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FEMALE BONDING AND FEMALE LANGUAGE: METAPHORS FOR CHAUVINISTIC SUBVERSION AND FEMALE SURVIVAL IN EZEIGBO'S THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES AND BA'S SO LONG A LETTER

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Abstract

The need to deconstruct and subvert phallocentric walls of patriarchy necessitates the emergence of women writers on the African literary landscape. The task of erasing the tripartite anthropocentric burden of the African woman can no longer be overstated. This paper serves as a unilateral contribution amidst multifaceted voices yearning for humanistic and pragmatic disburdening of the African woman. The study precisely examines how Akachi Ezeigbo, in the pre-colonial and colonial Umuga society in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, and Mariama Ba, in the postcolonial moslem society of Dakar in *So Long A Letter* bond women and imbue them with the most appropriate assertive language in order to shatter the granitic tenets of patriarchy. The study got insights from the more accommodating concept of African feminism. The study is of the opinion that bonding and its concomitant rebellious language provide both physical and psychological therapy and strength for the African woman in redefining her image.

INTRODUCTION

The African woman carries with her a tripartite anthropocentric burden. This is substantiated if one begins to appreciate the views of the ecocentric monists who view society as a monic entity as against anthropocentric external creators of man in a quest to unjustly appropriate and dominate both human and material resources. In the first place, the Whiteman (colonisers) helps to perpetuate the colonist perception 'other' myth index of the African woman as the 'other' raise to power three. That is, the 'other' other's other. Secondly, the white woman perceives the black woman as the 'other's other'. Ifi Amadiume (1987:3) expatiates that the attitude of the white woman towards the black woman "epitomises the arrogance and insensitivity of abstract anthropology, an attitude which unfortunately also permeates the work of most Western feminist theoreticians". She elucidates further that

White feminists were no less racist than the patriarchs of social anthropology whom they were busy condemning for male bias. They fantasized a measure of superiority over African and other Third World women. Black women's critique could not therefore be restricted to the male bias of social anthropology and not challenge White women. (Ibid)

Lastly, the African men, via social constructs, help to atomise the asphyxiating domestication of the African woman as the 'other'. Prescribed social and gender roles, which are profoundly restrictive on the woman, create obvious domestic 'bolekaja' between the man and the woman.

In further proliferation of the colonial myth of the African woman as the 'other', the African male, who was the first to grace the literary space, mainly as the result of the patriarchal preference of the male child to the

female in terms of right to be educated; recreated a gory and damaged image of the black woman. Patriarchal social constructs are pivotal to the devalued perception of the woman. Ekpong (1990: 84) avers that

Patriarchy is a system of sexual relationship in a social order where males rule females as a matter of birthright priority. And it has been so long in societies and so worldwide that men have always regarded women as their inferior both physically and mentally.

Adrienne Rich (1976:57) also opines that "patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, custom, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. Under patriarchal cosmology, African women are presented as collective or appendage beings. Mary Pratt (1986:139) sheds more light on the clubbing of women as collective beings: "the people to be 'othered' are homogenised into a collective "they", which is distilled even further into an iconic "he" (the standardised adult male specimen"). For instance, the effaced ubiquitous narrator in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an ally of the male domineering figure in the narratology of the cultural reconstruction and reaffirmation in pre-colonial and colonial Igbo community of Umuofia. The narrator subjectively projects the protagonist, Okonkwo as an embodiment of the values and vices reconstructed and reaffirmed in the novel. Okereke (2014: 22) explains that

It is Okonkwo (the man) who grapples with the vagaries and vicissitudes of the natural and supernatural worlds of Umuofia; it is Okonkwo who confronts the existentialist challenges and conflicting cultural, social, religious, economic and political forces of daily life in pre-colonial and colonial Umuofia. His strategies (positive and negative) of negotiating, surviving and transcending these challenges, invest Okonkwo with the phallic generative power to make history.

