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Redefining otherness: Writing fictional (auto)biography and centring female subjectivity in Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*

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This study seeks to examine how the Nigerian female writer Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo redefines otherness in *Children of the Eagle* by exploring the narrative elements of the sub-genre of fictional autobiography in centring female subjects. By foregrounding one of Regenia Gagnier's descriptions of a subject—one that is “a subject to itself, an ‘I’, however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this ‘I’ from its own viewpoint, within its own experience”—this paper argues that female subjectivity is a strategy that locates female characters as subjects, narrators, insiders and participants who share their experiences in the novel. It shows that the centrality of the female narrative voice(s) in determining the course and thematic focus of the novel enables female characters to demonstrate their otherness as a quality and position that makes them resilient, strong, and uncompromising promoters of women's cause against debilitating patriarchal beliefs and systems. Being the speaking subjects also helps them to unpack the underlying trajectories in their development and depiction in the novel. This study concludes that Adimora-Ezeigbo's adoption of this technique in *Children of the Eagle* strengthens the view that placing women as narrator-subjects enables the redefinition of otherness as a favourable concept capable of showing women as critical members of their societies and also a tool for African women writers' to transform the literary scene. **Keywords:** Adimora-Ezeigbo, female, fictional autobiography, otherness, subjectivity.

Introduction

One of the outstanding qualities of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's literary oeuvre is the exploration of the autobiographical genre in the creation of female-centred narratives. This is because her fictive stories are not far removed from her lived experiences (Okafor; Hunsu, “Historic Memory in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*”; Yakubu). Udu Yakubu avers that a close reading of Adimora-Ezeigbo's works would “lead the perceptive reader to no other but the author herself” (175). From her trilogy, *The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle* to the short stories, she appropriates elements such as the first-person narrative voice alongside a blend of historical facts with fiction to centre females as the subjects of her narratives. Her texts do not only bridge the numerical gap between male-authored and female-authored texts in Nigerian literature, they qualify her as a voice for women's visibility

and transformation in this tradition. Commenting on Adimora-Ezeigbo's position in Nigerian literature, Patrick Oloko (3) states that "[h]aving made some profound statements on the human condition by contributing to the ongoing reformulations of the paradigms by which women may be assessed in her vast publications re-imagining the female character, it seems rather obvious that this writer can no longer be conveniently ignored in serious discussions of Nigerian Literature."

One of the "reformulations" as I would argue in this paper is the deployment of female subjectivity as a technique that redefines otherness as a favourable concept capable of accentuating women's positions as critical members of their societies.

Female subjectivity is used in this essay to mean the position of the female as subject—"as a subject to itself, an 'I', however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this 'I' from its own viewpoint, within its own experience" (Gagnier 8). It is important to underscore this description of the subject as it relates to the redefinition of otherness which I argue that Adimora-Ezeigbo sets out to undertake in *Children of the Eagle*. To deploy postcolonial and feminist concepts of otherness, the position of the African female as the "other" of the colonising white male "self" and as the "other" of the colonised (black) African male "self" are positions that are disadvantageous to her. However, it could be turned around to her advantage if she becomes the subject (noun) of her narrative and even when she is a subject of patriarchy-controlled structures because under these circumstances, depending on how she appropriates her agency in the first instance, she is able to dismantle structures of liminality and emerge as a strong and resilient "other".

Otherness here is deployed as a counter-discourse to the sense in which post-colonial criticism understands it as a negative concept that places postcolonial as the "other" of the colonial "self". As I have argued elsewhere, "to continue to define otherness as that difference that keeps the African postcolonial female subject in an inferior position is to perpetuate domination and underplay the power of the autobiographical 'I' to represent self in a way that redefines otherness" (Hunsu, "Engendering an Alternative Approach to Reading Otherness in African Women's Autobiography" 174). Indeed, one of the techniques that stand *Children of the Eagle* out in Adimora-Ezeigbo's corpus is the way she combines the first-person and third-person narrative voices in the novel.

The choice of *Children of the Eagle* (2002, 2005) is premised on two other factors. Being the third part of the Umuga trilogy that centres on the story of the author's community, the other two are *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) and *House of Symbols* (2001), critics seem to have focused more on the other two than *Children of the Eagle* (Hunsu, "Historic Memory"; Ekemezie; Bhattacharji). Even in a volume such as *The Fiction of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo: Issues and Perspectives* (ed. Oloko), the absence of the text is conspicuous. Even when the novel is in focus the trend has usually been a thematic study of the text to show her commitment to dismantling patriarchal

assumptions (Osofisan, Nwachukwu-Agbada) or to show specific connections between her lived experiences and the novel (Nwaiwu). While this study benefits from both approaches, it extends discussions to the literary strategy—the centring of female subjectivity—as that which allows her to promote women’s issues through the sub-genre of fictional (auto)biography.

