

Reconstructing Identities Through Resistance in Postcolonial Women's Writing: A Reading of Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*.

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Abstract:

Colonialism and its after-effects of neo-colonialism and postcolonialism pervade the male-dominated literary tradition produced on the African continent. Within the complexities of these realities, the African woman may be said to be "doubly colonized" and her burdens multiple. Imprisoned then, by the authoritative phalluses which define her daily experiences and which seek to negate the authentic image of the African woman, as writer, she is compelled to negotiate new sites in which she articulates more viable and acceptable self-images. Our study here is, specifically, on one such response: that of the Nigerian novelist, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, in her important work, *The Last of the Strong Ones* (TLSO, 1996). This novel is important in that it directs us to a new historicism and cultural critique. Articulated in three parts, the paper, in its introduction, attempts a definition of the indices of identity that circumscribe the lives of African women especially within the present-day postcolonial matrix. The second part demonstrates the novelist's repudiations of stereotypes and her reconfigurations of women's identities as part of the needful project to recover the distinctive tradition of African female stories (herstories). In the final part, we draw attention to the areas where women need to further interrogate and construct meaningful identities.

Key words: identity, neo/ post- colonialism, authoritative phalluses.

Introduction:

Issues of identity are germane in the present-day dispensations of constantly reconstituting politics, gender identities, personal, national and international relations, especially as identities are understood relationally. In various fields of interactions, this is further accentuated in the light of changing patterns of reterritorializations and globalizations, as well as personal/ gender reassignments. And these possibilities continue to enlarge. But for the "Third World" woman (we use this term very self-consciously) in a postcolonial context, the identity issue is indeed central. Postcolonial women writers from Africa for example, keenly textualize women's identities through their fictional narratives, dramas and poetry.

In African literature today, including that of Nigeria, there seems to be an identity crisis for women as we perceive a disjuncture between the typical portrayal of women especially in male-authored literatures as weak and inconsequential in the scheme of things and the current emergence of a new breed of women from all over the continent. The first modern-day woman President in Africa has, for instance, emerged in Liberia, and for feminists across the continent, this is a great achievement. Scholars, critics, feminist activists and top-level technocrats in diverse areas of endeavor have also been produced all over this continent and they are demonstrating individually and

collectively that they are determined to inspire and create new histories and images for themselves. This is especially remarkable, because African women live within a dominant male culture that oppresses and devalues them. What then accounts for this apparent disjuncture between the lived experiences and the oppressive identities foisted upon women by dominant male cultures? To investigate this problem further it is also needful to ask the following questions: How and why these dislocations occur. And finally, how do the women as writers themselves interrogate their perceived oppressive identities?

In an attempt to engage these issues, we find it necessary to turn to the limitless resources of history, a powerful force for the reconstruction of our present realities. What we are here suggesting is that African women need to be placed within a specific time framework within which to conceptualize and analyze their roles, images, identities and statuses. To this end, we identify a time frame that is contemporaneous and located within the postcolonial context deriving from a sense of history that is not anachronistic. However, Abiola Irele (2005) as well as Emenyonu (2000), both eminent scholars of African literature, would rather some form of closure to this historical phenomenon of colonialism that has such incalculable resonances on our present-day realities. The issuing Africanist argument here is that we continually and actively re-invest and privilege the former colonial/imperial empires, with the intellectual and cultural power and authority with which they continue to control and subjugate the post-colonies. This, they argue, is especially because it forces us to continually define ourselves in exclusively, relational and colonial terms. But we posit that our histories, including the events of colonialism and the processes of decolonization that we have engaged in as Africans and which continue to irrevocably resonate in our present neo/postcolonialisms need to be properly interrogated in order for us to redefine new and acceptable identities for ourselves. No doubt, colonialism affects the colonizer and the colonized and its legacies establish certain orders of relationships as well as producing structures of inclusion and exclusion. An instantiation will suffice here: new symbolic orders of experiencing, speaking, feeling or other behavioural patterns are created. These “historical upheavals and changes” reverberate in African social realities politically, economically, educationally psychologically and culturally (Larsen, 2005:24). The predicament of our self-definition then becomes even more monumental as we are confronted in these modern times by the collapse of familiar categories and the consequent physiological and psychological problems of a fast developing borderless globalization.