The women were unapologetically submerged into repressive collectivism and chauvinistic extensions. The women are never called by their names but referred to as somebody's wife or somebody's mother (preferably the son) such as 'Nwoye's mother'. Women in *Things Fall Apart* like others in most male narratives are not meant to ask questions but expected to do what they are asked to do. For instance, during the homecoming of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo quickly answers his senior wife:

'He belongs to the clan', ' he told her. 'so look after him'. Is he staying long with us? She asked. 'Do what you are told, woman', Okonkwo thundered and stammered. 'when did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umuofia? (Achebe 1958:10-11)

In the existing social order, women are not recognised. Social institutions and interactions are conditioned by patriarchal constructs that dichotomise the man and the woman along binary opposites such as superior/inferior, master/servant, public/domestic, vocal/silence, independent/dependent, strong/weak, cultured/unrefined. The above explains why women such as the Ekwefis, the Ezinmas, the Chielos etc are silenced and passified. Arguing along same thought, Okereke (1998:133) notes that "African gender myths of vocality configure speech and vocality as male prerogatives while silence is seen as a female virtue. Shedding more light, Udumukwu (2007:3) explains that

Silence and passivity are two principal features of the good woman .... Apart from being passive and silent in the face of radical change, she is also the embodiment of culture and tradition. The important issue however, is that her passivity and docility have turned out to be potent fodder for her objectification by patriarchy. In other words, she is good because she naturally fits into the mould shaped for her by patriarchy.

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing contentious assumptions that women writers emerged on the African literary scene. The need to deconstruct and subvert patriarchy and phallocentric tendencies led to the creation of authentic female characters that are vocal, assertive, subversive, independent, and educated. Women writers have continued to achieve this gender reconstruction of the woman through various means. The focus of this paper is on female bonding and friendship, with emphasis on how women use language to champion the effective course of female bonding and friendship in re-imaging and re-positioning the brutalised image of the African woman. The assertive language of the woman underscores Okereke's argument that "vocality ... signifies more than voicing and means attention-compelling weighty speech (connoting power)" (1998:136). The paper beams searchlight on two novels by two African women – *The Last of the Strong Ones* by Akachi-Adimora Ezeigbo, from the pre-colonial and colonial periods; and Mariama Ba's post-colonial Moslem imaginary leap in *So Long a Letter*. Ezeigbo and Ba, unlike the patriarchal writers, write from the point of view and realisation that 'she who wears the shoe, knows where it pinches most'.

Female bonding and friendship is one of the domains where the subversion of patriarchy is significantly evoked by African women writers. Many women critics have pointed out the inevitability of female bonding and friendship in achieving this objective. For instance, Okereke (2000:62) states that female bonding brings "female solidarity for the survival, growth and autonomy of women". Janett Todd (1942:2) holds that female friendship is

important because "there can be cooperation ... and the persistent self-concern which the heterosexual tie seems to demand need not be primary. In female friendship, the heroine can momentarily forget the feminine image she must create for the man and relax from the strenuous demands of romantic love. Simone de Beauvoir (1949:542) has equally evaluated the merits of female friendship in *The Second Sex*. She asserts that

The feminine friendship that she succeeds in keeping or forming are precious to a woman, but they are very different in kind from relation between men ... collectively they (women) find strength to shake off their chains: they negate the sexual domination of the males by admitting their frigidity to one another, while deriding the man's desires or their clumsiness, and they question ironically the moral and intellectual superiority of their husbands and of men in general.

Akachi and Ba seem to realise the unavoidability of bringing women together for successful upturning of patriarchal tenets of subjugation. In other words, they seem to believe in the existentialist proverbs which state that "when people urinate together, it foams" and "a stick of broom can easily be broken but a bunch of broom can never be broken".

