

Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju & Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju Models in the construction of female identity in Nigerian postcolonial literature

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Models in the construction of female identity in Nigerian postcolonial literature

Gendered identity in Africa has for centuries been a hotbed of ideological and narrative contestations. While colonial constructions of the African female were generally essentialist and negative in character, early postcolonial African literature also ironically deployed essentialisms and rigid gender binaries to portray African womanhood, thus prompting a challenge of both by female African writers of the first generation. However, in a significant twist, second generation Nigerian women writers were to restore the related tropes of wifehood and motherhood to the front burner. This article examines the corresponding models of representation of gendered identity and the inherent, and complex, *negotiation* of gendered power relations over time in Nigerian postcolonial literature. These models, which we describe here as “essentialism entrenched”, “essentialism challenged” and “essentialism negotiated” are examined against the background of gender theory and African womanist discourse. The essay observes that the resurgence of motherhood, albeit in mediated/transformational forms in Nigerian women writing, underscores the continuing challenge of culture in the formation of African gendered identities and in relation to societal development. The work of Akachi Ezeigbo, a leading Nigerian female writer of the second generation, is used in the article to illustrate this resurgence and its interface with womanist theorizing. **Keywords:** African womanism, Akachi Ezeigbo, essentialism, gender binaries, motherhood, nego-feminism, sheroes.

Introduction

Early African attempts to counter racist colonial narratives resorted to imagery and categorizations that ironically reinforced the colonial tags of African intellectual inferiority, effeminacy and ineffectuality that were employed to justify the conquest and slavery of Africa in the first place. The African representations were therefore unwitting continuations of European negative image of the African. A key example here was the “Mother Africa” trope that was to become prevalent in African writing. In the famous first lines of the poem by Léopold Sédar Senghor titled “Black Woman,” the African ‘mother’ is presented as: “Naked woman, black woman / Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty.” Senghor was also famous for his formulation of the African person’s identity in general as a species governed by intuition and emotion, which tended to imply the absence of logical reasoning or scientific analysis.

It is important to reiterate here just how closely and how ironically Senghor’s trope of the African woman as “naked” and “mothering” echoed negative colonial re-

presentations. For example, Laing and other's colonial portraiture of more than a century earlier was that of African females as: "great overgrown women, *mothers* of families *naked* as when born and quite unconscious of the disgust which their appearance excited" (cited in Beoku-Betts 22; emphasis ours). The African female was also presented in colonial narratives through ambivalent and pejorative images of fascination and horror, akin to the *femme-fatale* figure in western "dichotomizing of women as Madonna/whore" (Arnfred 62). Finally, the colonial narratives placed African females within the domestic and public spheres of the African society, as "'jural minors' living under the tutelage first of fathers, then of husbands" (Perlman and Moal, cited in Sudarkasa 25).

The taxonomies produced by colonial officials were continuities of these essentialisms. Hunt (53) provided an example of the situation in the Belgian Congo in which the adult African female was portrayed under colonial rule as "the fallen woman, the slave and the liberated woman" with each category portraying the woman essentially in sex determined roles. Such taxonomies muted existing indigenous histories of women occupying high-ranking political offices, including commanding queens such as the Nigerian Queen Amina, and influential entrepreneurs and chieftains such as Madam Tinubu of Lagos, and Efunsetan Aniwura, the strong woman of Ibadan, also in Nigeria.

The point here is that the body image and social classification of the African female in both the colonial narratives and the African narratives of the Senghorian and *négritude* tradition entailed the sole identification of *women* with essentially biological, or sex-related roles. It is this essentialism that legitimizes the notion that the Senghorian tradition indeed represents a further, albeit ironic, continuation of colonial essentialist constructions of the identity of the African female.¹

Senghor's construction of the African woman is therefore the prototype of such essentialist constructions of the African female by subsequent African authors. The literature of the post-colony is replete with examples of the entrenchment of such essentialist constructions, occurring side by side with those of confrontation or challenge, as well as accommodation and negotiation of such constructions.

