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Contextualising the Female Sublime: A Feminist Reading of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols*

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Abstract

Feminism, an ideology which revolves around the refusal by women to be defined by male-established models of femininity, has gone through a lot of mutations. From being an agitation by women for the equality of the sexes, it has graduated to an advocacy for the propagation of a peculiar genre of literature in which women are both the authors and subject matter of the code. The argument for this new mode of literature is that the true identity and potential of women can best be realized when women begin to tell their own stories. This study seeks to establish the plausibility or lack of it of the argument that supports this new mode of female literary identity. Relying on women-centred literary theories such as gynocritics and the female sublime, the study distills the way some female writers are seeking to demolish the structures on which male theory is founded. To bring this to the fore, the study ventures into the audacious province of this new genre of literature that explores female experience from the point of view of female writers. It establishes that the novel under study and its author are products of this radical displacement that is being sought by women. This is done through female characters who reject male codes and patriarchal systems that place women at the lowest rung in the chain of beings. By so doing, they deflect male sexual egos that perceive women as the weaker sex. Through the heroic exploits of her female characters, the author shatters male theories and patriarchal ideologies. The study then submits that the author has not only given impetus to the idea of the female

sublime, she has diffused and supplanted the old-fashioned sublime of male domination through female characters who neither subscribe to nor are constrained by any patriarchal ideology.
Keywords: Feminism, Radical, Sublime, Equality, Genre, Codes

Introduction

Feminism, an advocacy that demands all genders should have equal rights and opportunities, first started as a European continental phenomenon. Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer and philosopher best known for her advocacy of women's rights, is reputed to be the mother of the first-wave feminism. The ideology was later embraced by women outside Europe with Betty Friedan, an American writer and activist, and a leading figure in the women's movement in the United States, taking the lead outside European shores.

Regardless of the differences in space and time, the enduring message of feminism is that the diverse experiences of women, as well as their identities and strengths, should be respected. Feminists the world over are not only intent on being granted rights equal to those enjoyed by men, they have gone a step further to insist on telling their own story with a view to creating a sustainable image of themselves. In this regard, some female writers and activists embark on a crusade for justice for themselves and for their sex. The overall objective is to ensure the protection of women's rights which they say are not guaranteed in a male society.

Even though feminist scholars in different fields are agreed on the need to engage the dominant male intellectual tradition, there is a variance of opinion on whether they should confront it, dismiss it, borrow from it or criticize it. In an essay "The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticisms", Ellen Messer-Davidow, points out that feminist critics in literary study are ambivalent over this seeming dilemma. While some have continued to borrow, either

purposefully or unwittingly, from traditional schools, others fear that "the enterprises of writing and thinking, let alone criticism, are so thoroughly infected by patriarchal ideology that women can achieve expression only through a female bio-language or rebellious silence" (Kauffman, 63). For her, feminist critics can neither do with traditions nor without them. Her submission is that feminists suffer greatly the anguish of divided inheritance.

However, this ambivalence was largely settled with the intervention of the likes of Elaine Showalter. While reflecting on the journey of women in their effort to define their own world, Showalter argued that women's writings should move to the female phase. It is the phase where women will freely tell their peculiar stories without being influenced by male-defined discourses and intrusions.

In her book, *A Literature of Their Own*, she examines the socio-economic conditions of British women writers and the expressions of their self-awareness. She then goes beyond British women writers, using the concept of a sub-culture to sketch a tradition of feminine, feminist, and female literature. (Kauffman, 67). To give substance to this female phase, she coined the term 'gynocritics' which denotes the study of women as writers.

As a literary theory, gynocritics places emphasis on sexual difference. It celebrates women's biological attributes as sources of superiority rather than inferiority. It appeals to the special experience of women as the source of positive female values in life and argues that since only women have undergone specific life experiences like ovulation, menstruation and parturition, only they can speak of a woman's life. Gynocritics also postulates that a woman's experience includes a different perceptual and emotional life and that women do not see things in the same way as men and have different ideas or feelings about what is important or not important.