Female Bonding and Female Language in Pre-colonial and Colonial Contexts of Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*

In the pre-colonial and colonial literary spaces of *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Ezeigbo recreates and bonds assertive women in the making of the history of Umuga, thus enacting the missing rib in the making of the history of Achebe's Umuofia which was hitherto appropriated by the men. Ezeigbo's matriarchs are not domesticated and domiciled in the historical backyard and otherness. She rather sees the need to bond the women into cultural organisations which not only protect their interests but erase the seemingly patriarchal scribbled otherness on them. The first of such associations is the *Oluada*. Okereke (2014:23) notes that Ezeigbo creates "energetic radical women in the four *oluada*, who she uses to redeem the women from the political ghetto in the making of traditional and colonial history. The four *oluada*, 'voices of the women' of Umuga, Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka dialogically interrogate and subvert ... (patriarchal) monologic relegation of the woman to the fringes of domestic, socio-political, economic, cultural and historical discourse ... The women are members of the 'Obuofo', which stands as an equivalent of Achebe's 'ndichie' in *Things Fall Apart*, where Okonkwo's senior wife, like other women were forbidden from being part of. In foregrounding the "olu", voice of Umuga women, Ezeigbo does not submerge that of the men. This is seen in the composition of the Obuofo: "... it was also necessary to recreate and propagate a vivid and memorable account of the lives of the four main actors of umuada. They were the *oluada*, chosen from the four villages of Umuga. They were the voice of the women, among the sixteen inner council committee. The twelve male members of the committee were also selected from the four villages (Ezeigbo 1996:3).

The inclusion of men and women parallels Ezeigbo's peculiar sense of African man-woman complementarism, which she most advocates in her 'snail sense feminism'. In what seems a quick correlation, Kolawole (1997:22) notes that as "gender mouthpieces" ... African women's collective bonding and mobilization reveal unique traits". The *oluada* is to make sure that women are no longer excluded in the decision making process of Umuga, especially in issues that affect the welfare of Umuga women. As members of the inner circle, the *oluada* is expected to communicate to and fro to the *obuofo*, the minds of the women. Ezeigbo imbues her *oluada* with assertive language and impromptu vocal potential that is unparalleled. For instance, Ejimnaka is reputed for saying "... 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... my independence meant everything to me, indeed my very life, and I guarded it fiercely" (27). Chieme is equally an " oluada who showed the world that a woman's reputation does not depend on her husband" (85). Invariably, the oluadas bring to fore the power of powerful individuality and vocality in their representations of women in Umuga. Rose Acholonu (2004:58) points out the essence of this kind of creatively assertive language. She avers that

these women …, rejecting the reality principle governing the male oriented tradition of literary realism, pursue and project the new woman's programme of self-actualisation. Through the creative manipulation of language, these female writers try to revisit and revise our traditional mode of realistic fiction which is an integral part of the cultural construct, geared to perpetuate male superiority and female inferiority.

The highly infectious nature of this kind of language seen in the *oluadas* serves to subvert the virtue of silence in other women of Umuga in the making of history.

Another female bonding and friendship in pre-colonial and colonial Umuga is noticeable in the *Umuada*- 'association of daughters'. Okeke (2004:146) emphasises on the importance of such associations in pioneering the agenda of women. She affirms that "women organisations and their consequent struggle to be recognised started from pre-colonial through colonial to the post-independence time.... These organisations provide avenues through

which women struggle to be identified and accepted in the society". Ezeigbo's subjective designation of the *umuada* as "the watchdog of the community, the guardian of tradition" (37) foregrounds the traditional role of women's involvement in the execution of traditional commands, which was submerged by male writers. As an association, the *umuada* "caters to the physical, emotional, intellectual, as also the economic, social and familial wellbeing of women" (Bhattacharji 2008:147). Through the power of language, the *umuada* are able to dialogize the essentials of being a woman in the society. Kolawole notes that "these women are not only speaking back, they are fighting back as they deconstruct existing distorted images or misrepresentations of African women" (Ibid:4). Shedding more light Okereke avers that "the hope of liberation for the woman and the African then lies in the conscious, rebellious daughters of the assimilated Africans, who know the secrets of the enemy's weapons of power – knowledge and voice for the deconstruction process" (2004:70). As daughters who are married out, the umuada as Okereke rightly points out are insiders in their various families and societies.