However, human societies and civilizations continually seek to redefine, regenerate and advance themselves making progress in this regard with varying degrees of achievement, leading to what may loosely be described as modernisation. And, as we have seen, the most dangerously extreme end of such modernisation is capitalist imperialism (McClintock, 1995:5; Loomba, 1998:4).

However, the invention of self is an important index in the process of identity formation. Stated differently, identity is a dynamic and continually changing process; it is not static, as it continues to be modified and finally becomes generally accepted with time. Identities of people, societies, and even nations, may be defined along sexual lines; that is, male/female, or in gender terms; masculine/feminine, which include all their spiritual, historical, emotional and social configurations. In recent times, however, people are crossing basic categories, in all manner of gender reassignments and are forging new, even “queer” identities such as bisexual, homosexual, gay, lesbian, transvestite and others. In a recent work, that ultimately problematizes the question of identity within the framework of culture, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) suggests that culture: “is whatever people make and invest with significance through the exercise of their human creativity” (118). In other words, beyond biological and socio-cultural determinisms, human beings are actively involved in defining their own identities. But whatever the confusions of these postmodernist fabrications, there are certain traditional African concepts of identity which are by no means simplistic in their extrapolations, especially, as they are not merely dichotomized in oppositional terms (Oyewumi, 1997:31). The affirmation of one’s identity, individual, group, or national expectedly, includes an establishment of value for, recognition and acceptance of it. This affirmation or rejection would consequently have far reaching effects on the sense of self at both the personal and social levels. Still on the matter of identity, Connolly (2002) avers that an identity is established in “relation to a series of differences” and that it “converts differences to otherness in order to be; in order to secure its own self-certainty” (64). This would then imply that identity embodies some degree of oppositional relativism in which there some points of inclusion and others of elision, leading to ascendancy or subordination.

Also of interest is that nations, even continents, have identities which can be conceived of in gender terms. For instance, Ogunyemi (1987) declares that Nigeria is male; on the other hand, Africa is conceptualized differently having as it were two sides, but in all Africa is feminine. To the “outsiders”, Africa is like the body of the woman. She is often highly eroticized, having such exhilarating *jouissances*; they (“outsiders”) feel a dire phallogocratic need to missionize, dominate and exploit her “dark” territories. This missionizing principle brought along with it its own mythological inventions; the differential and hierarchical construction of race and racism to legitimize its superiority (Susan Arndt, 2006). But to the “insiders”, Africa is the idealized, earthy Mother, placed on such a “pedestal”, and objectified. These typical illustrations of Africa show that identities are differently construed; the dialectics of inclusion/exclusion and white/black therefore foster conflicting models of understanding cultural identities. Such trajectories could lead to oppressions which easily occur especially, when people do not conform to the dominant social hegemonic

expectations. Undoubtedly, the African woman does experience these oppressions in various forms and in various spheres of life. But, as cultural institutions that very clearly capture superiority or subordination, as the case may be, literature becomes the critical sites for discursive interactions and conversations where issues of cultural identities may be addressed. To follow Appiah's thoughts again, these conversations or "imaginative engagements" do not necessarily lead to a "consensus about anything" but at least, "it's enough that it helps people get used to one another" (85). Unfortunately, though, this consensual experience seems to elude women.

Mary Helen Specht, (2006) shows that [from its earliest] contact with this continent the West has tried to come to terms with Africa by exploring, exploiting, enslaving, colonizing, Christianizing and mythologizing (42). In this process of degradation, it is women who now exist in specific historical, geo-political, class, spaces and locations which are neocolonial post-colonies that are the worst hit. We would make clear, presently, the implications of all this for the woman. Ania Loomba (1998) argues that "race, gender and sexuality are not just additive to one another in the colonial arena; they do not just provide metaphors and images for each other, but work together and develop in each other's crucible" (172). Therefore, it is the externalities, the network of social relations that underpin identity formations. In this regard, it is the woman who always needs to be constructed because on this continent the man is taken as the given, the norm. We must therefore seek to examine the woman especially in terms of the psychological consequences of these hegemonic patterns, but not with the aim of vilifying African men or the colonizers. This is because for women in particular, silencing and subordination has been the bane of their lives (Wisker.2000:3).

