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# THE CELEBRATION OF WOMANHOOD IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES* AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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**Abstract**

This essay explores the celebration of womanhood in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Despite the historical settings of the two novels, women appear to occupy a disadvantaged position in the Igbo cultural space. Yet, with courage and determination, they make their voices heard against the dominant voices. Thus, the essay asserts that the female characters achieve agency through self-determination. Their involvement in the conflicts show the extent to which they can be seen as symptoms and/or remedies. Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie portray the major female characters in the novels as symbols which point not only to themselves but appear to point equally at women whose stories are untold and who are, therefore, uncelebrated. Using womanism and snail-sense feminism, the essay shows how the female characters negotiate their way through an oppressive cultural and social system to attain agency.

**Keywords**: snail-sense feminism, womanism, self-determination, celebration, agency, symbol

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**Introduction**

In many cultures, women are marginalized and are treated as inferior to men. They are considered as "other," or as what Simone de Beauvoir entitles her famous book: "the second sex," a sex that is seen as negative. It is men who define the world. They determine the things women can do or aspire to. Thus, men have built social structures that limit women's place in society. Moreover, within the patriarchal culture, power is considered the exclusive preserve of the menfolk. Since women are mostly excluded from the power structure, they either have to yield to the dictates of the culture or fight to assert their presence in a culture that is not only discriminatory, but mutes their voices and renders them invisible. The women who challenge the patriarchal structure can be said to be those who choose to live in the world, according to Alice Walker, "on their own terms" (*In Search* 40), those who rise above the limitations imposed on them by their society. These are the women who are celebrated.

Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie are writers situating women in African narratives and history. These two writers share the same cultural background and the selected novels are historical texts which celebrate women and their contributions to events in Igbo history. In Igbo culture, women are seen as subordinate to men. They are usually excluded from the political structure, particularly from decision making concerning the community. However, in *The Last of the Strong Ones* (subsequently, *The Last*), we see that women are part of the decision making, perhaps because the community is on the verge of an existential crisis. But these women who take their place amongst the strong men of the community get there by overcoming both personal and cultural limitations. They are women who deserve to be celebrated for their achievements and contributions in their community and society. Thus, Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie appear to be rewriting the idea of women as voiceless and invisible.

Some scholars are of the opinion that most African women writers are trying to reconstruct the traditional view of women as weak, inferior and voiceless. Contrary to this, E. Modupe Kolawole and Gloria Ajami Makokha claim that African women writers are reconstructing women's identity through their writing using literature as a medium to assert female voices and to negotiate their identity. For Kolawole, these women writers no longer present women as the victims of tradition; rather, they present new heroines, "diverse archetypes of power and empowerment [who] engage in dialogue with tradition" (182). Makokha points out that literature enables female authors to construct female role models and/or debunk male myths about women (111). She argues that the Nigerian woman experienced double colonization in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (subsequently, *Half*), the first being her experience during the British imperialism and the other, her experience in the hands of the Nigerian man in postcolonial Nigeria (119). Similarly, Zanou Capo-Chichi, Laure Clemence and Fifame Bodjrenou explore the images of women and their roles during the Nigerian civil war. They assert that the genre Adichie employs in the novel enables her to portray women of different social classes and their invaluable contribution in the civil war. Also, Jennifer Rideout examines woman as nation in *Half*. She argues that Adichie uses Olanna as "the female allegorical symbol of the nation" (n.p.) because her character endures, unlike Kainene and Mama who

represent the future and tradition respectively. Rideout concludes that Olanna comes to represent the woman as nation in the new Nigeria because she embodies the modern and the traditional (n.p).

Ofure Aito posits that the central preoccupation of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last* is "to highlight women's heroic stature, which the men-orientation of Igbo culture submerges" (169). She argues that Adimora-Ezeigbo uses reincarnation to connect her trilogy which can be understood as "a story of women's continuity in the progression and transformation of a society" (166). Similarly, Mojisola Shodipe points out that, in the novel, Adimora-Ezeigbo embarks on "a journey of role re-evaluation and redefinition of womanhood within the context of the Igbo culture" (245). Furthermore, Shreya Bhattacharji asserts that Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last* challenges the status assigned to the African women in colonial discourse as "the 'other's other"' (132) by presenting her women as "vibrant, vocal individuals with powerful female genealogies, immersed in independent professions" (132). In contrast, Adegite O. Tobalase and Lucky O. Aikabeli explore masculinity in *The Last* and they claim that Adimora-Ezeigbo's portrayal of the male characters in the text is stereotypical. Whereas their focus is on masculinity, they seem not to acknowledge the fact that the women in the text equally demonstrate strength, assertiveness, protectiveness and authority, qualities they claim are usually ascribed to men.

