

REVISITING FEMALE (IN)FERTILITY IN AKACHI ADIMORA EZEIGBO'S *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES* (1996).

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to point out the way women are victim of their biological gender role of life-giver. Feminist writers address all issues affecting women's lives. Chief among these issues is (in)fertility which is labored in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. It is a novel portraying a traditional society in which both female and male cases of infertility are exposed. This paper underscores infertility-related victimization and the ways to transcend it. Building upon Clenora Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism, this analysis states to what extent obligatory motherhood oppresses women in patriarchal African societies.

Keywords: Africana womanism, (in)fertility, masculinity, motherhood, patriarchy.

REVISITER LA QUESTION DE L'(IN)FERTILITÉ FÉMININE DANS *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES* D'AKACHI ADIMORA EZEIGBO (1996).

Résumé : L'objectif de cet article est de montrer en quoi les femmes sont victimes de leur rôle biologique de genre qui consiste à donner la vie. Les écrivains féministes abordent toutes les questions liées à la vie des femmes. Au nombre de ces questions, figure celle de l'(in)fertilité qu'aborde Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo dans *The Last of the Strong Ones*. C'est une œuvre romanesque qui dépeint une société traditionnelle dans laquelle des cas d'infertilité féminine et masculine sont dévoilés. Cet article met en exergue la victimisation engendrée par l'infertilité et les moyens de la transcender. Se basant sur l'Africana womanism de Clenora Hudson-Weems, cette analyse montre à quel point la maternité obligatoire opprime les femmes dans les sociétés patriarcales africaines.

Mots-clés: Africana womanism, (in)fertilité, masculinité, maternité, patriarcat.

Introduction

In patriarchal societies motherhood is highly considered. A woman who gives birth is often welcomed and holds a locus stand in such communities. Yet a barren woman is generally prone to sarcastic comments and mockeries. Some feminist writers use infertility as a major trope in their works of fiction. In African literature while feminist writers claim themselves as African feminists or Africana womanists, they generally present infertility as a cause of oppression in their writings. Africana womanism is a term coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems in the late 1980s, as an ideology which can be applied to all women of African descent. To Remi Akujobi (2011, p.3-4), in his article "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture",

motherhood is so critical in most traditional societies in Africa that there is no worse misfortune for a woman than being childless. A barren woman is seen as

incomplete (...). Motherhood is an essential part of being a woman outside which the woman is empty.

In the same vein, Ositadinma Nkeiruka Lemoha and Joy Aruoture Omoru (2020, p.324) in their article "Agglomerate Nature of Igbo Femininity in the Selected Novels of Chinua Achebe, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and Buchi Emecheta" put that "Igbo femininity is wifedom and motherhood". These two statements encompass the view that womanhood depends on motherhood, in other words woman's infertility denies their womanhood in African societies. Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo in her novel *The Last of the Strong Ones*, recounts Chieme's humiliation, repudiation and her struggle to overcome her barrenness. In the Nigerian society portrayed by the writer, a woman who fails to bear children is a failed woman and that failure affects the whole community. This article demonstrates how in traditional African societies, infertility affects women's well-being and their fight to overcome their impairment. The study rests on Clenora Hudson-Weems' African womanism. This feminism in African context represents woman through 18 features:

a self-namer, a self-definer, family-centered, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with males in struggle, whole, authentic, a flexible role player, respected, recognized, spiritual, male compatible, respectful of elders, adaptable, ambitious, mothering and nurturing. Clenora (2020, p.66)

Among these 18 features, there are two that infertile women fail to achieve: mothering and nurturing. Using the tenants of African womanism, the first part of the study underlines infertility viewed as an individual abnormality which leads to an unacceptable failure. Second, women's fight to transcend their plight engendered by infertility.

1. Infertility: From Individual Abnormality to Unacceptable Failure.

In traditional African societies, being infertile, being unable to bear children is regarded as an individual failure in light of Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's perspective in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. In the Nigerian society pictured in the novel, as Onyekozuru puts, "marriage and motherhood are the greatest goal of every woman" (Ezeigbo, 1996, p.37). Accordingly, infertile women undergo all types of pressures from their husbands, in-laws, parents and the whole community. Chieme in the novel knows what a barren woman undergoes as pressure and oppression. She recounts that her husband's "relations were unhappy that [she] had not become pregnant after two years of marriage" (Ezeigbo, 1996, p.74). Their unhappiness increases in course of time and "after three years of marriage and there was still no child, [her] husband's relations openly expressed their disappointment and impatience" (*TLOSO*, p.74). Chieme's case is so serious that despite treatments from three "dibia from different villages in Umuga [she] had not been able to menstruate even once" (*TLOSO*, p.74). Chieme's clinical state is alarming but this does not deny her womanhood from an African womanist point of view.