Moreover, continued male dominance and sexism is legitimized only to the extent that people refuse to dismantle such oppressive constructs in our current conceptualizations of identity having accepted at the beginning of this paper that culture is alterable. Transforming society would then be possible when we generate new narratives, narrative techniques, and new myths to yield new meanings where African women are no longer "de-womanised" and tyrannized by a paternalistic Eurocentric hegemony as well as patriarchal African traditions. Without any doubts, some women writers have already gained high visibility as a result of the kind of critical attention they have gained so far from textualizing the oppressions of women on the continent. Here we can easily point to such Anglophone writers as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Nawal el Sadaawi, Nobel laureate-Nardine Gordimer, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, but lesser known yet no less important writers like Seffi Attah, Chimamanda Adiche and Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo from Nigeria need to be critically engaged to find out the specific contributions of their creative writings in this regard.

Akachi* is the first woman writer in Nigeria and possibly in Africa to complete a conventional trilogy - *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2000) and *Children of the Eagle* (2002). She has also recently completed another important novel, *Trafficked* (2008). As a trilogy, Akachi is immediately set in the company of Achebe, doyen of the African classic, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), who was himself first to establish this tradition on the continent. Promise Okeke, Nigerian poet and novelist, has also done another type of trilogy, which is more of a serialization. But, as we note, Akachi's text is literarily separated from Achebe's not only because of the generational divide; the one belongs no doubt to the "first world" of the "establishment school" of Nigerian literature, or African literature in general. The other's marginality is circumscribed essentially by the femaleness of its author; yet it is critical to continually engage in inter-textual interrogations in order to revise our literary canons. But the lack of adequate critical attention may well be an indication of the sexual/textual politics which is the bane of women's lives and writing in Africa, a reflection of their present statuses and identities. But so far, at least, Osofisan (2004: 7) has with such subtle candour declared that "Akachi has come to challenge Achebe and stand Achebeans on their head!" But Osofisan's seemingly mild critique cannot be missed here especially when it is properly recontextualized. Achebe's stature as the pace-setter of African literature especially with the publication, of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, half a century ago has for long been and is still being celebrated as a "defining" factor in modern African literature (Emenyonu, *ibid*: ix). It is our purpose here then to strip Akachi's text of the layers of stereotypes and misconceptions that patriarchal 'eclecticisms' have piled on women writers in Africa. Such eclectics mainly see such writing as some "subculture" of "mainstream" writing, or again as the inevitable "other" that is marginalized. An engaging paradox arises here; that is, at the risk of possible self-erasure, should we continue to conceptualize women's literatures and discourses on them only in relational terms and therein perpetuate sexist accretion?

Of the four adult novels produced to date by Akachi we have deliberately selected to study *The Last of the Strong Ones* (TLSO) here because of its critical engagement with colonialism and its after-effects of neocolonialism. And when placed contiguously with Achebe's novel here, we find that Akachi is not complicit: rather she challenges Achebe's "master script" or "master-narrative, to use Charles Maier's term, that dominant hegemonic narrative, producing a counter-narrative which leads to emergent new identities for African women.

With a writing career that began with an apprenticeship in writing children's stories for the broadcast media culminating in the publication of *Buried Treasure* (1992), Akachi has demonstrated in the sheer numerical output of her works as well as in the various genres she bestrides, her seriousness as a creative artist. Her imaginative fecundity is displayed in the four volumes of short

stories she has so far produced. Writing also for young readers and children, Akachi has reeled out at least eight other stories in *The Prize* (1994), *Alani the Trouble Maker and other stories* (2003), *Whisker the Brave Cat* (2005), *Red One and the Wizard of Mula* (2005), *Snake Child and Star Baby* (2006), *Ezezemale and the Tree Spirit* (2006), *Sunshine, the Miracle Child* (2006) as well as *My Cousin Sammy* (2007)

With all these and much more in terms of the acclaim and exposure some of these works have received, some have received local and international awards, two volumes of the short stories have been translated into two African languages (Swahili and Xhosa), Akachi's works remain relatively little known. For instance, whereas Emecheta, Nwapa and even Alkali have already gained high visibility in terms of critical attention on their works, only recently did the first full length study of Akachi's works appear. Osofisan (2004:23) as well as Patrick Oloko, in recent times, (2008:2), have separately decried this inattention given to Akachi so far. Given this context, our work seeks to be part of the ongoing Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo symposia so that her works can be properly evaluated and appropriately placed within the matrix of Nigerian and African literatures.