From the literature available, some critics have examined both novels as feminist texts but none has compared these novels. This essay, therefore, posits that Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie use imagery and character to portray the major female characters in the novels as symbols of strength. Unlike male writings that project the image of women as shadows, Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie present the image of women as presence. They celebrate women who overcome oppressive social structures in their culture to become women leaders and the voice of the ordinary woman who is voiceless and invisible as shown to a large extent in *The Last*. The study adopts womanism and snail-sense feminism in the analysis of the texts. Snail-sense feminism comes into this study, not because of its emphasis on non-confrontation and negotiation, but because, according to Ezeigbo, it, "symbiotically, advocates Western feminism's individualism and African womanism's communalism" (*Snail-Sense* 35). An individual has to be empowered before she can empower another. According to her,

> 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. And if she succeeds, the success of the family or the community follows naturally. (35)

In the novels, we find that it is individual empowerment that enables the characters to empower others. The idea of womanhood is considered from these two theoretical frameworks and with emphasis on character. Strength, resilience, compassion,

empathy, courage, tolerance, the ability to nurture and support others are qualities that pertain to character. The women's involvement in the war conflicts not only demonstrates the womanist ideals of cooperation and inclusiveness, but reveals their willingness to be part of the solution. They also imbue the spirit of their people.

**Women in the Igbo Cultural Space**

The two novels are written by Nigerian women of Igbo descent. However, in *Half*, the setting is both urban and rural and not centred exclusively on the Igbo rural community as in *The Last*. Like many cultures of the world, Igbo culture is patriarchal. Since a woman's domain is the family, much importance is placed on marriage and motherhood as spaces that give women identity. To be eligible for marriage, therefore, the woman's repertoire is expected to include character, beauty and resourcefulness. Obedience, submissiveness and humility appear to enhance a woman's character in this culture. Incidentally, possession of the finest repertoire does not guarantee happiness or protection against marital conflicts.

In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Buchi Emecheta's The *Joys of Motherhood*, the heroines meet all the criteria and more, because they also come from families with *name* and wealth, but their marriages fail due to childlessness. The women are young, beautiful, humble, obedient, submissive, resourceful and resilient, yet they do not escape oppression and social discrimination. In Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last* and Adichie's *Half*, a similar situation plays out in the lives of the main characters – Ejimnaka, Chieme and Olanna. However, the difference between the first two novels mentioned earlier and the primary texts is that, in the latter, the characters' limitations do not end in tragedy. Apart from Chieme, whose marriage ends in divorce, Ejimnaka and Olanna are able to overcome their limitations and to save their marriages.

In *The Last*, Ejimnaka desires independence in marriage. Her refusal to marry a young man shows her strength of character. According to her,

> I did not want to marry a young man, for two important reasons. I did not consider any of my young suitors attractive or intelligent enough. In addition, I hated being any man's appendage. I could not entertain having to eat out of any man's hand or being under his heel all my life, as my mother and father's other wives had been to Ezeukwu. My independence meant everything to me, indeed my very life, and I guarded it fiercely. (27)

This image of a strong and independent woman contradicts that of Ejimnaka's mother and her co-wives. For Ejimnaka, it is the need for independence that supersedes other considerations. Thus, she marries Alagbogu, a man old enough to be her father, to achieve her ambition. Ironically, this much-desired independence eludes her in Alagbogu's house. To reclaim her independence, she quits her marriage to Alagbogu, but as a divorced woman, she becomes an aberration in this culture where marriage is held in high esteem and considered as the ultimate destiny of every young woman.

Ejimnaka's marriage to Obiatu appears to be the reward for her courage. In Obiatu's house, she regains independence. Whereas her relationship with Alagbogu is

that of lord and subject, with Obiatu, she shares mutual respect and trust. They complement each other. Adimora-Ezeigbo constructs these parallel characters to show that independence and success should not be condemned in women. Contrary to expectation, their marriage becomes a symbol of a perfect union and partnership. However, by twist of fate, Ejimnaka is not able to have male children for Obiatu, an only son, who is expected to have sons that will guarantee the survival of the family name. Ironically, it is Ejimnaka's equally strong-willed, independent and self-sufficient daughter, Aziagba, who gives up marriage to "remain at home" (*The Last* 45) to produce male children for her father. Her choice to become a "male daughter" (Ezeigbo *Snail-Sense* 31) saves Ejimnaka from social discrimination and condemnation.