'Essentialism entrenched' in early Nigerian postcolonial literature

The debate between a view of gender in bio-essentialist or social constructionist terms is well established but it bears a brief, prefatory, summary here. Diana Fuss in her *Essentially Speaking* (1960/1989) had defined essentialism as "a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (xi-xii). Related to gender, the trouble is that the association of males and females with separate and fixed biological and psychological characteristics leads to a hierarchical social power dynamics within society that is generally unfavourable to the genders, and is particularly oppressive to the female. Male privilege is seen as

a direct consequence of genital differences and the consequent biological dimorphism in the organization of society (Firestone). As Jane Millet has put it in *Sexual Politics* "the limited role allotted the female tends to arrest her at the level of biological experience" (26).

Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, building on earlier propositions on the influence of socialization in the making of gender, theorized the historico-social interventions that shape sexuality and gender relations. An outstanding example of this construct is the manner in which the female body, especially, had become subject, or subjected, to modifications, through cosmetics, strict and sometimes punishing dieting, exercise and even surgical procedures to conform to group and social expectations, a phenomenon described as "political anatomy" (Foucault, *Discipline* 138). The performative theory of sexuality, as elaborated by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* also emphasised that gender is constructed and gender roles consolidated through a constant performance or iteration of gender binaries in everyday language and social practice. When a nurse or midwife announces "it's a girl," this is not merely stating the sex but engaging in a social performative that keys into existing social norms and established semiotics of gender differentiation.²

The conceptual contest between essentialism and social construction was complicated by eco-feminists who re-argued a genetic and biological basis for essentialism, contending that socialization could not explain major behavioural differences between the sexes and the translation of these differences into gender patterns (Sturgeon; Hacking). However, feminist and postmodern resistance to essentialist constructions in male-female issues has also persisted, based on the logic that biological sex, being an accidental natal condition, should not be construed or constructed to impose unwanted gender burdens on individuals. Simone De Beauvoir's 1949 statement that "one is not born a woman; one becomes one" has been echoed over and over as an exemplary dictum in feminist constructionist theorising (see especially the blistering and uncompromising critique by Monique Wittig ("Category of Sex"; "Mark of Gender") to the effect woman that the categories 'man' and 'woman' are only constructs that do not exist outside of such social construction.

Wittig's critique occurs within a relatively new wave of feminism, namely feminist new materialism, which also entails the consideration of materiality as a condition for the creation and dichotomization of genders (See Hennessy; Hennessy and Ingraham). In other words, the construction of body is not just an issue of biology but also a function of race, age as well as property or class relations: "A white working class girl in Britain will constitute her femininity in a very different way from a middle class, Indian girl. Both will differ from a woman in Japan or Africa" (Lennon, "Feminist Perspectives"). Despite such critical interventions, however, essentialism has continued to be, both in actual and fictional worlds, a strong factor in the representation of the potential of female members of patriarchal societies in general.

The entrenchment of a cultural view of 'woman' from a bio-essential lens was a standard staple of early male authored Nigerian literature. It manifested largely in three relegation forms—in the absence of any grand representation of the female in the literature, in the portrayal of female characters only in the domestic spheres and only in relation to nurturing and mothering roles, and thirdly in the negative portrayal of women. Conversely, the exclusive portrayal of males as heroes and protagonists is a feature of all male dominated literatures and has also been observed in relation to black literature.³ In contradistinction to this overbearing male is "the relegated female who is often consigned to a stereotype existence as mother, daughter, sister, rural woman or city pariah" (Oloruntoba-Oju, "Shifting Gender Semiosis" 117). "Very often she is a prostitute in the city," and when a rural woman she is a romanticized entity, one who is "static as history passes her by, who wants the old ways of life" (Ogundipe-Leslie; see also Davies for a similar taxonomy).

Other Nigerian women critics such as Chikwenye Ogunyemi described Nigerian literature as 'male', or as 'phallic,' largely entailing what Asha Sen was to describe as "the immobilization of the female in male imposed traditionally-convened roles" (Sen 56). Florence Stratton had also noted that such exclusion of women from the mainstream was not just a passing feature of early African male writing, but was, indeed, *the* defining feature.