The critical paradigms of this work stem from the postcolonial conditions that define African women's lives today. By postcolonial we mean the historical, psychological, economic, and political complexities that result from the colonial experience. In its historical sense we appropriate what Bill Ashcroft and others have quite simply described as "all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present (Ashcroft et al, 1989:2). The complexity of tensions and conflicts that have etched themselves into the psyche of the colonized and which continue to emerge from that experience underpins the psychological framework we describe here. The economies of unequal power relations which privilege the imperial centre to use all its might to exploit, deplete and devalue the resources of their hosts are pertinent here. But more specifically, it is the textualization of the subjectification of the African woman in a postcolonial state that is of primary concern here. Politically, African women are not traditionally visible in the political landscape of the continent. However, there is now a little improvement and Akachi textualises this reality.

In her work, Akachi espouses an integrative and accommodationist brand of feminism: what she has articulated as "complementarity", firmly located within the socio-political structures of an African realism. This is what she relentlessly pursues in her *TLSO* in order to create authentic identities of the African woman. As Mary E Modupe Kolawole notes, the search for self-recreation is predicated on self-identity which starts with self-naming (1998:5). Similarly, Nana Wilson-Tageo has called for a "feminist framework" that enables the critic to see representations in texts as

mediated by “sexual difference” and the imaginative and ideological conceptions that surround gender (1997:14).

In *TLSO*, Akachi draws on the material of the conflicts ensuing from the colonialist invasion of the Nigerian space, psyche, traditions, mores and societies and so she takes her place in the company of those other Nigerian writers who have either used this same material or the more recent tragic event of the Nigerian Civil War as the backdrop for their fictional discourse. As Chidi Amata (1988) notes, “the age-long relationship between literature and war not only produces a rich literary harvest [it] offers the greatest literary opportunity for the display of heroism as well ...” (86). But beyond its mere use as thematic material or the mere rehashing of the theme of “culture conflict”, Akachi participates in a visceral way, in the on-going criticism on the injustices of racism and sexism ensuing from that encounter. The novelist quite clearly depicts a nation (Umuga) caught in the throes of a Fanonist process of violent decolonization and liberationist movement. Akachi enters the colonial discourse but very deliberately, writes against the grain of Western imperialism as she engages that experience with the insights of a woman. But this is no mere feminization for Akachi and for the reader: rather, the novelist “de-authorizes” the chauvinistic “versions of history and identity politics” that male authors with their imperialist overlords have ‘regaled’ the Nigerian readership with. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, remain the “archetexts” in this regard.

At another level, and when we percolate *TLSO* through the literary antecedents of Soyinka’s intense pessimism in *The Strong Breed* (1964) as well as through Osofisan’s more revolutionary and optimistic ethos in *No More The Wasted Breed* (1982), we encounter a novelist in search of the heroines of our traditional past, the strong ones the: “carriers” of the community’s burdens that we can identify as the enduring embodiments of the legends of the people. Fortunately, for posterity, certain strong women are located. Therefore, her work is valued materially and politically as she empowers her women through pro-active, pro-women perspectives to “decontaminate” Umuga and its environs and influence society positively by altering the republic of Nigerian literatures that has for long historically and critically neglected and marginalized women. This needs further elucidation here. Akachi creates female characters whose identities are continually modified as they each relate to their respective husbands as wives and mothers or when they each gain freedom from their respective marriages and join the alutaradi (association of wives), obufo (inner council committee), umuada (association of daughters) or oluada (top women representatives). This is most typically stated when after the death of her husband, Umeozo, Onyekozuru tells of how she began to pay more attention to the activities pertaining to her and the village. She starts to attend umuada and alutaradi

meetings regularly and even take care of her body! (*TLSO*: 44). Similarly too, when Chieme is rejected by her husband she goes through a process of self incarnation and later joins the organization of umuada, spearheading and effecting changes that have far reaching consequences for the village and for the whole town.