Fictional autobiography and African women’s writing

Generally, fiction can be considered autobiographical if it bears direct relations to the life of the author while a text is classified as fictional autobiography if it is an imaginative life-story or lives stories of characters done to follow the conventions of traditional autobiography. Traditional autobiography requires the narrator and protagonist of the narrative to be the same person and to be told in the first-person singular pronoun. The story is told from the perspective of the person, I would say, the “experiencer”.

When it comes to African women writers’ use of the sub-genre of fictional autobiography, the key to understanding their intention lies in understanding the primacy of the female perspective/eye and voice in the stories that are told. By presenting the female perspective/eye, they underscore female subjectivity as a strategy and “an approach to women’s history” which allows women’s stories to be told “from the perspectives of the individuals who lived that history” (Lewis).

When women, “who lived that history” tell their stories using fiction as a medium, there is almost no place for self-effacement but there is ample space to express their experiences, authenticate their stories and show their agency both in the concerns and techniques of writing. Mary Kolawole (167) observes that African women conceive writing “not as a synonym for elusive fiction but a source of self-actualization”. She explains further:

These women writers do not conceal their active relationship to the fiction. This self-referential process is therapeutic, as it allows direct self-commentary by unveiling temporarily the veil of fiction. This authenticates the African woman’s reality that is being depicted and validates any emergent theoretical position. This is central to the process of self-definition and self-healing [...] Whereas western women writers can afford the luxury of fiction qua fiction, African women often have an urgent message and this precludes self-effacement. (167–8)

Their choice of the fictional autobiography to depict socio-cultural and political realities of the continent gives their characters the space to speak as insiders and participants and not as mere and helpless subjects of narration but as subjects presenting their “own viewpoint” (Gagnier 8). Furthermore, they portray realistic subjects that are connected to authors’ lived experiences.

In the section that follows, this study explores Adimora-Ezeigbo's use of the fictional autobiography and how the female subjects of her novel take control of the narrative in *Children of the Eagle* as a means of highlighting their otherness.

Otherness and female subjectivity in *Children of the Eagle*

Otherness or difference is used here to mean those qualities that highlight uniqueness, strength and resilience of the female subjects in the face of crippling patriarchal systems. Each character's otherness is built on different sets of experiences which they narrate. Being a fictional (auto)biographical novel that adopts the first person narrative voice and that also invites the reader to the life stories of members of a family, *Children of the Eagle* positions women as determiners of the narrative course and the eye/I through which issues and other characters are represented.

Since these women tell their stories, they have the opportunity to reveal personal struggles to rise above limitations and the roles that other people, especially women like them, have played in the persons that they have become. It does not provide a chronological narration of their lives *per se* but gives a glimpse into important and landmark events that the reader and the fictive society might not know about them except through their narratives. The past is history and the novel may be a fiction but to Adimora-Ezeigbo, the need to draw fictional characters from her lived experiences is a pressing and important one which must not be overlooked. As quoted in Stephanie Newell's study on Adimora-Ezeigbo's woman-centred frameworks both the past and present merge in the author's scheme to produce female characters that are worthy of emulation:

When I was growing up, I was surrounded by strong women (my mother was one of them) so I grew up believing and "seeing" that women are not inferior to men in any way [...] I simply recreate what I know existed and still exists: strong, articulate, industrious and caring women, full of the joy of living and facing and confronting adversaries in their lives. (90)

Two issues emerge from this statement credited to Adimora-Ezeigbo. First, those women are not the "inferior" other and that certain qualities stand them out in their community. The female narrators in the novel are therefore endowed with each of these qualities as they demonstrate their otherness in accordance with the lived experience of the author.

Although this text completes the stories started in the first two novels of the trilogy, it, like the other two, is "independent". *Children of the Eagle* is a story, set in 1990s Nigeria, about the life stories of the five daughters of the Ugonwanyi also known as Eaglewoman. Their stories are interspersed with the narration of the events that take place in Umuga within a period of less than three weeks around Christmas time. The

family, first four daughters namely Ogonna, Nnenna, Obioma, and Amara and later Chiaku, gathers to witness the posthumous conferment of chieftaincy titles on their great-grand parents, Obiatu and Ejimnaka, who along with others, are being honoured for the role they played in pre-colonial and colonial Umuga community. Another crucial reason for their gathering is to welcome their prospective English brother-in-law as he comes to ask for the hand of Amara in marriage. The birthday anniversary celebration of their mother and a memorial service for their late father, Josiah Okwara are the other two occasions that have brought them together. However, as important as these reasons seem, their mother is concerned about the family's biography which Nnenna has been commissioned to write.