The insistence by women to create a literature of their own as advocated by Showalter was to graduate into an ideology of sorts when some radical feminists came with the idea of the female sublime. The sublime mode, conventionally, has been the domain of masculine writers. However, women have, in recent decades ventured into the same mode of writing. In an essay, "Toward a Female Sublime", Patricia Yaeger points out that the most notable practitioners of the sublime mode among women are the group of writers called French Feminists. In the scheme of the French Feminists, there is a desire for feminine power. Thus, their prose is often laden with "sweeping metaphors equating women's writing with the release of geothermal energies" (Kauffman, 191).

In French feminist writing, women are required to create a new architectonics of empowerment. But this cannot be done through the old-fashioned sublime of domination, or the vertical sublime which insists on aggrandizing the masculine self over others. Instead, the empowerment will come through a horizontal sublime that moves towards sovereignty or expenditure, or that "refuses an Oedipal, phallic fight to the death with the father, but expands towards others, spreads itself out into multiplicity" (Kauffman, 191).

This being the case, a feminine text cannot but be more than subversive. It must be volcanic. The sublime as a feminine mode must invent for women a vocabulary of ecstasy and empowerment and a new way of reading feminine experience.

Yaeger sees the sublime as a genre the woman writer needs. It is a mode that allows trespass and appropriation of forbidden and illicit forces. It is a tool for the woman writer who is looking for a genre permitting the exploration of alternative modes of female experience. For Yaeger as well, " the woman writer who writes in the sublime mode writes differently; in order to overcome her exclusion from the dialectic of negative power enacted in the conventional sublime" (Kauffman, 199). The way these female

discourses shape our appreciation of the novel under consideration will be our major preoccupation in this study.

Theoretical Framework

From the background to this study, we have been able to establish that feminism in literature has moved to a higher realm. Women writers are beginning to create their own realities through writings or narratives that emanate purely from the perspectives of women. For this reason, it is important that we consider as many brands of feminism as will serve our purpose. For the purpose of this study therefore, we deem it most appropriate to adopt the feminist approach to criticism and its variants in our analysis of the novel under study.

Feminist criticism is concerned with the politics of sex. In pre-Mendelian days, for instance, men regarded their sperm as the active seeds which give form to the waiting ovum. This was an assertion of patriarchy over matriarchy. According to Raman Selden (Selden,129) , what feminist critics do is to summon up furies to counter what they consider as the complacent certainties of patriarchal culture and create a less oppressive climate for women writers and readers. They also try to expose what they regard as the fraudulent objectivity of male science. Feminist criticism therefore wishes to escape the fixities and definites of theory and to develop a female discourse which cannot be tied down conceptually to a recognised male-produced theoretical tradition.

For Barbara Smith, a black feminist approach to literature must embody the realisation that "the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers" (Showalter, 170). She also argues that the black feminist critic must have a primary commitment to explore how both sexual and racial politics and black and female identity are inextricable elements in black women's writings.

While using the framework of feminist criticism as our tool of analysis, we will expand its frontiers by taking into consideration what Alice Walker calls "womanism". According to her, "womanist is to feminism as purple to lavender" (Walker, xii). In Walker's scheme, a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of colour. She is given to "outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour (Walker, xi). She is intent on knowing more and in greater depth than is considered good.

For Walker as well, a womanist is "interested in grown-up doings (Walker, xi). She loves other women sexually or non-sexually. She appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength. Above all, she is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people. For this reason, she loves struggle.

Essentially, feminists of all shades are interested in the emancipation and liberation of women. Feminist scholarship, just like other aspects of feminism, is preoccupied with liberating women from the structures that have kept them down. The objective is to reinterpret and reconstruct female experience for the benefit of humanity.

Borrowing from Ellen Messer- Davidow who advocates that women can achieve expression only through a new female bio-language, Lillian Robinson defines feminist criticism as 'criticism with a cause', 'ideological and moral criticism', 'revolutionary criticism' whose aim is to alleviate "the oppressive effects of literature on women" (Kauffman, 67). Our choice of this critical approach is informed by some considerations.