From the outset, Akachi sets for herself the task of extracting “truths from our myths, our history and our folktales so that the youths could be properly instructed” (*TLSO*: 2). This singular focus by the author immediately throws up certain complexities that need careful examination here. First is Akachi’s return to the use of myth in this novel. For Akachi, myths are not the primitive relics of mystical and archaic formulations of a now irrelevant, naïve and superstitious past overtaken by a highly technologized world; rather they are the timeless culture-bound yet not moribund philosophical, psychological and ideological repertoires used to authorize and encode society’s values, norms, aesthetics, sensibilities, codes of conduct, gender socializations and perhaps more importantly the embodiment of the society’s sense of identity. If this crucial mythic system of signifying is then eroded, corrupted or misappropriated then that social collective is doomed. Therefore, it is crucial for Akachi as well as other African women writers to specifically engage actively in the process of retrieval and reconstruction of the mythic kernel of their respective communities since they form the bedrock of the community’s valuational system of self-definition and consequent stability. For Akachi, the return to the use of myth in this novel is a spring-board for questioning received truths from a “westernized center”; as the Umuga saying goes: “when a commoner wishes to criticize the king, he must wear the disguise of a masquerade (*TLSO*: 60). Moreover, she is not an apologist for the so-called pristine, pure traditionalisms of the pre-colonial era. Rather, myths, traditional cultural expressions, are a veritable site for the systematic recovery of discursive privileges for the woman and this is what Akachi does here. The novelist returns to Umuga and retrieves from communal history the authentic and precise roles Umuga woman play in the encounter with the “Kosiri” (white invasionists) and their attempts to foil the degradation of their community. As Kolawole further posits, “When derogatory mythic conceptualizations of women are internalized over a period, certain negative self-perceptions emerge which are then taken for granted as natural and African” (7). Erudite feminist theorist and scholar, Molaria Ogunidipe Leslie’s (1994:229-230) call for the transformation for Africa through the active participation of women in national polity driven by STIWANISM (acronym for Social Transformations Including Women In Africa) is apposite here.

Beyond the morality of the novelist’s position on behalf of the youths, the future of our generation, Akachi also becomes in this novel, the raconteur *par excellence* of racial memory/history, the neighbourhood spokeswoman or scribe of sorts. Her strategy here is to quickly

establish an authentic counter-narrative, a veritable alternative, to prevent the “contamination with the distorted account that “kosiri” and his agents were bound to present at some future date” (*TLSO*: 2). In a strategic repositioning of the facts of their ethnic histories and realities, Akachi, an erudite scholar, teacher and critic herself, is anxious to set the records straight especially for the future generations. She inflects the narrator’s voice with an unmistakably authorial eloquence and impact, resulting in a formidable combination that tackles the centre and its comprador accomplices in the outposts. Akachi evinces a humanism that is proletarian, one in which the human(woman) factor is indispensable as she elucidates in her own inaugural lecture “ for a people properly educated and socialized drive development as a matter of course and that literature is the most efficacious subject/discipline to provide humanistic education” (2008:16). This she accomplishes as she aligns with the men, women, sons and daughters of Umuga to reconstruct the reality of their lives in the problematic colonial condition. Being acutely sensitive to the emotional and material complexities that particularly negate the subjected lives of these women, Akachi joins forces with the vulnerable women of Umuga to resist the historical and intellectual failure that would have been the fate of these women once they refused to assert themselves. The suspicion or question of her acculturation does not arise here as the women themselves expressly and passionately implore her to be their memory. In *TLSO*, Akachi structures her narrative such that the personal or otherwise private lives of the major protagonists intersect the communal aspirations of Umuga. In turn, their self-narratives which structure their identities and their interactions in the various community groups become mutually defining and this is crucial in the novelist’s postmodern feminist’s rejection of an essentialist nature of women. The non-linear varieties of these self-narratives or biographies create a pluralism or multi-foci reading that allows us to re-read the underlying assumptions of traditional African societies which these women seek to transcend in order to foster a more humane society. Yvonne Vera, quite perceptively, writes about the efforts of other African women understanding their acts of courage and the “intense risk a woman takes in the sheer effort of writing placing herself beyond the accepted margin, abandoning the securities of less daunting, much more approved paths”. (1999:3). Through their narratives in Akachi’s *TLSO*, we see women who are not mere appendages, whose hitherto stereotypical image of passivity is here contested from the structured margins of a dominant ideology. More than this, the women become determining factors in society as they form socio-political pressure groups or what we may here call endogenous spaces to work for the survival and greater good of Umuga. Finding or replicating such relevant endogenous spaces is of critical importance for the articulation and participation of African women in influencing and transforming their diverse communities and societies.