Sexist as the male authored texts have been correctly deemed, they do contain what may be described as the 'flint of negotiation' and 'flint of challenge' of the essentialist representations that they are largely guilty of. For example, Wole Soyinka in particular has been accused of deploying female stereotypes "enough to suggest a definite sexist bias against women" (Davies 81), but it is also recognized that there occurs the "kernel of positive portrayal of the female image" simultaneously in the works (Davies 85).

The flint of challenge mode occurs like a fissure or rupture within a dominant representation. Several statements and scenarios from the works of Chinua Achebe, Zulu Sofola and Femi Osofisan, among others, can also be used to exemplify this flint of challenge model. For example, in Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Odibei, a female character, insists that: "A man is not a man simply because he parades an okra sprout" (15). This obviously disturbs the man equals manliness/phallus equals bravery versus woman equals womanliness binary. Gender based metaphors are similarly employed in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. For example, the market women in the play tell Sergeant Amusa, a colonial 'native' policeman, that the truncheon that he wields is not the one 'that counts' as far as they, the market women, are concerned; the one that counts is the baton that he carries under his "government knickers." Such statements that index a distinction between biological sex and gender do disturb a strict gender binary. In Osofisan's *Morountodun*, the shero, Titubi, also on the whole emerges as a legend, "a female promethean heroically braving life's odds, putting her

life specially at risk to serve a cause" (Oloruntoba-Oju, "Myth" 10). The work again exhibits a flint of challenge mode by conferring a heroic status on a female character.⁴

However, the definitive movement from a mere 'flint of challenge' mode to a comprehensive resistance of essentialist representations of the African female is largely associated with the emergence of African women 'subversive' literature in the early sixties, beginning with Grace Ogot, and including Nigerian women writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta.

'Essentialism confronted': Rejection of wifhood and motherhood

The strategies of the resistance by gender sensitive women authors to essentialist representations of female characters have been well established. The most important of these is the strategy of inversion, basically by fronting female subjectivity and relegating, even discrediting, the male subject (Stratton 62–63). In works employing this strategy, female characters are made the subject of nationalist and other narratives, while male subjects take a secondary role. The trope of wifhood and or motherhood as a 'necessary' identification parameter of African womanhood is equally subverted.

In the works in this category, women find happiness in unmarried states and in a childless life, even if this is often after having attempted but failed to live according to patriarchal norms. In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, the female protagonist, Efuru, would eventually model her life on that of Uhamiri, the river goddess. Though childless, Uhamiri is nonetheless the goddess of beauty and wealth, attributes that she bestows on her faithful followers. In *One is Enough*, also by Nwapa, the female protagonist, Amaka, eventually anchors her life, her future and her happiness on the rejection of marriage and traditional concepts of motherhood:

I don't want to be a wife anymore [...] There is something in that word that does not suit me [...] Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me. When I rid myself of Obiora [the husband], things started working for me. [...] No, I am through with husbands. I said farewell to husbands the first day I came to Lagos (*One is Enough* 127).

As in the novels of Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta's novels also attempt to construct a new female identity that confronts traditional conceptions of wifhood and motherhood as the sole and inescapable fate of African womanhood. In Emecheta's novel with the ironic title *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego, unlike Nwapa's Efuru, does have children, but still could not find happiness as her fate is forever woven around the vicissitudes of family life. Nnu Ego would eventually confront her deity with her frustration with an essentialised female identity: "God," she asks, "when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" (224) The resolve of the female characters in these representations insinuates the rejection

of wifehood and motherhood as defining parameters in constructing the identity of the African female.

Allied to such rejection and confrontation of essentialist discourse is the representation, in the new writing, of women involved in a search of actual involvement in the political structures of the African society, what M. E. M. Kolawole ("Self-representation" 1) describes as a "self-conscious attempt to use literature as a political weapon for consciousness raising empowerment." Kolawole proceeds to propose three levels of the struggle for power by women as represented in the works of women writers. These include: "women who struggle but find tradition and social strictures too formidable and complex" ("Self-representation" 4), whom she considers to be represented in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*; women who engage in an "abortive quest for power" (6), represented in Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, and women involved in the "quest for power through a more overt revolt" (7), as in the works of Tsitsi Dangarembga and Nawal El Saadawi.