When the medical solution turns out to be unsuccessful, Chieme resorts to the spiritual alternative. This can be noticed in the following passage: "Idemmili, great mother, I have come to your shrine, weighed down by grief (...). You know my burden.

I have come to you for solution" (*TLOSO*, p.80). Chieme's reliance on Idemmili, the divinity matches with Clenora Hudson-Weems' portrayal of the Africana womanist woman. For the theorist childbirth is essential, that is why she points out some divine or spiritual ways to come to term with infertility. Africana womanism claims that if human and medicinal solutions do not prove efficient, the spiritual strategy is an option. The theory strives to find solutions to infertility and so portrays the Africana womanist as the one who

demonstrates a definite sense of spirituality, a belief in a higher power, Our Heavenly Father, whose presence transcends rational ideals (...). In the area of health care, she frequently goes back to folk medicine and spiritual healing. Clenora (2020, p.80)

For the theorist, spirituality can help women improve their conditions in society. In patriarchal societies, barren women go through daily jeers on account of their incapacity of bearing fruit to their husbands. In this case, they seem to break the chains of life cycle. The role of Africana womanism is to help women like Chieme be able to bear children through spiritual ways and to maintain the cycle of life. In traditional Africa, a person who was born to parents should in his turn be able to give birth as a way of continuing the cycle.

However, Chieme finally admits that her case is hopeless. She is different from other women as she can never bear children. She laments: "Why was I not like other women? Were there other women like me, who had a similar abnormality" (*TLOSO*, p.78)? Chieme's abnormality implies the loss of her womanhood and her self-esteem. In her so patriarchal community, a woman who is unable to bear children is not a woman. Her husband Iwuchukwu clearly tells her in their following conversation:

- I want to marry another wife who can give me children. I am afraid of you and can no longer continue with this marriage.
- How do you know your next wife will not have a similar problem?
- I assure you I will ascertain that she has started seeing her time before I pay her bride price.
- Is seeing her period a proof that she can give you children?
- It may not be, but it will be a proof that she is a woman, at least.
- A woman? (...) Am I not a woman?
- You are not a woman (*TLOSO*, p.76-77).

So, for Iwuchukwu her wife Chieme is not a woman because she is unable to play her biological role of life-giver. Thus, there is enough here to believe that womanhood in traditional African societies is not natural, it is rather acquired through roles women play, particularly by giving birth.

As Chieme, like all women in traditional African societies, is educated to believe that wifhood and motherhood make the woman, she refuses to leave her household. She begs her husband not to repudiate her. Chieme's clinging to her household shows her family-centeredness and male-compatibility, Africana womanist values a woman should exhibit according to Clenora Hudson-Weems.

Obligatory motherhood is therefore a source of victimization for woman in marriage. A woman who is unable to bear children is a failed woman. In traditional African societies women are made to believe that because they have failed to bear children they are no more women or human-beings overlooking the fact that failure is part of human life. If this is true then, why is the failure of this kind not accepted and not understood? Thus, wanting children at all costs seems not to be realistic. In her novel, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo “acknowledges the fact that there are difficulties and challenges inherent in marriages but maintains that through negotiation, compromise and reconciliation in marital relationships the union can be kept stable” (B. D. Okunrobo, 2020, p.121). The writer therefore denounces divorce as the solution when the couple experiences any difficulty including childlessness.

Furthermore, male children are important in patriarchal societies. This explains a kind of oppression against female children. For instance, before Umeozo, Onyekozuru's husband dies, he decides “to share his land and other possessions equitably among his sons” (*TLOSO*, p.44), unfairly ignoring his daughters. Thus, failing to have sons is tragic in such societies. If the inability to have children is a serious problem, having only female children and not male ones is also another problem. Ejimnaka recounts her own experience with her husband in her following statement: “Obiatu's people were unhappy that we had no male child, so they wanted him to marry another wife” (*TLOSO*, p.33). Obiatu's mother “began to act as if in mourning. Mourning the absence of a male child in the family” (*TLOSO*, p.33). The situation is tense, a male child is needed or an alternative solution should be found. Ejimnaka explains: “It was Aziagba who solved the problem and saved all of us from slow death. She was willing to remain at home with us to produce male children for her father (...) It was a big relief to all of us” (*TLOSO*, p.33). Indeed, Ejimnaka's people strongly believe that a male child prevents “slow death” and immortalise the family and the whole community. Africana womanism fights against male superiority and is for positioning men and women on equal footing.