In a manner that somewhat recalls the women in Sembane Ousmane's epic narrative in *God's Bits of Wood*, Akachi, captures the saga of the colonial imperialist invasion and subjugation of Igbo land in Nigeria. Through the eyes of the strong women, Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme, and Chibuka or the representatives of women in the "sisterhoods" of daughters in the "umuada" or of the wives in the "alutaradi" or even in the "Obufo", we encounter our own correlates of Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Amanda Berry Smith and Anna Cooper. In each of their well-articulated stories, the author captures graphically the pains, the joys, the travails and challenges of these women from the vantage point of one whose personal life has been affected by the larger communal struggles against the 'kosiri'. Of particular epistemological significance is the fact that Akachi creates a feminine locale that is psychologically outside and beyond the patriarchal universe and expectation of the image of meek, subordinate women. Through their participation in these associations we see the collapse of the boundaries of male/female, domestic/public dichotomies which hitherto hindered the cause of women. Each of these women emerges from her highly subjectified space and seize-hold of the apparatuses of resistance discourse in such an unprecedented manner and begins to re-inscribe herself into the center of things, skillful and subtly subversive in the reticent telling of their personal life stories. Perhaps theirs is an unconscious answer to the Spivak question: Yes indeed, the subaltern speaks from a position of power! They take the center stage and perform roles powerfully influential and transformative as they are committed to the survival of Umuga, their homeland. They violently wrest for themselves the tools of communication and empowering their voices, they each record and articulate their individual stories flowing with the sheer force, lucidity and directness of lived experiences into "*the rhythms of each others lives like the confluent streams of the Agwazi and the Ebizi. Our two rivers of ideas and commitment joined and mingled their waters of harmony that was always at high tide*" (TLSO: 19).

Akachi uses language dexterously to signify difference. Deploying lexical items, cadences of cultural idioms and Umuga speech rhythms and proverbs with which she abrogates the privileged centrality of English (and without losing meaning), the novelist creates nuanced identities of strong women who "are great survivors who find their way out of crippling situations" (102). But Nigerian, indeed, African women have significantly been involved in the political histories of their communities either as individuals or as collectives, as we witness in the heroisms of radicalized fore-runners such as Moremi, Idia, Mary Ekpo, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Amina, as well as in the radical collective actions of the Lagos women's protest against the introduction of water rate in 1909, the Aba women's riot of 1929 against tax and the Abeokuta women's protest against colonial taxation in 1949. The East African Mau Mau guerilla wars and the struggles against the Apartheid regimes of South Africa all evidence women's participation in political activism in the development

of new ethno/national identities. How come then, that the monumental and phenomenal “heroinism”, to use the coinage of Ellen Moers (1977), of all these women have consistently suffered immolation at such a critically defining moments by many male writers? How can we explain the transition of these stories from prominence in their lived contexts to negation and systematic denial in their afterlives? Is there a purpose to this omission? Perhaps even more disturbing is whether almost all male writers simultaneously suffered this same form of amnesia. Or is it that these women icons are so dangerously provocative that the men are terrified in a Freudian sense? Could this projection of male xenophobia or possible complicity be collusion with the dominant discourse of imperialists with all their identity-destroying power to destroy the “other”? Taken in totality, what has resulted is the suppression, near erasure of women’s vital sources of creativity. But writing as a self-conscious male critic, Biodun Jeyifo (1993), in a significantly germane discourse, has as a matter of urgency, called on women writers and critics to “delegitimize the under-textualization” of the stories of these foremothers of women’s creativity by male writers and critics. This should then lead us to question and revise the processes of canonization of African literatures.

As their stories in *TLSO* unfold, we see Akachi resist the capacious use of cultural memory against the women. It is in this regard that Akachi’s work is compelling. Women in African literatures have for long been unheard and unsung but in this novel, the writer gives each one of the leading women the creative space in which to assert herself. In describing themselves, the women follow the same pattern; a description of their homesteads; the home of their nativity, the (mis)adventure of marriage, the escape into the women’s associations where they find fulfillment and complete self-expression and at the end of each story, the author gives a short eulogy remarking the strength of each character. Of Chieme it is written, for instance, “Oluada who showed the world that a woman’s reputation does not depend on a husband. You defied *Agwu*, the spirit of disorder and deformity. You wrestled with adversity and took the bull of life by the horns....Your triumph is enviable....Woman mountain, seeded in tradition....” (*TLSO*: 85). Ejimnaka says that as a mature woman who had now overstayed her welcome in the home of her “nativity”, her life was now “like a lone boat plowing down the river. I could not think of a way to steer my life well. My soul was yearning to return to land, to firm, dry land” (*TLSO*: 20). After the collapse of her first marriage, we see Ejimnaka search for the meaning of her existence and in this process/search she finds a lover and friend in Obiatu. In very idyllic terms they express love even in the face of the harsh realities and mundanities of their existence.