Similarly, Chieme experiences challenges in her marriage. Unlike Ejimnaka whose womanhood is tested and proven despite her failure to mother a son, Chieme fails as a woman because of her inability to conceive. Onyekozuru tells us that "marriage and motherhood are the greatest goal of every woman in Umuga" (50). Chieme succeeds in getting married to Iwuchukwu, but her greatest failure is that her womanhood is in doubt because, she has never "been able to menstruate" (103). For Iwuchukwu, Chieme is neither male nor female and he divorces her as a result. Chieme's consultation with the priest of Idemmiri is a turning point in her life. She embraces a new profession as an oral artist and becomes successful. Due to her wealth and fame, she becomes "*Loolo*," a prestigious title that is commonly associated with women whose husbands are chiefs. The title is a celebration of her achievements as an independent and powerful woman in her own right. Thus, Chieme's father and Iwuchukwu appear to be antithetical characters to Chieme. She succeeds where they fail. The father is unable to provide for his family and Iwuchukwu is unable to keep Chieme and marry a second wife.

Following the womanist ideology, Chieme is "a woman who loves life and is not resentful of what she has been through, who loves herself regardless" (Walker, *In Search* 6). She is a woman who does not allow her tragedy to ruin her. In the words of the "watchers, the memory of Umuga" (176), Chieme is the

> *Oluada* who showed the world that 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 and has made you the greatest funeral artiste in Umuga and the surrounding towns. Your life is a source of inspiration to Umuga women whom you have led with wisdom. (119)

They celebrate her triumph over her handicap, a handicap that does not limit her, but liberates her to discover herself and to prove to the world that, indeed, a woman's identity and reputation do not depend on a husband. Without Iwuchukwu, she is able to "think herself" (De Beauvoir 27).

In *Half*, Olanna suffers the same crisis as the Umuga women. Again, it is the question of womanhood: marriage and motherhood. Unlike the Umuga women, Olanna is a modern woman in pre-independence and post-independence Nigeria who is portrayed as a model African woman. She is beautiful, cultured and educated. She has a deep respect for Igbo culture and values which seem to be captured in the person of

Odenigbo. However, her "live-in" arrangement with Odenigbo puts her in conflict with Mama, Odenigbo's mother, who considers their relationship as an aberration. Mama is a traditional Igbo woman who places great value on the customs and traditions. For her, not only Olanna, but her entire family is abnormal. Mama views Olanna's mother with disdain because she hires a wet nurse to breastfeed her children while she is alive and well – an action that is un-African and a contradiction to womanhood and motherhood. For Mama, therefore, Olanna's family, their status and her education make her an imperfect match for Odenigbo. Her perception of university education is that it makes women proud, insolent and loose – negative qualities that ruin a woman. Moreover, the question of motherhood is also in doubt since, according to Mama, no one knows if Olanna can have children.

As if to justify Mama's fears, Olanna is unable to conceive but, ironically, Amala, the village girl that Mama brings for Odenigbo, takes in after what Odenigbo describes as "a brief rash lust" (281). Olanna is devasted because the society is constructed in a way that a woman is seen as incomplete if she does not have a husband and a child. To be a complete woman is to be married and the mother of sons. Odenigbo and Olanna decide to get married because they have realized that society is intolerant of difference. Although Olanna belongs to the new hybrid of women, the university women who have achieved emancipation and agency through education, yet she has to conform to her culture because it is the culture that constructs womanhood. Unlike Olanna, Amala is uneducated – an antithesis of the university women. Poverty and lack of education erode her self-worth and turn her into an object, a baby-making machine. Thus, in the new world of urban and educated women, she is an outsider. She has nothing to recommend her but her fertile womb. She is proof that Odenigbo is not impotent and yet, she does not inscribe Odenigbo's potency as a complete man. Her place would have been firmly established in Odenigbo's house if she had had a son. But lack of a son displaces her even in Mama's affection. Her inability to have a son reduces her to a surrogate position. She appears to be a mechanism enclosing a message intended for another. It is Odenigbo who unintentionally sends this message through her to Olanna, the desirable and chosen one, the one that belongs to him. "Nkem," as he fondly calls her, means "my own" and it is his seal of ownership for nothing belongs to him totally as what is his. Olanna's decision to adopt Baby, Odenigbo's daughter with Amala, is an act of bravery that restores their relationship.