In adopting feminist criticism as an analytical tool, certain crucial questions present themselves for consideration. One is, to what extent has the sublime mode and the overall idea of female discourse advanced the cause of feminism as an ideology? Another

is, how much of the feminist temper is found in the work under consideration? By providing answers to these and related questions, we are able to establish the extent or lack of it of gender bias in the writings of women. The approach will also help us to discover how the assumptions of a patriarchal culture are countered in the work under study.

Literature Review

In order to put in proper perspective how feminist agitations came to graduate to the level of the sublime mode, it is important to carry out a random survey of how activists and writers from different races and continents have deployed their experiences and exposures in their agitation for a better deal for the womenfolk. Indeed, the quest by women for a face and voice and, consequently, a literature of their own, is not an ideological pastime. Rather, it is borne out of the unsavoury experiences which they have had in their various environments.

We have earlier noted that the fire of feminism which was lit by Mary Wollstonecraft in Europe was later to spread to America in later years. Feminism started in America first as a club movement before it found expression in fiery writings. One of the earliest crusaders for women's rights in America was Sojourner Truth. In 1851, she mounted the podium at the Akron, Ohio women's convention to canvass for the rights of women. There, she argued that both racism and sexism militated against the democracy with which Americans had become comfortable. Relying on her slave experience, she systematically denounced sex discrimination. She travelled the country and spoke to audiences about women's rights and blacks' rights.

Intent on debunking the logic upon which sex discrimination was based, that is, the notion that the woman is weak and in fact an appendage to man, Truth drew attention to how she carried out the same physical tasks as men without any help from any man. She

had ploughed, planted, gathered into barns without being supervised by any man. In the face of all these, she posed the question, "Ar'n't I a woman?" (White, 20).

In antebellum America, the dominant feeling was that women needed male guidance because women were fickle and weak-willed. The American woman was poised for a rejection of this American idea about a woman's place. Whereas American white women were expected to be passive, because they were female, black women had to be submissive because they were black and slaves. This made a difference in the sex roles of black and white women, as well as in the expectations that their respective societies had of them.

Beyond the fervour which women's liberation movements engendered in America, there were also writers of different persuasions who expressed views on feminism. One of them is Virginia Woolf. In an essay, "A Room of One's Own" she quotes Pericles as saying that "the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of; that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them." (Eagleton, 75). Here, Woolf is trying to signpost the age-old prejudices from a patriarchal society that held women down.

For Mary Eagleton, British and American feminist critics in the 1970s were preoccupied with the idea that women writers had been silenced, by and large, excluded from literary history. Thus, the interest of many feminist critics at the time was the desire to rediscover the lost work of women writers , while providing a context that will be supportive of contemporary women writers, and the wish to manifest what it is to be female (Eagleton, 1). The critics demanded a status and recognition for women authors. They wanted to fit men into the male dominated tradition and at the same time wanted to write the history of a tradition among women themselves.

Alice Walker was also a notable voice in matters of feminism. In an essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", she raises the question: what did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? For her, the answer is "cruel enough to stop the blood" (Eagleton, 33).

She imagines how the creativity of the black woman was kept alive, year after year and century after century when for most of the years black people have been in America it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write. You can then imagine "the agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with their real gifts stifled within them" (Eagleton, 34).

But Walker is consoled that this is not the end of the story because, "for all the young women, our mothers and grandmothers, and ourselves, have not perished in the wilderness" (Eagleton, 34).
In her book of essays, *Black and Female*, Tsitsi Dangarembga examines the legacy of imperialism in her own life and on every aspect of black embodied African life. It weaves the personal and political in an illuminating exploration of race and gender. The book is a powerful testimony of the pervasive and long-lasting effects of racism and patriarchy.

She writes in the blurb of the book that black feminists are "the status quo's worst nightmare". She continues: "our conviction is deep, bolstered by a vivid imagination that remind us that other realities are possible beyond the one that obtains." She sees herself as an "existential refugee. I have been in flight since I left the womb" (Dangarembga, 3). Born in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), she observes that a white settler in Southern Rhodesia was of the view that African women were seen, initially as victims of African men.