In the intricate tales of their lives, these women realize the limitations of a devalued sense of self and so begin to question their oppressed identity. When Chieme is declared as being neither male nor female by her husband after four years of marriage, she consults with her “chi”/ “divine

mother” through Idemmiri, the only goddess in Umuga who had a husband. At this point, it is useful to Ogunyemi for further illumination on this “chi”/ “ori” trope. She postulates in her important vernacular theory that “women’s power is predicated on the belief that, openly acknowledged or not, a feminine force determines the important phases of each individual’s life” (35). By extension then, and as a metaphor for social equilibrium that Akachi consistently espouses, African societies must reconnect to this feminine principle to attain wholeness and wellbeing.

Faced with the crisis of identity, Chieme pays a visit to her maternal uncle in her attempt to find a solution to her personal predicament. But Chieme’s personal crisis of identity is also connected to the crisis of a community in transition, in her quest for self-preservation. Chieme’s life dramatically changes as she resolutely determines to live life to the full; “*she lives in full becoming impervious to gossip and deaf to the derision of the world*” (TLSO: 81). Importantly too, her profession changes; she combines superhuman attributes of chanter, performer and artiste. Therefore, the end of her marriage saw the emergence of a triumphant and successful woman.

We see the group of women completely fearless and un-put-down-able, who not only take affirmative action against the stooges like Okwara and other “treacherous warrant chiefs” but who also dare to march against the “metropole” in Awka in their search for redress from the trespass of the “travelers/ wayfarers” who as it were “are no longer standing on one foot” (17): reconstructing a world where the cultural and historical assumptions of the invasionists about them are challenged. Their stories, as we see, are frontal attacks against imperialist discourse. Thus the women constitute for themselves a counter-discourse that answers back to the “empire” in a retrieval programme of women’s self-image and histories from their despotic use against them.

Importantly too, Akachi’s women in this novel are not constrained by their poverty or illiteracy. What they lack in material wealth they make-up for in strength of character, resilience and integrity, such attributes of subversive resistance, in spite of being always at the risk of great personal loss and physical injury. Akachi does not construct women who are passive, docile or voiceless for such constructs would inadvertently continue to perpetuate sexist prejudices which phenomenally exclude women from political discourses. Whereas other African women writers including Grace Ogot and Flora Nwapa “appropriate and valorize female experiences and in the process subvert certain fixed definitions of the female subject, Nana Wilson-Tagoe (1997:14), Akachi’s women relentlessly forge for themselves a new identity in the face of the two-fold tyranny of colonialism and traditional patriarchy. Each of her women enters marriage only as a necessity of tradition and so they gain entrance into the wo/man discourse through which they surreptitiously “argue with the phallus”; as it were entering into the “symbolic-order-of-the-fathers” and subvert that order that endues the men with such power and authority but which conversely categorizes

women as weak, trivial and merely sentimental. Even when they appear docile as Chibuka in her relationship with Itheme, her cruel husband, we note her suppressed resistance. This is indeed a resistance strategy, a feminine mystic, designed to first ensure survival of these women at the domestic (psychological) level and then empower them to take-over at the public (social) arena and take center stage joining the alutaradi, the Oluada or the Obufo as they give their strength, wealth and wisdom to the commonwealth of Umuga collectively taking on the “kosiri” with all its humiliating indignities against the land and people. Akachi concludes in another place thus:

It is not an easy matter being a woman in a society like ours where women are expected to do two-thirds of the chores. Women cannot escape many of the responsibilities thrust upon them by culture and tradition, but they can at least control their destiny to a large extent, and structure and take pride in every aspect of their lives (1996b, 7).

As we have seen here, Akachi creates women not smarting under the burdens of Western imperialism or the traditionalisms of Umuga, rather, we see great women empowered not by a male society but by themselves to create a society where they are valued for who they are. Akachi’s recommendation in *TLSO* is that women must participate more intensely in the political processes of their societies or face the consequence of erasure that a negative complacency would bring upon them. Finally, it is our submission in this work that we must interrogate the political and imaginative control or authority over women’s lives in the present postcolonial condition. By reconfiguring and challenging dominant narratives women are able to de-scribe themselves from the periphery. It then becomes apparent that identity is foundational as it reinforces the possibilities of resistance in the literatures of women.

Note

1 In this paper I deliberately deploy a feminist style of using the female author’s first name.

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