In *The Last of the Strong Ones* Ejimnaka's mother who has internalized patriarchal norms, warns her: “Obiatu is an only son. What he needs is not companion but a wife, to bear him [male] children who will perpetuate his name” (*TLOSO*, p.52). From these statements, it appears male supremacy over female for multiple reasons particularly because male children keep the name of the father, the family and the community going.

From all accounts, if, as patriarchal society claims, infertility is a curse, then failing to bear male children is also a curse. Accordingly, if infertility, that individual abnormality affects the community, failing to bear male children equally affects the community. Interestingly, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo projects her women as strong and resilient enough to transcend some social hardships and live their lives fully.

2. Transcending Abnormality: Women “living fully” with Infertility.

In spite of humiliation, misfortunes barren women go through together with the prime importance to children in patriarchal Africa, the author still suggests that infertility should be transcended. Being unable to bear children should not constitute a hindrance to women's full well-being. Though they cannot give birth, they still have

a role to play in their community. Ezeigbo's Chieme strives to transcend her abnormality as the chief priest of Idemmiri tells her: "Daughter, Idemmiri said you should be yourself and live your life fully. That is her message to you" (*TLOSO*, p.80). To be more convincing, he adds:

As you grow older, you will discover that life does not treat everyone the same. A sensible man or woman must learn to accept this fact without resentment (...). Look around you and see how differently people are endowed or blessed. Observe and be amazed at life's inequities on my levels (...) the world is a mystery (*TLOSO*, p.81).

These words really relieve Chieme morally, mentally and psychologically. Chieme admits that as a human-being she cannot get all that she desires. From what she hears from the chief priest she is not made to have children. So, she makes up her mind to "live [her] life fully" by exploiting her talents so as to overcome her abnormality. She puts: "I took a decision that I would like to be a chanter. My desire was to be the best chanter not only in Umuga but also in the towns far and near" (*TLOSO*, p.82). This statement presents Chieme as ambitious, self-namer, and self-definer, hence exhibiting Africana womanist values. Chieme gives herself a name and an identity in a society where a barren and childless woman is a failed and marginalized woman. She soon becomes a great singer and with her first income, she decides to be in harmony with her custom. She puts: "after a few years, the bride price paid on my head was returned. I became completely free" (*TLOSO*, p.83). It is normally Chieme's parents' duties to pay back her bride price to her ex-husband's parents, but Chieme as an independent and self-assertive woman takes the responsibility to free herself.

However, Chieme is respectful of elders and her custom and can be viewed as an Africana womanist due to her respect of African customs and traditions. Clenora Hudson-Weems (2020, p.81) confirms this (2020, p.81) following this assertion:

This is a major aspect of the character of the Africana womanist, for she holds the elders in high esteem. The true African womanist respects and appreciates them, insisting that her youths do the same (...). The appreciation of her elders is a continuum of African culture which African women still insist upon in their everyday lives.

Besides, in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, art is a pivotal strategy to the transcendence of infertility according to the author. To Ezeigbo, even though a woman is reported barren, one way for her to overcome jeers and mockeries is through artistic expression. Chieme in the novel finds her self-esteem back, lost due to infertility, through her art. With Chieme the chanter, the saying "music soothes the soul" is quite meaningful. She states: "This profession has taken me everywhere and brought me popularity and prosperity" (*TLOSO*, p.83). Ezeigbo hence endows women with qualities which enable them to penetrate public sphere viewed as a male preserve in patriarchal societies. This shows Ezeigbo's aesthetics in the novel. A barren woman cannot give birth to children. But, when she produces work of fiction, of imagination, she becomes as productive as a fertile woman. The music produced by her is likened

to a baby of a mother. This is certainly what Bridget Dahunsi Okunrobo (2020, p.118) expresses when she puts that: "Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, in her novels, dismantles stereotypes and rewrites women into relevant and prominent positions in society". This is very noticeable in *The Last of the Strong Ones* in view of Chieme's portrayal as an undeniably talented chanter, who received the call, who as an artist bears a mission, which is to educate people. This tremendous and noble role played by Chieme makes her insert the highest sphere of her society. She "became a *lolo* and chose the title Omesarannaya- the one who brought fame to her father" (*TLOSO*, p.85).

The title of "*lolo*" in the Umuga community is not for all people, it is exclusively attributed to those who have demonstrated their power and their positive influence on their people. So, a woman, above all a barren one generally victim of exclusion, inserting such a sphere shows Ezeigbo's Africana womanist perspective in the novel. Atafei Pewissi (2017, p.17) explains that: "Womanism aims to develop an account of the world from the perspectives of both men and women on equal footing". Ezeigbo approves of this view and advocates that gender barriers should be broken and men and women should play complementary roles. This is apparent in the novel through the *Obufo*, the Umuga (a Nigerian community) inner council committee. That group is made up with men's and women's representatives, responsible for the leadership of the community. When Chieme proves that she is reliable, she is appointed as a representative of women in *Obufo*. Ezeigbo therefore pleads for an inclusive leadership, with men in concert with women for the welfare of post-colonial society.