"These men were idologised as beings who resorted to violence at the slightest provocation and who had little, if any desire to work. ....Thus, African women were first seen as the prey of these men, who imposed heavy socio-economic demands on them, from which the women should be rescued" (Dangarembga, 12).

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, the author whose novel is the focus of this study, also holds strong feminist viewpoints. For her, feminism is an ideology which insists that society should recognize claims of women for rights equal to those possessed by men, be they legal, economic, social or political (Ezeigbo, 1). Just like other feminists, she sees this advocacy as a response to oppressive and unjust laws, customs, traditions and attitudes directed against women in a male-dominated society. Here we refer to systems and practices which ensure that women are relegated to the background, marginalized, discriminated against and are generally left subservient to and dependent on men. As an ideology therefore, feminism seeks to liberate and emancipate women the world over from oppression, ignorance and disorientation. It aims at bringing a change to women's unenviable condition in society.

For Ezeigbo, feminists can be classified into two broad categories- the radical and the liberal (Ezeigbo, 2). Those in the radical category are separatists who often opt for a life of their own different from those of the opposite sex. Lesbians, she says, belong to this category. The liberal group of feminists opt for a broader social context where they will coexist with the menfolk. However, they insist that such relationship should be that of equals or partners.

Ezeigbo believes that feminism, the activities of feminists and the women's movement "have given many women self-confidence and self-respect. Many more have gained the ability to solve problems and the courage to speak out. Some have developed leadership qualities which were hitherto latent" (Ezeigbo, 3).

It should be noted that in an attempt to redefine her sexuality, the novel form has largely helped the woman in her quest. Given the fact that sex definition has special relevance to the history and evolution of the novel, women (particularly black women) writers have come to find the novel form an amenable medium for the propagation of their ideas. Through the novel form, she, according to Barbara Christian, often constructs a world of her own, affected by a developing personal vision, yet tempered by reality and social change (Christian, 3). Through her craft, an indication has been given as to the relationship between racism and sexism in America. This situation was aided by a historical factor. This is the process of the erosion of established certitudes. The twentieth century was an age in which so much slipped by so fast, when previously accepted forms of masculine authority were questioned and repudiated, and when traditional sex roles were assailed.

In addition, the sexual theme which the female writer is interested in is one of the preoccupations of the twentieth century. Rosalind Miles, an authority on the fiction of sex, believes that sex awareness is the most important factor of humanity and it is, throughout life, the-primary imperative of being, feeling and knowing (Miles, 17).

Given these varied experiences of women and the positions some of them have assumed on the need for them to have a face and voice in a male dominated society, it is hardly surprising that the uncompromising among them have taken the issue a notch higher. The argument for the female sublime as advocated by Elaine Showalter remains, so far, the high point of this agitation. How some of these radical viewpoints have found expression in the novel under study will occupy our attention in the rest of the study.

House of Symbols as Female Discourse

House of Symbols typifies what Elaine Showalter categorizes as literature of their own. It is female discourse. In the novel, the

author uses her principal characters all of whom are women to counter all the theories and belief systems that reserve an inferior status for women. The novel begins with the silent injustices that women bear in the hands of men. The author presents us with Eaglewoman who, at 16 years of age, feels grown-up and independent. She is resentful of anybody who has power over her or told her what to do or what not to do.

But her sense of independence is short lived. She is to discover, to her chagrin, that she had been packaged and disposed of before she knew that such a transaction ever took place. She is stunned by the knowledge that she had been betrothed at the age of eight to a man she neither knows nor has anything in common with since her childhood. That man is Osai. He turns out to be her husband. The author uses this story to draw attention to the culture of disempowerment that women have had to face.

To destroy whatever modicum of authority such liaisons bestow on men, the author chooses a story line that presents us with super women who do not just assume male roles but even surpass them in what they claim to be their territory. This is exemplified by the heroic exploits of her heroines, particularly Ezenwanyi, Eaglewoman and Okwudiba.