The umuada in Ezeigbo's *The Last of The Strong Ones* are not passive to the happenings in Umuga. The umuada is portrayed as the implementers of the sanctions of the oluada as seen in the case of Abazu who tries to kill Onyekozuru, a member of the oluada: they were on the verge of marching to Abazu's compound to 'sit' on him and his household until he reappeared from his hiding place. If after two days he was not seen, umuada would burn down his compound in retaliation for his attack on Onyekozuru (167).Ezeigbo also writes that during the war with *kosiri*, "umuada gave total support to obuofo and would take charge of the purchase and preparation of food for the fighters" (132). They are indirectly involved in the direct combat with *kosiri* because their unbeatable provision of food and other medications sustained the strength of Umuga warriors.

Alutaradi – association of wives is another platform for female bonding and friendship in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones.* Again, Bhattacharji notes that "the central position of wives in the Igbo subsistence economy made them (*alutaradi*) a powerful presence ... they also exerted immense control over marriages and fertility rituals" (148). Amadiume (Ibid:65) further explains that this group "monitors the interests of the (*alutaradi*) at all fronts ... and had the right to demonstrate and if necessary go on strike... demands usually included the repair of dangerous roads, sanctions on those who maltreated their wives and on youths who harassed young girls .... 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".

The above assertions clearly imply that members of the *alutaradi* speak with action packed language. In Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, the *alutaradi* "cross-checks and controls the excesses of (the) patriarchal cult" (Bhattacharji 148). Ezeigbo writes about the stringent measures taken by the *alutaradi* against a man who patriarchally drove his wife away and threw her belongings in the courtyard:

... we organised the women against Egwuagu when he unjustly drove his wife away and threw her belongings out into the courtyard. We descended on him like a swarm of bees, with the intent to sting sense into him. We turned ourselves into human litter, occupying every available space in his large *ngwuru*, a day later, he indicated his willingness to talk with his in-laws. (52)

This attests to the African woman's resolute recalcitrant posture in bringing down the formidable walls of patriarchy. It shows collectivism among the women such that the interest or what affects one woman becomes a reproach to the rest. Kolawole (1997:22) has pointed out the communality of interest among bonded women in the pre-colonial times. She notes that "since pre-colonial periods, African women have been mobilised to fight for their rights and even on behalf of the whole group". She continues by stating that "the concept of group action by women, based on common welfare in social, cultural, economic, religious or political matters is indigenous and familiar to a majority of these women" (Ibid:27).

The highly flexible familiarisation and acculturation of *alutaradi* by the women of Umuga underscores the defiant nature and effective bonding of women in African societies. Ezeigbo imbues in the women a kind of language that transgresses the expected phallic norms of society. The women thus used proverbs in expressing their thoughts. Proverbs, in phallic punctuated discourses such as in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the prerogative of the men; women are not allowed to use it. Okereke (2014:26) explains that

this transgression of phallic discourse boundaries by women in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* interrogates and challenges to dialogue the exclusive appropriation of these specialised indigenous speech forms especially proverbs, by men .... Whereas Achebe's women communicate more in domestic, specifically, kitchen language, as they negotiate their survival in a male dominated culture, Ezeigbo's women use witty,pithy proverbs to express their thoughts and ideas with phallic abandon ... thereby redeeming women's language from the trivialization to which patriarchal consciousness often condemns it.

Regrettably, these associations as well as the women are unapologetically buried by the male writers in their myriad of narratives. Ezeigbo has unequivocally shown that female bonding and friendship, soused with matching female

rebellious language serves as an inevitable force for the survival of the African woman in obnoxious patriarchal existences.

