalities and influence. Chieme describes this scenario in the novel in her many travels and the wonders she saw as a praise singer amongst the Igbos and women in this position are mostly married. Meek (1937) also wrote that:

Another type of relationship whereby Igbo women exercise their powers is through the 'Ikombara' and this is practised among the Ngwa Igbo, this is the kind of relationship whereby a husband allows a friend or acquaintance to sleep with his wife regularly on one night of the eight days of the week. The protocol is to give the husband a gift of two jars of wine, one leg of a cow, a chicken, and some cash. He is also expected to assist the husband in farm work when

called upon. The practice is particularly common in cases of elderly men married to young women. (p. 276)

In this tradition which seemed to limit her as an object for barter, the woman exercised the power to choose her paramount Ezeigbo (1990, p.153), and by so doing, she could be expected to derive reasonable pleasure from this arrangement, and it also offers her the outlet for sexual satisfaction which an elderly husband might not be able to give, and this in a society controlled by strict sexual and moral code where adultery and clandestine love affairs were severely punished. Uchendu (1988) in his study of this concubinage among the Ngwa Igbo, sums up the advantages the woman enjoys from this Iko Mbara as follows ‘a woman depends on her Iko for new dresses, clearing the bush, educating her children and raising trading capital: polygamy has its tension. Women need sexual satisfaction and emotional security which a common husband may not always give satisfactorily and equally to all his wives. An impotent husband can contribute to the misery of his wives. It is this concubinage, which helps some women to father children and raise them, thus having a right to inherit from their husbands. Thus in traditional Igbo society where this Iko Mbara is practised, it became a source of strength, satisfaction and even prosperity for women. Most times, it is the woman who suggested the arrangement of the Iko to her husband. According to Emenyonu (1995) in traditional Igboland, this trade naturally became a major occupation of women who did not engage in extended trade to get rich. The traditional Igbo women were described by Basden (1983, p.88) as a burden-bearer of the country, he came to this conclusion due to his extensive stay and research in Igboland, where he observed that Igbo women were hard-working women. Among the traditional Igbo, physical attributes were never the primary consideration in proposing marriage to a female. It is the ability to excel in trade and hard work that is the most determining factor, for the female usually, after marriage, is given a piece of land by her husband on which to farm and produce food e.g. cassava, coco-yam and vegetable to feed her family. The husband provided no food except occasionally when he gives yams to his wife as seen in Chibuka’s marriage to Iheme in the novel. It is also a well-known fact that in nearly all Igbo communities, ‘the processing, sale, storage and preservation of all food stuff was done exclusively by women’ (Amadiume, 2015, p.37). Awe (1992) agreed with Amadiume (2015) in this light when she opined that trade has traditionally been an important activity for both rural and urban women and they were not left

out of the new international trade. And through trade explained by Uchendu (1988), was how women exploited their rich cultural heritage and attained recognition and gained status in their communities. Uchendu (1988) also attested to this phenomenon when he asserted that:

A woman may be highly ranked because of the position of a distinguished son, her success in trading or her position in the title society, irrespective of her marriage order. Indeed, some women are ranked higher than their husbands because of their distinctions in other spheres. Wealthy women marry in their own right, found big compounds and play the role of social father quite effectively (p.86).

Acholonu (1995, p.45) attested to this point when she opined that rich and enterprising women are better placed on the social ladder than poor un-enterprising men, without prejudice to individual customs of African communities. Amadiume (2015, p.37) agreed with this when she explained that depending on their dexterity, women could own valuable property i.e. women could acquire rights to land, but not inherit land in their patrilineage, because they had to be given out in marriage, and in Igbo community took titles, such women were rich and powerful and were ranked higher than men and enjoy greater prestige and influence.

During the colonial era, when white men came with their outrageous chauvinistic ideology, it is to be noted that women were involved in the new trade with the foreign interferers. Nwapa (1991) contended that in Nigeria's economic and administrative history, trade was considered a woman's job and prominent women among the riverine Igbo sought to enhance their influence with foreign traders, When the British took over in 1785, the United African Company (UAC) avers a flourishing trading post for the ubiquitous market women of Oguta with the opportunity to acquire more wealth. The Oguta industrious market women made a great impression on many research scientists who visited Igboland, among whom was Leith-ross (1965), who observed that:

The palm-kernel trade also belongs to the woman, but I know of only one town where a remarkable figure, Madam Ruth as she is known dominates the community. A veritable amazon's

trader, she sweeps through the marketplace like a ship in full sail; stands in rose pink velvet and purple head-tie, on the bank of Oguta lake, shouting commands to her women bent over the paddles as they shoot the oil-sack laden canoes across the lake; or weary after days work climbs the steep lane to her home, dangling her Yale latch key. There are others like her but she is the acknowledged leader and nowhere else in Owerri province did I meet any such outstanding feminine figure in the world of commerce (p.343).