It is this project that lets the reader into the life of each member of the family but the author presents narrators, women of the same mother but with diverse experiences and aspirations rather than a narrator, who is supposed to be the biographer. J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada's describes it in this way: "In like manner, the author of *Children of the Eagle* places on the lips of the four daughters of Josiah (Osai) and Ugonwanyi ("Eaglewoman") the message of a new redemption, which can only fructify when women and the larger society are re-educated to enable the former to enjoy a more qualitative existence." (88)

The representation of female subjects in *Children of the Eagle* is therefore central to the author's attempt to portray positive images of her female characters. How is the first person narrative voice presented in the novel? In the first instance, the novel starts with a third-person omniscient narrator and only moves on to the first person in different chapters of the text and in the first instance, in the ninth chapter of the first part of the four-part novel. It seems the author deliberately subsumes the identity and voices of individual persons, this time women, in the third person as a means of underscoring the communality that is depicted in the novel. The story in the novel is actually stories about these women whose lives are at once intertwined and separate. The five daughters of the Eaglewoman are introduced in the first chapter of part one, where the reader is informed that only four out of five daughters are with the Eaglewoman at the beginning of the narration. They are, as listed in the novel,

- Ogonna Okwara-Nduka: a secondary school teacher in Lagoon City. Married with four children—two sons and two daughters.
- Nnenna Okwara-Okoli: a senior lecturer at the University of the South in Lagoon City. Married with two children—a daughter and a son.
- Obioma Okwara-Ebo: a church leader, pastor and evangelist who lives in Lagoon City. Married with four children—two sons and two daughters.
- Amara Okwara: a journalist living in Coal City. Single. She has no intention of bringing children into this world.

Two other siblings have not arrived:

- Chiaku Okwara-Kwesi: a medical doctor who practises medicine in London and lives in a flat with her African-American friend. Divorced. She does not have a child.
- Nkemdirim Okwara: a secondary school boy in Kada City, the youngest member of the family. (3–4)

In the above resume of each of the major characters that we meet in the novel, one can notice a trend in the author's presentation; their professions are mentioned first, followed by where they live, their marital statuses, and the presence or absence of children in their lives. The third person narrator-cum-author seems to be interested in making the reader believe that apart from being female and born by same parents, they are upwardly mobile women who possess varying identities with respect to motherhood.

Motherhood is presented as a rallying point and index for defining these women's identities without giving a negative impression about women who choose not to have children. The novel shows the power of these women to choose their "motherly" statuses and the influence of an irrepressible and intelligent mother on the development of female subjects. In the last part of the resume that we see above, mention is made of the last child of the family, Nkemdirim who also is the only male child. The circumstance surrounding the birth of the boy and his appearance as a son of Eaglewoman, as will be revealed in the course of the narration, is a secret that ties the women and their mother to the exclusion of others, including the women's husbands. The boy is actually the fruit of the youthful escapade of Obioma, the pastor-daughter of the Eaglewoman. This is an aspect of the story which is significant in considering the impact that both the "eye", that is the one who had the experience or the one who lived the history as Lewis would put it, and the "I" meaning the speaking-subject on presenting the other side of a story that could portray the pastor-daughter as a wayward and conniving woman.

The fact that Obioma is the narrator of the story behind the birth of Nkemdirim puts to rest the assumption that women are unable to keep secrets. The secret remains one until Obioma decides to narrate it by herself. If Nnenna, the family biographer had been the one to let us into the details, then that assumption would have been proved right. Collectively, the women show their commitment to family values and demonstrate that they have been well-tutored as "Children of the Eagle". On the part of Obioma, the narrator-participant, she is absolved of almost all blames through the way she recounts her experience. First, according to her story, the impoverishment experienced by her family and many other families in the Eastern states during and after the Nigerian civil war drove her into the arms of the stranger named Lanre, the biological father of Nkemdirim. She says, "I saw myself as the third of five cherished daughters of a once prosperous couple who had been crippled financially by a tragic

war. A girl who used to eat whatever she wanted and wore the clothes she fancied. Now, she was a near destitute. A tramp." (195) She was never wayward and because of this, after the sexual encounter with Lanre, she quips, "I discovered my peace of mind was gone." (195) Their affairs lasted for only two weeks as her father appeared and took care of all financial needs but psychologically disturbed because she knew the gravity of her action even before she found that she was pregnant. This picture invites the reader to empathise with Obioma and not judge her. More so as she had the option of terminating the pregnancy but she chose to keep the baby who eventually becomes the adopted son of her parents' and widely known as the only son and heir who saves them from the "shame" of not having a male child. Being an insider and the one who lived the story, she is able to give details, including painting a picture of the emotional and psychological trauma that attended this period of her life.