In *The Last*, Onyekozuru and Chibuka's marriages show how women are treated as objects. Onyekozuru is given away in marriage to Umeozo, a man older than her father, in exchange for a plot of land. Marriage to Umeozo denies her agency. She is invisible and voiceless. Similarly, Chibuka also experiences this loss of self in her marriage. Her parents choose her husband to make sure that she does not achieve agency, since assertiveness is seen as a reprehensible quality in a wife. However, despite the constraints these women experience, one trait that is common to these women of diverse backgrounds is resilience. They rise above oppression, abuse, inequality and marginalization to achieve agency. Some grow from being invisible and voiceless to become self-aware and self-actualized.

**Women in Conflict: Symptom or Remedy?**

Since women previously are not directly involved in armed conflicts, they are usually excluded in war narratives. But Adimora-Ezeigbo's and Adichie's novels show that regardless of this, women's contributions are valid and essential. In *The Last*, women are included in the political structure. In Umuga, women belong to two associations, the *umuada* and the *alutaradi*, but between these two, the umuada is more powerful. They are the daughters of the land, "the watchdog of the community, the guardian of tradition" (*The Last* 49). However, the *oluada* is made up of four exceptional women who have distinguished themselves in umuada and have earned the right to become the voice of the women in Umuga. Their participation in the decision-making sets them apart as men's equals and shows that Umuga respects intellect and leadership skills irrespective of who possesses them as these women are chosen on their merit and not because of their husbands' achievements. According to Kolawole, Obioma Nnaemeka posits that the philosophy of "live and let live" in Igbo society "allowed gender role sharing and encouraged women's visibility" ("From Metatexts" 195).

This philosophy is seen in Obuofo where gender role sharing is allowed and encouraged. Incidentally, it is Onyekozuru's recommendation of a letter-writer in Agbaja that brings about the crisis in Obuofo. Unfortunately, Abazu turns the Agbaja betrayal into a personal and gender war. To show that his attack on Onyekozuru is a gender war, the three *oluada* absent themselves from the obuofo. They convene a meeting of the umuada and take their resolution to obuofo. Ironically, in this culture where women, as individuals, are seemingly weak, voiceless, "insignificant, ineffective" (*The Last* 49), they can assert their voice as a group. When "*umuada* joined forces, the earth trembled" (49). Thus, the women are ineffective as individuals but, as a group, they wield power. Their voice is optimal and they can make demands rather than bargain. Their voice is also strengthened by their knowledge and respect for the culture and tradition.

The women are active against gender-based violence within the community as well as the police action and, consequently, the military campaign against the community by "*kosiri* and his agents" (184). To demonstrate that they consider themselves as remedy rather than liability, they "take charge of the purchase and preparation of food for the fighters" (182). Every woman is expected to get involved in the war effort except old women, nursing mothers, pregnant women and sick women. While the men buy arms and fight in the conflict, the women ensure that they do not die of hunger. So the women's effort is complementary to the men's. Without food and water to sustain the fighters, the men will lose morale. So their effort is crucial because without their contribution, there is bound to be a negative ripple effect.

In *Half*, there is a more robust contribution from the women because, unlike in Umuga, the war in the novel is a civil war. The scope is wider and so is the duration. Like the Umuga women, the university women are involved in the pro-war campaign and preparations. They command respect and also demonstrate strength in unity by joining the rest of the university staff to sign the petition to the military administrator demanding for secession as an end to the dilemma of the easterners in Nigeria. Even before the commencement of the Biafran war, the University Women's Association is involved in

helping the victims of the massacres in the north. The association organizes food donations for the refugees from the north (*Half* 198). During the war, they continue the task of clothing the soldiers. They strongly support the win-the-war effort because their goal is the survival of the entire Biafran people.

Initially, Olanna's attitude to the war is lukewarm unlike Mrs. Muokelu who is a champion of the cause. Ironically, at the end, there is a reversal. If it is the war that shakes Muokelu's faith, it is the same war that intensifies Olanna's passion for the cause. Her epiphany enables her to grow from weakness to strength. Ironically, some characters in the novel that are portrayed as strong, aggressive, and disdainful of weakness break in the face of adversity. Odenigbo's personal tragedy revolutionizes his ideology and destroys his faith in himself. He changes radically from strength, certainty, fearlessness and being master, the one with knowledge and the power of speech, to weakness. However, Olanna's near-death experience in the trench hardens rather than weakens her resolve. Faced with the choice to fight or perish, she chooses to fight for her survival and the survival of those she cares about.