However, Kolawole's concluding remarks also zero in on what she calls "the reality," that "many women strike the just balance, achieving a resolution in the tension between the productive and reproductive roles" ("Self-representation" 9). Kolawole then proceeds to validate an inclusive approach, "necessary to sensitize both men and women to the need to improve women's opportunities and representation in the development process" ("Self-representation" 9). Literary representations that strike such a balance move from the confrontation model to what we have described as the negotiation model. The latter model became quite prominent after the first wave of confrontation and challenge of essentialist representations evident in the works of the first generation of Nigerian women writers.

Return of motherhood: from confrontation to negotiation

By the second generation (which includes writers such as Zulu Sofola, Mabel Segun, Bunmi Oyinsan, Ifeoma Okoye, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, among others), bio-essentialist features such as sisterhood, wifehood and, especially, motherhood came back to the 'front burner' as crucial, even if not exclusive, parameters of African womanhood. The impression created by this resurgence is that the writers had re-evaluated the earlier attempt to confront patriarchy from the western perspective and discovered that, perhaps in the initial frenzy, certain indigenous African perspectives may have become compromised.

The theme of a specifically African womanhood identity is at the centre of the debate between western feminist perceptions of womanhood and African womanist perceptions. It is at the core of the disagreement and the famed retort that 'Western feminism is not applicable to the African culture.' (See, among others, Ify Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987); Susan

Arndt's *The Dynamics of African Feminisms* (2002) and Obioma Nnaemeka's *Mapping African Feminisms* (2005) for an elaborate discussion of this trajectory).

In her article shortly before she died, titled "Feminism and African Womanhood," Zulu Sofola argued that to divest African females of essential sex-determined features is to "dewomanise" and rob her of her African "identity" (61). She then proposed four elements of African female identity ("as divine equal of man in essence, as a daughter, as wife and as a mother") which have since entered into African womanist discourse as resilient parameters of gender appreciation within the African cultural clime (see Nnaemeka "Mapping"). Sofola insists that these elements are "conceptualized and established within a structured system of co-rulership" (54). What we find here is some accommodation for bio-essentialist features of womanhood and a simultaneous negotiation of 'elbow room' within the existing societal structure; in other words, not a complete rejection of motherhood as a defining identity of African womanhood, but rather a negotiation of the associated conditions. While Zulu Sofola did not provide a name for her formulations, they tend to align with African womanist formulations on African womanhood. Terms that have been employed in African womanist criticism to explain this conception include "complementarity" (used repeatedly by Catherine Acholonu in her formulation on "motherism," and Obioma Nnamaeka's concept of "nego-feminism" which implies the negotiation of feminism and the exclusion of what she also calls "no-ego feminism," that is, feminism as an ego trip. Nnaemeka, quite like the other African womanists, argues "the importance of culture and difference" and "the necessity and prudence of "building on the indigenous" in the construction of African feminist theory" ("Nego-Feminism" 361). The earlier African womanism formulations of Ogunyemi and Kolawole (*Womanism*), as well as the postulations of Oyeronke Oyewumi on the departures within Western and African gender constructs also suggest that womanhood and especially motherhood continue to be considered central to the concerns of African females. As Amadiume had noted, "the sanctity of motherhood meant that women were treated with respect" (114). At the same time, motherhood as a central principle is constantly being negotiated or mediated to divest it of vestiges of gendered oppression associated with hegemonist patriarchy. For example, issues of widowhood, inheritance and non-egalitarian marital partnership (wifehood) constitute some of the sites of negotiation.

The 'negotiation model' in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*

Children of the Eagle, a novel by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, prominent female Nigerian writer of the second generation, offers a fairly comprehensive insight into the literary appropriation of the tropes of 'complementarity' and 'negotiation' that characterize the new, womanist, discourse. The novel is the end part of a trilogy that focuses on the

imprints of the woman as daughter and mother within the joint patrimony/matrimony that defines Igbo patriarchy (Igbo is one of the major ethnicities in Nigeria and setting of many Nigerian literary works including Chinua Achebe's).