In the novel, Ezenwanyi, a principal character, assumes magical roles. She is a prophetess with divine powers. She has a calling and this imbues her with extraordinary vision. The vision is a strange one. It empowers her to combine both traditional and Christian religious practices. To emphasize the fact that nature reserved a special role for her she did not receive her calling until she has had her four children. Then the preparation for her life work began. It was carefully carried out at the initiation of powers beyond her understanding. She acts as a bridge between the living and the dead or reincarnated souls. She foresees events long before they

occur. She sees them clearly in advance and warns people especially if they are harmful or negative occurrences.

In a society where many souls are searching vainly for meaning in their lives, Ezenwanyi steps in to give meaning to people's lives. She says:

> "There are many souls searching for meaning in their lives. Searching and searching in vain...If they are fortunate, they find help before they are sucked into the abyss of nothingness. These are the ones who lead fruitless lives as they journey along life's rugged pathways, terrains. I am able to help such people" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 42).

She also heals people's minds. The insane are brought to her for cure and regeneration. She can exorcise wicked spirits, free their bodies and redirect them to creative paths. In fact, she has so much powers packed into her single body.

Regardless of the magical, probably fetish, powers which Ezenwanyi has, she embraces the Bible and its content. Osai is amazed and confused that someone who is believed to be the priestess of one of the local deities is talking about the Bible. But Ezenwanyi sees no contradiction in her dual roles. She is both a traditionalist and a Christian. She stands in the middle of the two religions, building bridges. She surmises that "only bridges can save the world from itself; from disconnection and destruction. Two religions coexist here without ease. My destiny is to bridge them, pull them together and nurture something new which draws strength from both" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 47).

A Genderless God

Beyond presenting us with a woman whose powers surpass those of men around her, the author goes full circle in her demolition of male discourse. Contrary to the received and accepted belief that Chukwu (God) is a man, the author creates a female protagonist

who argues that Chukwu is man and woman fused together in pure essence in spiritual form. Ezenwanyi declares:

> "Man and woman are two sides of Chukwu at the point of creation. Hence, Chukwu is both father and mother. The two rolled into one. Being the essence of man and woman, Chukwu is thus genderless. God has no gender though today different peoples and cultures represent the creator as male" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 46).

For Ezenwanyi, the God that Christians worship is the same worshipped by her ancestors. There is no difference except that Christians have imposed a single identity on the supreme creator: male. She rejects the notion where Chukwu is seen as father, throwing away the female essence of the creator. She argues:
"By limiting the creator to father, they do great injustice to the creator. The creator is all things" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 47).

In propagating this strange belief, Ezenwanyi believes that she is aspiring and striving to re-educate and reorient people to mend minds that are dislocated and replant souls that are uprooted. Her call is symbolic of the merging of ways.

Beyond Sexuality

In Ezenwanyi, Adimora-Ezeigbo creates a stupendously exceptional woman. Physically, she is all woman: well-rounded, soft-bodied and a feast for healthy eyes. Spiritually, she is a storehouse of divine vision and inspiration. The suggestion here is that woman should not be perceived in terms of her sexuality. There is more to her than the ordinary eyes can see. That explains why Ezenwanyi's house is regarded as a house of symbols. It is a place where people come and receive insights into the true meaning of existence. It is "crammed with spiritual symbols, feminine and masculine symbols. Old and new symbols, jostling for survival and, it seems, succeeding to do so in peace and harmony" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 50).

To sustain the sublime mode in the novel, the author does not stop with the creation of the magical character called Ezenwanyi, she also supports her larger-than-life presence in the novel with other female characters with great strides and accomplishments. One of them is Okwudiba, the greatest story teller and historian of Umuga. She is regarded as the third and fourth eyes of Umuga before the white people came with their culture and religion that cast their shadow over Umuga's religion and culture.