The story of the family's first daughter especially her rocky marriage is another insider story that opens up some of the private issues that underlie her relationship with her husband. She is acutely aware of the victimization that greets divorced women in their society where divorce, as in many African cultures, is considered strange and the fault of the women. But she claims that her children are the only reason she is still married to her husband because female children from divorced parents face stigmatization as they are not considered good material for marriage.

Ogonna's subjectivity in the narrative of divorce and her personal experience brings to the fore the mindset of many women who are in unsuccessful marriages but are still putting up appearances for the fear of negative societal assessment. Though Ogonna promises her sisters that she "will not be the vanguard of divorce in their family", she knows that her marriage is as good as ended because she has full responsibility for the family upkeep and the children's school fees since her husband has refused to support them. She narrates her life story to underscore her patience and resourcefulness in the face of the difficulties she is confronted with in her marriage.

It is interesting to note that *Children of the Eagle* presents four generations of mothers. This technique can be read, in the terms of author's treatment of female subjectivity, as a text in celebration of the value that Africans place on extended family systems. Children are tied to their parents, grandparents and great-grand parents in ways that question the viability of the existence of isolated individuals in African societies. *Children of the Eagle* stands out as a text that extensively gives a very positive and favourable portraiture of mothers as far back as the fourth generation. Nnemme, the character through whose perspective a reasonable proportion of the novel is presented, is an exceptionally gifted woman. Although like her sisters, she has inherited their mother's resourcefulness and strength, she possesses characteristics that go far beyond her mother and are traced to her great grand-mother, Ejimnaka.

According to family and communal history, Ejimnaka, mother to an only child, Aziagba, was one of the female members of *Obufofo*, the highest ruling body of pre-

colonial Umuga community, who resisted the incursion of colonial power to the point of death. She was a woman of unparalleled inner and physical strength who could match any adversary, male or female, strength for strength and even overcome. Nnenne is described as the reincarnate of this woman and it is no wonder, despite the victimization she suffers as an academic, she is still able to stand. Indeed, Nnenne is unlike some of her colleagues who, she says, are performing far below expectation: "Many an academic has lost discipline. Some recycle the same old notes totally ignorant of developments in their field. Some have abandoned research for the pursuit of money—a disease that attacks the system throughout the country, from the south to the north, from the east to the west." (172)

Adimora-Ezeigbo tactically builds an image of otherness around this character by underlining her strength, commitment to work, exposure, and importance as the member of the Okwara family to carry on the trend which Ejimnanka's life initiated in their maternal lineage. She has been denied promotion for several years but she is stronger for it. She shares with her sisters: "But I no longer allow the delay to trouble me, to dampen my enthusiasm to do the things that interest me at work or outside work. I do my work, look after my students. I know my appointment will come just as light comes to overtake darkness." (170) The experiences of Nnenne are punctuated with strong and formidable display of "heroism" such that she is clearly singled out as possibly the most intelligent and better known character to the reader than others, even her sisters.

She is bolder and more outspoken than her sisters or any other character in the novel and it seems Adimora-Ezeigbo uses her to epitomise remarkable strength and intelligence of the female child, girl, and woman. This character's positive traits are traced back to a childhood and girlhood that evinced irrepressibility just as the author claims she witnessed in women around her as a child and adult.

On an occasion during this visit to their mother, Nnenne and Ogonna recall an experience the family went through when they were younger. The extended family had decided without due consultation with Eaglewoman and her children that their father's unmarried sister, who needed an accommodation, was to be moved into a shop that was located in the front of their house. It was a discomfort that their father was willing to bear without considering its effect on the well-being of his family because in Eaglewoman's words, "he does not want to offend his brothers and sisters" (70). The reason for not seeking the opinion and consent of the woman and her daughters was simply because of their gender. In their culture, female children are discriminated against and sidetracked whenever any vital decision is to be taken. So, as a critique of this practice, Adimora-Ezeigbo includes an experience like this to underscore the ability of women when they bond to defeat even the most formidable enemy. On the day of the operation, the five girls, Ogonna, Nnenne, Obioma, Chiaku, and Amara, dressed up and stood by the gate of their house. Ogonna recalls:

My sisters and I wore our win-the-war shorts and sandals made from discarded vehicle tyres and positioned ourselves at the gate like soldiers standing sentinel. For a weapon, we armed ourselves with courage [...] Papa was astonished to see us at the gate. Before he could address us, we began to shout we did not think it was right to turn a shop into living quarters because such a move would spoil the beauty of our home [...] Not even a refugee would request to be quartered in such a place, we argued. Nnenna insisted that our opinion should be asked for and taken into consideration in a matter that affected us. (70)

Nnenna was the only one who could point out to their father and the other members of the group the fundamental issue to this act. In Ogonna's narration, she mentions that it was not as if they were opposed to their aunt coming to live with them, but they thought the shop was not an appropriate place, a fact that could have emerged if they or their mother had been duly consulted. Nnenna's remark during the confrontation is actually the reason why such an event would have any relevance to the portraiture that the author intends to give her female character, especially Nnenna, whose outspoken and bold traits remind one of their great-grandmother.

The author also endows her with supernatural abilities which others do not possess. She is able to see people and things beyond ordinary physical eyes could see and is also able to foresee future events. Her sisters keep referring, at different points in the novel, to times when they were younger and Nnenna's "gift" was what saved the family from one calamity or another. This ability was actually "passed on" to her by her great-grandmother's friend who is also described in the novel as one of the foremothers of Umuga community. It is this quality in Nnenna that has now been converted into exceptional writing proficiency. As a poet and novelist, she is able to transform the most ordinary event or sight into an extraordinary one through writing. Again, her poetic attribute is linked with another character in the past who was also their great-grandmother's friend and member of the "Oluada".

Adimora-Ezeigbo's penchant for narrating reincarnation is demonstrated by depicting a character like Nnenna, who is an embodiment of the positive traits which made those foremothers outstanding in their days and worth celebrating in the contemporary time of the novel. Ofure Aito argues that against the negative use of reincarnation in the works of Wole Soyinka and Ben Okri, Adimora-Ezeigbo uses the African concept to underline female strength and relevance. She points out that one of the qualities that supports and strengthens Adimora-Ezeigbo's feminist writing is the fact that in the trilogy, especially *Children of the Eagle*, the author celebrates a formidable present by connecting her characters to the foundation laid by foremothers. She states "The novel celebrates reincarnates of the past 'Oluada'. But this time, the amazons of Umuga and Atagu are our contemporaries who combine the spirit of the past with the temper of the present to transform the world" (172). This transformation

is made possible through the cooperation of the living, one of whom is Nnenna, to maintain the image of the “strong women”.

Conclusion

The autobiographical occasions in the novel are necessitated by the writing of the family book. Since Nnenna, the writer, is unable to determine the contents that each of her sisters will like to include in their life stories, she has to depend on them to tell their stories themselves. This strategy works both for Nnenna and the author in the novel. Nnenna uses this to give her sisters access to the autobiographical text since they all deploy their female subjectivity direct and control the contents of their stories and also illuminate the importance of one another as members of the same gender and family. By making them tell their stories as subjects of these stories, Nnenna hopes to occlude the possibility of unreliability through misrepresentation, an error that could mar their existence as a group or disrupt the bond they have maintained through their lives. So that when they tell self, they also become responsible for whatever details they have included in their own life-stories. This underpins the primacy of the female as subjects of autobiographical writings and the autonomy they gain and exercise as the “I” of their narratives.

On the part of the author, she protects Nnenna from reader’s censorship by making sure for instance, that such a well-kept secret of Nkemdirim’s birth is not exposed by Nnenna the writer, but by Obioma, the one that is directly involved. Moreover, their individual voices are heard and not subsumed in the collective, as the author makes us see that they are all important in the totality of the narration. Their life-stories will make meaning in the family book when read as branches of the same tree of female self-expression and actualization. The female subjects of *Children of the Eagle* narrate their past in order to reveal how they have triumphed over life challenges and how they have been able to create space for self-determination and self-actualization. The novel qualifies as a fictional autobiography because of the way the author draws on her personal experiences as a child and adult in portraying women of exceptional characters and because of the dependence of the first person narrative voice in telling the life stories of these characters. The novel underlines the potency of the speaking subject and strengthens the view that the sub-genre of fictional autobiography enables the redefinition of otherness as a favourable concept capable of accentuating women’s positions as critical members of their societies and also remains a site for African women writers’ transformation of the literary scene.

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