Ezeigbo, an academic professor and critic herself, regards the term 'feminism' as one that is "often misunderstood" because "it conjures up visions of aggressive women who try to be like men, dress carelessly and abandon essential feminine attributes" ("Feminism" 1). Her use of the term "essential" here is interesting within the context of this paper. Her idea of a "true feminist," which coincides with her idea of the ideal woman, is one who is: "Not a colourless, passive, ignorant and inert doormat of a woman. Neither is she a termagant nor a hater of men. She relates well to all human beings and is cheerful, friendly but restrained. As a wife or mother she is dutiful, responsible but not aggressive; self-confident but not arrogant" (Ezeigbo, "Feminism" 3). More recently, Ezeigbo identified as an African womanist, womanism being, for her, the type of feminism agreeable to African culture, something that is "closest to our lives as African women [...] trying to build our society, our families" (in Oluigbo). She also speaks of the complementarity needed to build society without necessarily being "confrontational," the "need for men and women to work together to achieve a better society, in the family, at work places, in politics, everywhere" (in Oluigbo).

Children of the Eagle tells the story of five women and their mother, thus setting the stage for an intense daughterhood, sisterhood and motherhood in the narrative. They all go through harrowing experiences that include surviving a civil war. Each of the women tells her own story, hence placed in active subject positions, echoing the inversion strategy of much feminist literature. Their stories also include their relationship with men and how they have sought in their individual ways to redress gender inequality at various sites of engagement. The first image of these women that the reader is acquainted with is that of confident and independent individuals who have attained appreciable economic and social statuses. None is a "doormat of a woman." Nnenna Okwara Okoli is a University Professor, Chiaku Okwara a medical doctor, Amara Okwara a journalist, Ogonna Okwara Nduka a school teacher and trader, and Obioma Okwara Ebo an Evangelist.

The location of these women in the various professions is a deliberate strategy of the author's to ensure that they are viewed first of all as citizens making their mark in the socio-economic landscape of their country and communities. The women have come from their various locations in the urban spaces of the country on an annual reunion ritual in their home town of Ugwuta. The town is literally lit up by their presence, not just because of the imposing Jeep they ride in, but by the sheer aura of attainment that their presence exhibits. Those who are associated with them feel a sense of pride. Traditionally fixed gender binaries with respective male/female attributions, (such as social achiever/domestic housekeeper, master/missus, provider/provided for, active/passive, strong/weak, bold/timid, outspoken/taciturn, titled/

untitled, educated/uneducated, knowledgeable/ignorant, etc.), are disturbed by the location of these women in the novel.

Not all the five sisters are married. Nnenna is married and seems to have an enjoyable marriage, but the complex negotiations that go into sustaining the marriage are also textually evident. Her position is that the successful marriage is one that is based on an egalitarian perception of marital roles. Herself and her husband dialogue out their differences, plus a huge dose of mutual respect. Two other ladies are not married, by choice, and at least one, Ogonna, continues to stay in a bad marriage despite Nnenna's encouragement that she should get a divorce. In this mixture of marital statuses, the author disturbs the fixed traditional construction of wifedom as the only respectable state of adult womanhood.

Ezeigbo does not by any means romanticize the society in which these women live, nor does she romanticize their individual experiences. Obioma, now an evangelist, had gone through a gruesome rape experience in the hands of a quack medical doctor who was to help her procure an abortion. The pregnancy had resulted from a romantic affair with the love of her life, but the circumstance had seemed not to permit that she should have the baby, hence the attempted abortion which the doctor's behaviour forces her to abandon. The other sheroes of the novel had also had their own share of the rough life.

