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## Book Review: Children of the Eagle

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*Children of the Eagle*. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. 2002. Lagos: Vista Books. pp. 397. \$4.00, paperback.

Reviewed by Dr. Osita C. Ezenwanebe<sup>1</sup>

*I told myself that I would go in search of a female Okorigwe (the hero of Umuga) because I was convinced she existed. If she did exist, then I must find her; I must excavate and bring her to the limelight like her male counterpart. But if indeed she didn't exist, then I would invent her – create her in my stories, in my writing (329).*

*Children of the Eagle* is the eighth major novel by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, in addition to her numerous critical and non-fictional works. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, a professor of English Literature, is an eminent scholar and a distinguished teacher who introduced, and still continues to sustain, gender studies both in her department and throughout the University in general. *Children of the Eagle* is the last of the three novels in the Umuga Saga; the other two are *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) and *House of Symbols* (2001).

The above extract from the novel summarises Ezeigbo's aim – a search for and a recreation of a female Okorigwe<sup>2</sup>, who signifies the heroic strength of women and a celebration of their indomitable spirit in the face of socio-cultural oppression. She achieves this aim by creating the story of a widow, Mrs. Okwara, nicknamed Eaglewoman, and her five proud daughters. Ogonna Okwara Nduka is a school teacher and a trader, while Nnenna Okwara Okoli is a university lecturer. Obioma Okwara Ebo is an evangelist, while Amara Okwara is a journalist, and Chiaku Okwara is a medical doctor.

The setting is her hometown, Umuga, in 1990. *Children of the Eagle* is a long novel of twenty-five chapters but the tripartite structural arrangement helps to hold the reader's attention to the end. *Children of the Eagle* is a novel of social criticism and of epic dimension in its treatment of social issues. The social issues tackled by Ezeigbo include the criticism of religion as a tool of exploitation (155-156), the pervasiveness of bribery and corruption, especially among civil servants (159ff), the practice of hagiography in the place of autobiography and biography among writers (167ff), the man-made barriers to academic climbing (203ff), communal conflicts in Umuga (252ff), and the horrifying effects of the Nigerian Civil War, especially on women (257ff). Prominent among the social issues recreated in the novel is the reality of the gender inequality and female oppression that exists in Nigerian society.

*Children of the Eagle* is a feminist novel. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo exposes the social conventions, cultural mores, and traditional practices that oppress and marginalise women, especially in the Eastern part of Nigeria, as well as celebrates their struggle for

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<sup>2</sup> Okorigwe is a legendary figure, an Igbo warrior and a symbol of bravery and courage which is culturally attributed only to men. By coining and using the expression "female Okorigwe", Akachi emphasises the fact that such attributes are not limited to men only. The term therefore refers to female legendary warriors and those who display great courage and bravery in the past.

freedom and survival. The community of Umuga, like other towns in Nigeria, is patriarchal; the social conventions, cultural mores, and traditional practices are organized in favour of men. Preference for male children, the fact that too much importance is attached to male children, the dehumanizing widowhood rites, the non-recognition of women's achievements, and incidents of rape and sexual harassment are all squarely addressed in the novel.

Umuga kinship structure is patrilineal and the continuity of the family lineage is through the male. Hence, the absence of a male child in the family of Josiah Obidiegwu Okwara (prior to the birth of Nkemdirim) is a warning of the extinction of the lineage, despite the presence of five diligent daughters. His brother, Reuben, tactically reminds him that he has no heir when he asks Osai to sell to him his plots of land in Enyimba City. The importance attached to the male is made more poignant in Igbo land (where Umuga is located) because of a land tenure system in which women are not allowed to inherit land. The reasoning behind this practice is that the female children soon get married, and it is an abomination for a woman to carry her father's wealth to her husband's house.

The death of Osai Okwara, the head of Okwara family, exposes the family to the greed and avarice of neighbours who capitalize on his absence in order to encroach on their land. For instance, it is only after his death that the sons of Umeaku try to reclaim by force a piece of land that their father sold to Osai to solve a pressing problem. Umeaku's "battalion of sons" is confident that there is 'nobody' in Okwara's family to challenge their action since the grown children are women and the only son born into the family now lives in far away London.