Female Bonding and Female Language in Post-colonial Context of Ba's *So Long a Letter*

In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba takes female bonding and friendship further into the post-colonial African society. As a matter of fact, collective action of the post-colonial African women is inevitable for the sustenance of the pre-colonial and colonial renewed and re-written image of the woman, and the complete dismantling of the colonial myth of woman 'otherness'. Set in the moslem culture which places enormous restrictive measures on the woman and unlimited physical and psychological freedom on the man, Ba bonds two energetic women – Ramatoulaye and Aissatou – in upturning moslem patriarchal restrictions on the woman. Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou suffer the breakdown of their marriages, but while Ramatoulaye adopts the accommodationist motif in her reaction, Aissatou resorts to the more radical going-out motif.

Ba's female bonding and friendship unparallels that of Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones.* While the matriarchs and the women of Ezeigbo are illiterates but educated in the traditions of Umuga, Ba's Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are educated and literate. This explains why Ba uses pen to establish a strong bond between the two women. The epistolary narrative style underscores the mightiness of the pen and substantiates that distance can never be a barrier to healthy bonding between women.The reply of Ramatoulaye represents and dictates the tone of Aissatou's letter. Both letters, written in a subversive and rebellious language serve to help the woman continue to survive and contribute meaningfully to the society even if marriage unfortunately breaks down. Bonding allows the woman to stay alive in any reactionary motif adopted. Unlike the lonely Nnu Ego, who dies a miserable death in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, bonding serves not only to keep Ramatoulaye and Aissatou alive, but assertive, independent and happy. Female friendship, according to Egbung (2011:8) thus "brings healing and confidentiality .... Ramatoulaye ... opens up to her friend, Aissatou in her letter and receives psychological healing ....." Okereke (2013:267) equally notes that the novel is "... a female tete a tete showing women in therapeutic dialogue". She maintains that "sisterhood seeks to dismantle the superstructure of patriarchy constructed by global brotherhood" (2014:265).

Ba's women find succour in the power of education in shattering the barriers to bonding. Okereke (2002:140) expatiates on this when she states that

The liberating influence of Western education has therefore given the ... talented woman a voice with which to speak out on behalf of her less talented and privileged sex. It has equipped her with the boldness to question the double standards operated by the male dominated world and its negation of womanhood.

Education acts as an equaliser for the woman. It makes the woman aware of her rights in the society. It gives her the morale to perpetuate these rights and subvert patriarchal class structures as seen in the case of Aissatou's marriage to Mawdo Ba.

Ba fortifies her women with unlimited rebellious language weaponry. This is why Tamsir's exploitative declaration to Ramatoulaye -- "when you have 'come out' (that is to say, of mourning), I shall marry you. You suit me as wife ... You are my goodluck ... I prefer you to the other one, too frivolous, too young" – was met with such a convoluted 'bolekajarised' (come down let's fight) language. Ramatoulaye, full of rage decides that it is time to break the silence of thirty years of harassment, violence and sarcastic contemptuousness. She bursts out:

Did you ever have any affection for your brother? Already you want to build a new home for yourself, over a body that is still warm. While we are praying for Modou, you are thinking of future wedding festivities. Ah yes! Your strategy is to get in before any other suitor, to get in before ... you forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you ... what of your wives? ... your income can meet neither their needs nor those of your numerous children ... I shall never be the one to complete your collection. My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis ... (58)

Tamsir's request is devoid of love. It typifies a continued instrumentalization and objectification of the woman that is the hallmark of pre-colonial and colonial African men such as Okonkwo. However, Ba and other women writers seem to be saying enough is enough. Yakubu (2004:90-1) explains further that "in spite of patriarchal structures governing a female's biological body and what her personality should be, women have been able to negotiate and create spaces for themselves – spaces of re-creation, remembering and re-ordering".