Two incidents in this novel bring out some of the more complex negotiation of womanhood and gender relations in the world of the novel. The aborted abortion briefly described above is one of them, and we will return later to the incident. The other is the death of the girls' father, Mr Okwara, who having left no son, leaves the family at the mercy of certain unsavoury aspects of patriarchal organization of society, in this case the issue of inheritance. Since inheritance passes only to male children in this society, widowhood results in a double jeopardy for the bereaved. However, it is these two ugly incidents that constitute the textual catalyst and narrative launch pad that the author has used to foreground some of the salient qualities of traditional African motherhood.

That Ezeigbo is personally infatuated with motherhood is pretty much evident in her non-fictional statements, including her 'confession' that she modelled the Eaglewoman in her novels after her mother: "not everything about my mother but some aspects of my mother's life and experience are subsumed in that character" (in *Oluigbo*). Although the title of the novel foregrounds the children, the novel is as much about the mother as the children. Eaglewoman's positioning in the novel accords well with the theoretical characterization of motherhood, and in particular Black motherhood, in terms of power and protection (Collins; O'Reilly; Kolawole; Acholonu, among others). The strength and sanctity of womanhood (involving daughterhood, sisterhood and motherhood) is a constant theme, and empowering women through negotiation, a constant strategy, in Ezeigbo's works.

Part of the complex meaning of *Children of the Eagle* and of motherhood is how Ugonwanyi manages to nurture her five girls through the vicissitudes unleashed upon the family by the death of the father, and the gendered hostility of the community. Her success is borne out by the relatively comfortable socio-economic location of her five children as shown above.

The appropriation of the symbolism of the Eagle for Ugonwanyi, the mother in the novel, called *Eaglewoman*, is also part of Ezeigbo's textual strategy to subvert an age-long gender binary. The eagle is a symbol of strength, sharpness of focus and, by implication, of intellect. Usually deployed as a symbol of masculinity (the air force; crest on military uniforms, bureaucratic conveyances, etc.), Ezeigbo upturns the implied binary by appropriating the symbolism for a female.

Ugonwanyi's handling of the failed abortion situation further brings out the pre-eminence of mother in the African family. Protection is offered not only to the helpless unborn child but also to the entire family. Ugonwanyi deftly negotiates the respectability of her family. She seizes initiative and announces to the stunned family members, including her husband, that: "I have decided to carry this pregnancy and give birth to the baby." Her plan, which she soon unfolds, is to send the pregnant Obioma to friends in the anonymous city of 'Ibaland' (a barely disguised pseudonym for Ibadan), while she, the mother, acts pregnant back home and then goes to Ibaland to 'deliver the baby' when Obioma's term falls due. Ugonwanyi does exactly that. As it turns out, the family now has a son, Nkemdirin, and the son *has* a father in the culturally acceptable sense.

In this complex negotiation, this mother, or this idealized motherhood, successfully navigates skewed gender exclusionary landmines within Ugwuta patriarchy, while simultaneously avoiding a frontal confrontation. It is true that this personal negotiation mode of seeking legitimation by disguised means may not be structurally transformative vis-à-vis the entire community of women suffering similar deprivation; however, the manoeuvre indicates a nucleus of resistance that may well eventually ignite the sensitivities of others and snowball into a communal engagement in the future.

There are other pitfalls to be negotiated. For example, tradition forbids females to appear before the village Council, *Ogunano Ezeala*. How then would a family without males make representations to the Council over a land dispute! In negotiating this gendered landmine, Nnenna is to lead a public protest against gender discrimination in Ogwuta and then write a letter to the Ogwuta Council of elders in an attempt to shake this age-long tradition. Though unusual, the Council does accept this representation by proxy and the land issue is resolved. Ezeigbo, through the same Nnenna, carries out a complex negotiation of traditional proverbs as part of her textual strategy to undermine some of the institutions that the proverbs represent.

It is interesting that J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada should slap the tag of "domestic amazons" on these wide-ranging female protagonists. The tag "domestic" would

seem to pejoratively diminish their known operational scope and influence in the world of the novel. Worse still, it could betray, in the manner of a Freudian slip, a cultural mind-set to limit the achievement potential of females to the domestic sphere.