Unlike most female characters portrayed by male discourse as flat and uninspiring, Okwudiba is an epitome of memory and imagination. She is the wordsmith, the wordmonger who hypnotized spirits and humans by the sheer power of her eloquence. Her knowledge of the past is a feat only a few can match or surpass. She is the wordsmith who makes music with spoken words.

Another is Aziagba, a woman of courage who gave birth to twins in a land where twins are forbidden. She defies tradition, shuns stigmatization and raised her twins and sheltered them. She stood her ground in the face of taunts and abuses by people who charged her of deserting Umuga's hallowed and tested way of life. She was condemned for betraying the memory of her father and mother by embracing a religion and culture which caused their death and threatened to destroy all they stood for. But she is vindicated in the end given that many of those who condemned her were later to embrace Christianity. While others condemned her for nurturing twins, she dismisses their misgivings and holds instead that her twins are a symbolic affirmation of the exegesis of a way of life that ignorant and misguided strangers could never understand.

Eaglewoman, one of the earliest female characters that the author introduced in the opening pages of the novel is a woman of no mean repute. Even though there was a scheme by the male society to subjugate her through an early betrothal that she knew nothing

about, she refuses to allow herself to be delineated along that patriarchal scheme. In adulthood, she has become very influential. The author describes her as "a solid rock that gathers moss. Around her, green and yellow moss blossoms in a thick furry mass at all seasons" (Adimora-Ezeigbo 99). She is so influential that people obey her and dance to her tune. Many struggle to be near her magnetic presence. She knows how to burrow into people's skin like a mole without irritating or annoying them. The author writes that "her influence is not a flash in the pan or the sudden flame or glitter of a shooting star. It took years for it to develop, grow and spread, like the umbrella tree" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 100). In her exploits, Eaglewoman succeeds in garnering another name, Enyi: Elephant. The wise matriarchs called her Enyinwanyi: Elephantwoman.

When challenged by the problems associated with a long hiatus in child-bearing, she is not deterred. Being a woman of wisdom, she believes religiously in destiny. She is giving to saying that nothing happens by chance. She shares Ezenwanyi's position to the effect that every living soul is to remain open to uncertainty and surprise. Her guiding principle is that a life of purpose reveals the purpose of life. Eaglewoman is fulfilled in the end because in spite of the challenges of child birth, she ends up having as many children as she wants. Her house, in the final analysis, becomes a home of children aged between five and twenty. It is a home of nurture. Symbolic of life. It is "House of Symbols. A house where souls are revived with life-giving sap" (Akachi-Ezeigbo, 135).

Conclusion

From our analysis, we can conveniently conclude that the novel under consideration is a feminine text. In it, the author has employed the tools of gynocritics and the female sublime in depicting characters who are not delineated or constrained by male codes. For instance, she has, through the challenges that border on procreation that Eaglewoman has, made a case for apostles of

gynocritics. The argument here is that the special experience of women is a source of positive female values in life. It also advances the argument that since only women have undergone specific life experiences which are unknown to men, only they can speak of a woman's life.

In the novel, as well, the sublime mode is faithfully employed by the author in the portrayal of her female characters. Through it, she creates women of power and influence; unusual women who engage in grownup doings. As a feminine text, the author has deployed the sublime mode to shatter the framework of institutions created by men. For instance, the portrayal of God as genderless by the author is not only subversive, it is volcanic. It is a viewpoint aimed at subverting male discourse. She has, by so doing, created a new architectonics of female empowerment.

Even language is not spared in the author's rejection of patriarchy. In the novel, the English language is written off as sexist. Thus, the author ensures that we do not encounter seers, prophets, ancestors and priests, rather she presents the reader with seeresses, prophetesses, ancestresses and priestesses. That way, the author rejects the male code in language use by forcing the female gender on words that are, more or less, traditionally accepted as gender neutral in their usage and application. The novel demolishes masculine investments and renders irrelevant the sublime of domination which insists on aggrandizing the masculine self over others. Through these devices, we encounter in the novel a vocabulary of ecstasy and empowerment and a new way of reading female experience.

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