The settlement of the land dispute is compounded by the fact that Ogunano Ezeala, the highest decision-making body in the land, does not deal directly with women. When they finally come to demarcate the land, Pa Joel has to represent the Okwara family. It is then that the daughters of the Eagle realize that "it is viewed as a misfortune to have a family populated by daughters" (75).

The birth of a son, Nkemdirim, into the family by one of the daughters, Obioma, is represented as the birth of hope, of continuity. The joy that welcomes his birth is one that obliterates the immoral nature of his origin. The joy or sadness of the family hangs on him. The news of his accident, for example, leaves Eaglewoman temporarily dead (unconscious). Her 'death' symbolises the future of the family (extinction of the family lineage) should anything happen to Nkemdirim. It is the threat to his life that requires the offensive "nluikwa" tradition, a tradition which, according to pa Joel, demands that

*If Nkemdirim returns to his ancestors ... then Amara [one of the daughters] should remain at home to perpetuate [their] father's name by producing a son or sons to inherit his vast property and wealth in Umuga and other places (385).*

Umuga culture is one in which people are valued not for their achievements but for their gender. Though Nkemdirim is not seen in the novel, his overriding presence is felt from the beginning to the end.

The “over-valuing” of the male gender means an “under-valuing” of the female. The gender bias is apparent in the event at which Umuga honours her citizens through the granting of chieftaincy titles and other awards. Women’s contributions to the development of Umuga town are not recognised. Nnenne bemoans one such event where fifty citizens of Umuga are honoured by Eze-Oha II in partnership with the Umuga Progressive Union and not even one of the recipients is a woman. Gender inequality is also inherent in the treatment of divorcees and their daughters when compared with the treatment of men and their sons. The fear of social stigma makes Ogonna, Eaglewoman’s eldest daughter, stay in a bad marriage. The daughters of such women are no exception, either. “They say such girls cannot make happy homes” (126). This discriminating social attitude makes marriage a cage that traps and enslaves women while men are given license to be dilettantes.

Widowhood rites are another of the crimes against womanhood discussed in the novel. Eaglewoman narrates her own terrifying experiences of these rites after the death of her husband, Osai. There is a compulsory three-day ritual lament at cockcrow, two weeks onslaught of the *Umuada*’ (kindred sisters of the husband)<sup>3</sup> during which they are sumptuously fed amidst severe censorship, and a one-year mourning period during which she was confined to her home (160 – 62). Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo exposes the oppressive cultural traditions and social mores to the judgment of the audience. She portrays the degree of the inhumanity inherent in them by concentrating on the excruciating pain experienced by those at the receiving end of such cultural practices. The world of the novel is a world of don’ts for women.

Akachi’s criticism is a balanced one because it is directed at both men and women. Although she detests the patriarchal attitudes that oppress women, she does not condone some “matriarchal” attitudes by which women degrade themselves. *Children of the Eagle* is also, therefore, a criticism of abortion, the rejection of marriage and child-bearing, and the “herd mentality” in which woman bond together in uniform at formal and informal gatherings, seeking cheap recognition. While the novel sympathises with women as victims and prey in times of war and social unrest, it repudiates abortion as a self-inflicted degradation. The minute detailed description of the agony that characterizes Obioma’s near-abortion process is aimed at discouraging other teenagers from attempting it. The vicious raping of Obioma by the doctor during the abortion process can be seen as the degradation of a degraded woman. Consequently, her decision to give birth to her child instead of aborting it is hailed when this decision results in the birth of the only son in Okwara’s family. The changes called for by the novel are in both patriarchal and matriarchal attitudes.

*Children of the Eagle* is most importantly a novel of social reconstruction. The greatest achievement of the novel lies in the novelist’s ability to move beyond mere exposition of the social crimes against women to powerfully demonstrate through the lives of the main characters the ways out of such degradation. The five enviable daughters of Eaglewoman do not just sit down and bemoan the ignoble state of women in Umuga; rather they map and carry out strategies that change the state of affairs. For example, they do not merely bemoan the insult of Umeaku’s sons, nor are they discouraged by the fact that the highest decision-making body in the land will not deal

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<sup>3</sup> Umuada" literally refers to women born into a compound of an extended family. They exercised judicial powers in traditional Igbo society before the coming of the white man.

directly with women. Rather, they devise a way to reach them indirectly through the mail and the case is finally settled. Nnenna also takes a bold step to ensure that the deserving daughters of Umuga are accorded the same recognition as their men. The novel is highly instructive without being moralizing. It teaches women how to survive in a man's world while fighting for equity and justice.