On the other hand, a tag such as “Amazon” tends to project Ezeigbo’s *Children of the Eagle* as a novel in the confrontation mode. Indeed, Nwachukwu-Agbada generally deploys war and allied rhetoric to describe the author’s strategy in confronting what he calls the “assumptions” of Igbo patriarchy. Agbada’s descriptive rhetoric includes terms such as “enlistment,” “dismantle,” “topple,” “negate” (86) “battle” (87), “losing out” (91), “unmask,” “weaken” (96), etc. However, neither the author herself, as shown above, nor other notable critics perceive this important work as belonging holistically to this confrontation mode.⁵

Rather, essentialist notions of African female identity are constantly negotiated within the patriarchal structures in the novel. Eaglewoman would support the retention of “everything that is good in our culture” and she finds it “strange that a woman would not want a child;” nonetheless, she would struggle against unsavoury aspects of the culture and of patriarchy. In the process, traditional African notions of womanhood are sometimes reinforced and sometimes revisioned. Characters are allowed to follow the inclination of their hearts while related aspects of gender discrimination are negotiated at various levels.

Ezeigbo herself explains this compromise/negotiation strategy in her interview (in Oluigbo):

[M]y female characters are not usually combative, but of course they are highly principled characters who know what they want and how to go about it [...] My women are strong and very resilient; they are not weaklings, but their strength is not in violence or confrontation but in being principled and self-controlled, in collaborating with other people around them. But of course, if this collaboration brings about confrontation, they will move away and chart out their own survival.

Conclusion

The negotiation/survivalist model of representing African womanhood, illustrated here with Akachi Ezeigbo’s *Children of the Eagle*, corresponds to the dominant trend in African womanist discourse. The discourse resonates with the tropes of ‘complementarity,’ ‘negotiation’ and ‘reconciliation,’ and signals a departure from the mode of confrontational challenge that characterized earlier representations by first generation African women writers. The model has also involved a restoration of features of essentialism, biological dimorphism and gender binaries associated with colonial and early African male writing. On the whole we get the impression that sisterhood, wifehood and especially motherhood remain important parameters for the representation of African womanhood. However, unlike the colonial and male

representations, these are no longer presented as sole or inescapable parameters; the essentialism is modified, negotiated.

The negotiation/complementarity model has been projected in womanist discourse as a rejection of western feminist postulations and, simultaneously, a projection of salutary African gender perspectives. However, the model would also appear to represent a not so salutary reality on the continent, namely the relentlessly skewed gender attitudes and unyielding male privilege within African cultures. Against such a background of obdurate cultures, positive change in gender perspectives on the continent would depend on complementary transformative efforts on the part of all fair-minded members of the society irrespective of sex or gender.

Notes

1. Wole Soyinka especially was to denounce Senghor's formulation on the basis that he was 'inflicting' on African culture a rigid conceptual binarism, "the Manichean tradition of European thought" that is alien to African culture (*Myth* 127).
2. In Nigeria in 2004, MTN (a GSM network) drew some flak from feminists, with its advert featuring the announcement of a new-born's sex. (A man in the city, taking advantage of the mobile network, calls his mother in a remote village to announce that his wife had given birth: "Mama, Na Boy" ("Mama, it's a boy"), and the entire village erupts in ecstasy. The network was accused of gender insensitivity, but the incident also demonstrates how gender is a performative routinely acted out in line with cultural expectations and social prescriptions.
3. The lament by Hernton (39) is exemplary: "male authors have portrayed male heroes and male protagonists almost exclusively, and the complexity and vitality of black female experiences have been fundamentally ignored."
4. The term "shero" has entered feminist discourse as a preferred term for the female "hero" and a lexico-symbolic challenge to the "phallogocentric" term "hero," and the feminised but phallic-derived term "heroine" (see Mama). Titubi's own sheroic status has been the subject of controversy in the literature (see Ajayi; Richards; Olorunfoba-Oju, "Myth"). However, this does not invalidate the flint of challenge mode that her representation in the play connotes, as proposed in this paper.
5. For example, Femi Osofisan, incidentally also referred to by Agbada, had described Ezeigbo's strategy in the novel as tending overall toward "negotiation, compromise [and] reconciliation" (39).

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