Ba's female bonding transcends individual differences. Though Ramatoulaye and Aissatou exhibit different opinions towards the issue of marriage, their closeness is not marred by these differences. Coulis (2003:32) elucidates more:

Even though Ramatoulaye and Aissatou choose different responses to the attempt to subjugate them, they retain a friendship and respect that endures. Their bond transcends distance and all differences and is the core of the

narrative. Being unclassified or unclassifiable by genre, *So Long A Letter* seems a metaphor for the sisterhood Ramatoulaye and Aissatou formed in childhood, modified throughout many years together and apart and continues to offer sustenance and support to them both.

The stance of Aissatou speaks against the injustice of polygamy. Polygamy restricts the woman but allows infinite freedom to the man. Women in polygamy are reduced to mere material slaves for the satisfaction of the man's sexual libido. It is a platform which practically puts the woman in extreme otherness. Aissatou totally rejects polygamy and this does not in any way affect her friendship with the more accommodating Ramatoulaye who finds happiness in marriage. Ramatoulaye, on the other hand respects the radical posture of Aissatou. She reflects: "I am one of those who can realise themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (56). In female bonding, women are united by a common interest to fight a common enemy in order to realise a common happiness regardless of individual biases. Ramatoulaye speaks more of this type of friendship: "friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (54). Ba shows female friendship to transcend beyond the limits of love and any other obstacle. The bonding between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represents a perfect paradigm in female friendship. The solidarity sustains them to survive against patriarchal social constructs and constraints.In the existing bonding, Aissatou buys a car for Ramatoulaye. This shows that female bonding and friendship extends to the provision of not only psychological antidote, but physical therapy. The car makes Ramatoulaye more mobile as against the moslem restrictive mobility of the woman. It is a semiotic utterance that 'speaks out' the woman from the caged moslem culture.

Ba equally makes a case for female bonding across gender just as Darko does in *Faceless* where there is a bond between the women at MUTE and Slyv Po in ending the cankerous evil known as streetism. Ba creates a bond between Mawdo Ba – Modou's doctor friend and former husband of Aissatou – and Ramatoulaye. The bond helps Ramatoulaye to effectively cater for her health and that of her children. The bond indirectly affects Aissatou, for through Ramatoulaye she gets information concerning Modou Ba which helps to strengthen her independent life in the more heterogeneous societies of France and USA.

Conclusion

Through female bonding and the concomitant female rebellious and assertive language, Ezeigbo and Ba reinvent the women and fortify them against any form of violence. Grace Etuk (2003:2-3) opines that

Violence against women constitutes a peculiar type of violence. Its peculiarity stems from the fact that women are the direct targets, even though the entire society indirectly share in its effect in the long run ... violence against women refers to any action, inaction or practice that threatens or works against the emotional, physical or mental well-being of women. It is any act of violence that is committed against women because they are women.

Women have a lot to contribute to the society. The development of most African countries would have known unprecedented progress if the African men had not been influenced by the colonial myth of the black woman otherness perception. Recent studies reveal that women are agents of change. For instance, in a recent study on disaster in a hundred and forty one countries by Cannon, it was discovered that most African countries are considered inequitable because whereas women contribute greatly to the economy, they are more vulnerable to disasters (qtd. In Gboyega 2013: 14-15). Gboyega also records another study by the World Conservation Union (IUCU) which discloses that "women are powerful agents of change and their leadership is critical. Women can help ... in dealing with issues such as energy consumption, deforestation, burning of vegetation, population growth, development of scientific research and technology, policy making among others" (Ibid:15). The above assertions lend credence to the positive feminist and womanist portraiture of the black woman by Ezeigbo and Ba. The matriarchs of Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and the energetic women of Ba's *So Long a Letter* are all agents of change. The peculiarity of their zeal for change stems from the fact that it is complementary and accommodating of phallocentric views. It only becomes radical if the men become adamant and recalcitrant, especially in their perception and treatment of women. Ezeigbo and Ba, in the two novels have thus carved a niche for themselves through effective bonding propelled by rebelliously assertive language.

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