This remarkable woman is Flora Nwapa's grandmother, undermining the fact that she is a Christian, which serves as an additional knowledge to own traditional gifts. The Igbo women enjoyed a lot of privileges in traditional society and the coming of the white men interfered with this advantage. Leith-Ross (1939) in the same vein described the Igbo woman as a 'rare and invaluable force, thousands upon thousands of ambitious go-ahead, courageous, self-reliant, hardworking, independent women'. She also stressed their 'startling energy, their power of organisation and leadership (p.339). Hence, the Aba women's war of 1929 in protest against their empowerment is an example.

STUDY OF FOUR LEADING FEMALE CHARACTERS

1. EJIMNAKA

Ejumnaka, the favourite child of great Ezeukwu, is beautiful, intelligent, disciplined, fearless, assertive and a master weaver and artist. She first married the elderly Alagbogu whom she confessed she only married with the thought of manoeuvring him in line with her vow that 'No man would be allowed to control me, the daughter of Ezeukwu' (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1966, p.23). After her marriage to him, she discovered to her chagrin how wrong she was and she immediately walked out of the marriage not because of pride, but because her husband was coming in between her economic activities. The minute she noticed this and saw she could not convince him to allow her trade to expand, and knowing that economic prowess is an important empowerment tool she later remarried the great Obiatu, again making a choice devoid of interference.

2. ONYEKOZURU

Onyekozuru, the daughter of Ezeigwe and widow of Umeozo, is kind, obedient, bold, secretive, a good cook and talkative. She was given away by her father to the elderly Umeozo to offset his debt. But due to her kind and obedient nature, she won the heart of her husband and her mate, Udumaga for she treated her like a mother, hence before the death of her husband he called all his family members and gave a large portion of land to Onyekozuru's sons in the presence of his other sons by his first wife. After the demise of her husband, she decided not to remarry and through dint of hard work and proficiency in trade, she earned the respect of both males and females in their community. She was able to prove that being a widow is not a handicap to women's empowerment.

3. CHIEME

Chieme, daughter of Nlebedum, a distinct character, who showed the world that a woman's reputation does not depend on a husband, is a kind but vengeful character. Once married to Iwuchukwu as a teenage virgin, Chieme had the peculiar problem of not menstruating and hence childless. She was callously sent out of her husband's house by her husband due to her condition. After the period of lamentation and self-pity, she got hold of herself and later discovered her skill in singing, trained under the great Nwakaku and became even more popular than her, for her fame spread like the proverbial harmattan fire. She was able to prove to critics that having children or not, the sky is the limit for any hard-working woman because in reality a woman's success is not judged by the children she has, but by what she can do for herself.

4. CHIBUKA

Chibuka, the kind-hearted, carefree daughter of Umeahunanya, almost have her life ruined by her marriage to IHEME, the sadist and selfish man, who always count his yam religiously every day when leaving the home in the morning and first thing when he comes back from the farm. Chibuka was subjected to a lot of inhuman treatment by her husband even though she bears him sons every year; this does not stop him from battering her at the slightest provocation. She had no one to turn to, not even her parents. She bore this burden alone all through her marital life until death saved her from the clutches of this terrible union. She built up the courage and started attending the meeting of Umuada and Alutaradi not minding the

scorn she had been subjected to in the past. She also became a force to reckon with in Umuga for her wisdom which won the heart of many.

Through her eye we are able to know that no matter the circumstances a woman finds herself in, the minute the hurdle is removed, she should pick the pieces of her life and forge ahead as self-pity and murmuring does not get one anywhere.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study reveals the following about the study of this dynamic traditional Igbo women of the Eastern part of Nigeria that:

1. Women empowerment as illustrated in the novel is driven by financial independence and the strength of character of the women's personalities.
2. In the novel and the Igbo society that served as a background, it is noticed that women are not disadvantaged because of their gender. Empowerment is self-limited – you become what you want to become.
3. Society does not culturally place obstacles on women's way, because even where there are no male children in marriages, the practice of Nluikwa makes the women secure in her husband's home.
4. The Igbo women are practitioners of women empowerment; they are not mere preachers of women empowerment.
5. A woman does not need a man to be self-assertive and successful in the Igbo society.
6. In the novel, we noticed that childlessness is a problem in Igbo marriage.

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