Admittedly, barren women in traditional African societies are generally viewed as witches and excluded from community life, but Chieme's case is different. She has rather become a key member of her community in which she plays crucial roles. For example "she participated fully in the activities of *umuada* [association of daughters] in this village and in the whole town" (*TLOSO*, p.85). Chieme explains that she "spearheaded some changes in the way it was run and these changes have endured till today. *Umuada* plays a bigger and more effective role in Umuga" (*TLOSO*, p.85). She is invited to this association, not because she is barren, but because she is as equal as other mothers. Thus, she has succeeded in coalescing social barriers by suppressing social hierarchical discourses which favour good people (mothers) and bad people (barren ones). Now, both barren and fertile women are judged on equal terms.

Furthermore, Chieme exhibits openness and generosity through her art as it can be noticed in her following assertion:

My performance, as everyone in Umuga knows, is not limited to funeral laments, I chant, sing and recite during happy celebrations like festivals, marriages and title-taking ceremonies (...). I chant about respect to the gods and goddesses (*TLOSO*, p.83-84).

One can therefore say that Chieme seems to be more important than mothers in the community. While babies give joy to their mothers only, Chieme's baby (music) entertains all the village. It gives joy to all families, which children may not achieve. So, through her art, Chieme is risen to an unattainable height that women with babies cannot match. Chieme, infertile in the womb is rather fertile in the mind. She shows that a barren woman is not a failed woman, nor a useless woman. Chieme brings her

contribution to the balance and the development of her community and transcends her infertility, her abnormality. Her financial stability and her social values trigger her reintegration in her community. She even adopts children she has never been able to biologically bear. Chieme asserts: "My two sisters sent their daughters to live with me and help me with chores (...). All my brothers and sisters have many children and I am a mother to all of them" (TLOSO, p.83). Like Anowa, that barren woman in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, called "mother" by her slaves, Chieme as "a flexible role player" (C. Hudson-Weems, 2020, p.75) becomes a mother though she is childless. Thus, Ezeigbo promotes Africana womanist values. According to Clenora Hudson-Weems (2020, p.83),

The Africana womanist is committed to the art of mothering and nurturing, her own children in particular and humankind in general. This collective role is supreme in Africana culture, for the Africana woman comes a legacy of fulfilling the role of supreme Mother Nature-nurturer, provider and protector.

Chieme, though barren, embodies "the art of mothering and nurturing" and hence transcends "the yoking of motherhood and victimhood [which] continues to be a feature of feminist discourse on motherhood" (O. Nnaemeka, 1997, p.5).

Through Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's portrayal of Chieme, it is apparent that adopting children can be an alternative solution to infertility in the couple. A woman who is unable to bear children can adopt some, and with her natural mothering and nurturing assets treat them like her own children and will be recognised as a mother. Chieme lives fully with infertility which is presented as a handicap in her community. Through Chieme "who showed the world that a woman's reputation does not depend on a husband" (TLOSO, p.85), nor on children, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo underscores the necessity for women to break gender stereotypes.

Conclusion

At this study reaches its twilight, we can assert that dealing with woman's infertility in this study mainly consisted in showing how barren women are despised in phallogocentric Africa. Then, the transcendence of infertility is emphasized. The study is focused on woman infertility. We sometimes have the impression that most novels revealing patriarchal discourse and phallogocentric ideals seem to hold women in low esteem. We have the impression that writings inherent in feminist theory always demonstrate a certain relentlessness against women to the point of considering them as reified people in a hypocritical society in which men are sometimes liable to deficiency and handicaps in the proportion as women. Indeed, while we attack sterile women, we sometimes overlook that some men present the same pathology, and which is unfortunately not exposed. Therefore it is high time male fertility was also addressed in works of fiction with the view to calling for the principle of congruent forms. Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo proves that infertility concerns both men and women, but not women only, as it is commonly believed in African societies. Through Abazu an infertile man who shamefully and cowardly puts an end to his life for infertility, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo hence deconstructs the patriarchal assumption that, women are weak while men are strong. Furthermore, addressing infertility implies addressing

also fertility and vice versa, in that, one gives sense to the other. Thus, the spelling “(in)fertility” in the title of this study shows both female frustration and their transcendence of their handicap.

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