Olanna's win-the-war effort is ideological. Since the war itself is dehumanizing, she continues to teach as a way to rehumanize the children and in order to help "*save Biafra for the free world*" (*Half* 418, emphasis in the original). Unlike Olanna, the motive for Kainene's survival projects is paradoxical. It is both profit-driven and humanitarian. Kainene is a successful business woman who takes over her father's business. In the words of their father, Chief Ozobia, "Kainene is not like a son, she is like two" (39). She is as strong and competitive as a man and can be likened to Shug in Walker's *The Color Purple* who is said to "act more manly than most men" (245). Even Kainene's disappearance is an enigma, and it does not negate, but rather affirms her character. Her disappearance with Inatimi appears to be symbolic, a symptom of the Biafran state. A nation of unshakeable faith and strength, not beaten by adversity because, like Kainene, Biafra is inventive, challenging, resilient but, at the end, it simply fades in pursuit of survival without a trace.

Similarly, Olanna can also be considered as a symptom of the Biafran State. She is not a symptom in the sense of a causative agent, but a symptom in the sense that her experience mimics the Biafran experience. She survives beyond others' expectations. In the end, she will become revolutionary. Her transformation reveals the roundness of her character. Odenigbo acknowledges that Olanna is strong: "You're so strong, nkem" (*Half* 491). Like Obiatu and Ejimnaka, Odenigbo complements Olanna. With the war, Olanna grows in strength while Odenigbo diminishes. Ironically, the strong ones, incapable of self-doubt, are broken by the war. Kainene, despite her indefatigable spirit, will literally disappear, a disappearance that shatters Richard because, as Gwendolyn Diaz points out, for Fernando Diaz, "disappearance was a fate worse than death, because it deprived the survivors of the rituals of death: the funeral, the burial, the control over the destiny of the body, and acceptance of finality" (3).

Both Olanna and Kainene are symptomatic of the Biafran State. Kainene can be said to represent the Biafra which disappears at the end of the war while Olanna is the new Biafra that emerges from the conflict, and which is not weakened by loss but made

strong by her experience. This new Biafra is a spirit of resilience, a spirit of hope. As Olanna is hopeful that she will find her sister in time, such hope is invariably expressed about Biafra. Biafra can be found. It lives. It is only a matter of time. Similarly, in *The Last*, Ejimnaka is one of the strong ones who is broken by the war. Unlike Abazu whose suicide obliterates, rendering his strength and masculinity void, Ejimnaka's suicide does not diminish her but proves that tragedy ruins especially the strong. Thus, when Obiatu and obuofo are taken away, things fall apart not only for Ejimnaka but for the whole community because, they are the symbol of their culture and tradition. Also, Ejimnaka symbolises the spirit of Umuga after the war, a paradoxical spirit, a spirit at once broken and defiant, a spirit made weak but still resilient. The women we encounter in the novels embody the spirit of the people. It is a spirit passionate with hope, growth and reconciliation, imbued with the thirst for acceptance, for equality and freedom but, ultimately, a fighting spirit. It is this spirit that the novels seem to celebrate in the women and the people. The texts celebrate the achievements of the women and their people. Both Umuga and Biafra lose in the war but the victory lies in the courage to have dared to fight for what they believe in. It is the spirit of freedom and survival that the novels celebrate and the women we encounter in these novels possess this spirit and the courage to chart their own destiny.

**Conclusion**

Women occupy a disadvantaged position in a patriarchal society and their struggle is fundamentally gendered, because they have to contend with the limitations of their sex which is considered as inferior in a man's world. Due to these preconditions, women who excel in a male-dominated society are worthy of celebration and this is what the primary texts in this essay can be said to be about: the celebration of womanhood. Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie use imagery and characters (parallel or opposing) to portray the major female characters as symbols of strength. These women fight for equality and defy subalternity or structures of oppression in their society. In *The Last*, the four *oluada* fight individually to give themselves voice and visibility. The ability of the individual to empower herself before she can empower others is what snail-sense feminism emphasizes. It is because the *oluada* has attained self-actualization individually that they can lead the umuada. As a group, the umuada have authority because they demonstrate the power in unity. They do not bargain; they demand. On the other hand, *Half* shows women who are independent, who show cooperation and support in their relation with the male gender. Mostly their strength, resilience, courage and patience enable the women in both novels to succeed and achieve self-actualization. Their ability to lift themselves, their families and communities makes them worthy of celebration.

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