For Akachi, the feminist struggle is not only external – against patriarchy – but also internal –working hard with a firm determination to succeed. It is a painstaking battle to prove one's ability, what Nnenna describes as “the struggle to be accepted, as a person with a right to be clever and be respected for having certain abilities” (330). Nnenna's academic excellence is based on her determination to prove her intelligence through hard work coupled with a blunt refusal to be frustrated by the menace of her male classmates and colleagues. The novel, therefore, extols the ideals of hard work, courage and determination in women, believing that with them, women can make it to the top of their careers in life.

The feminism of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is basically African – and hence liberal. It can, therefore, be referred to as “womanism” in order to differentiate it from the separatist nature of radical Western feminism. Akachi seeks a change within the larger framework of African culture. Radical feminists may hotly challenge her stance on some of the issues raised in the novel. Although the novelist repudiates the “multitudes of African customs that mortify the soul,” she also sees it as her duty to protect the aspects of the culture that make us African. Her feminism seems to be guided by the words of Eaglewoman when she says that “all that is wholesome in our culture should be protected and preserved” (319). This belief is shown in the character's demonstration of filial love – the cord of African communal life. The novel is also supportive of marriage and childbearing, although the right of individual choice is respected. Eaglewoman's objectification of a woman's private parts as a vessel of love and life is meant to buttress her point that “it is strange for a woman not to want a child” (44). The novel celebrates the bond of love and attachment between mother and child (as seen in that between Eaglewoman and her daughters), supports Ogonna's rejection of Nnenna's suggestion of divorce (instead devising a survival strategy), and tacitly dissociates itself from Amara's hatred for childbearing.

Another endearing aspect of the novel is the novelist's optimistic stance on issues concerning women, particularly in her treatment of mind-breaking gray issues. The optimism of Akachi Ezeigbo can be likened to that of the modern Russian dramatist, Antonin Checkov, whose characters assume a cheerful disposition in their confidence in a better tomorrow even in the face of current struggles against the seemingly unavoidable chaos of modern life. Like Checkov's characters, the daughters of Eaglewoman are confident that change will come no matter how long it takes. “I believe that tomorrow is greater than yesterday and today” (289), says Nnenna as she consoles her eldest sister.

*Children of the Eagle* as a literary art embodies beauty not only in its content but also in its form. All the elements of the novel are carefully selected and synthesised to achieve the novelist's main aim of recreating a female Okorigwe in a bid to create a society based on gender equity and justice. The main characters are all female: Eaglewoman and her five diligent daughters, who are learned, bold, assertive, courageous, and overflowing with warmth and love. The action of the novel is the story of their relationships with one another, and with others outside their family.

The language is simple and direct and is meant to ensure that the audience understands the important, urgent message so that they can act on it. The language is touching, carrying the message of the novel as smoothly into the heart of the reader in the same way that a river meanders through thorns and bushes into the deepest crevices of the mountains. The language is also rendered more pleasurable by the use of certain devices that evoke clear, distinct images. Prominent among the devices is the use of symbols. Akachi Adimroa-Ezeigbo is really in love with symbols. There is a pervasive use of the eagle as a symbol of strength - the kind of strength women need to withstand and overcome the cultural oppression and to reform the society. There are also the symbols of the wall gecko as the predator (man) and its prey at the victim (woman). The first and third person points of view are used. The first person point of view makes most of the incidents confessional and hence, authentic and captivating, as the reader follows the characters into the innermost part of their past and present lives.

The novel is not without fault. Its main weakness emanates from its epic nature. The issues covered are so vast that sometimes the story seems to ramble away from the focus of the novel. Some of the incidents even seem to assume a life of their own life. However, total disintegration is checked by the fact that the novel is cast in the form of an enquiry, a form of data collection, for the writing of a biography of the family. In the end, Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo succeeds in recreating a female Okorigwe in the lives of Eaglewoman and her daughters, who are set up as models for feminist struggle. The message is clear: let the eagle soar high, and her children higher still.