

Continuities in Female Social Learning in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *the Last of the Strong Ones*

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Abstract

*Within the last two to three decades, there has been an intense clamouring for women's emancipation. In this paper, we use deconstructionist criticism as theoretical fulcrum to critique the condemnation of modern decadence in the 21st century, which undermines the wholesome contribution of women to society. Through content analysis, the study adopts an interpretative qualitative methodology, drawing on tools of narrative, thematic and character analyses to deconstruct literary portrayals of gender roles and pedagogy in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Findings reveal that contemporary societies are grotesquely portrayed as characterised by painful cynicism, particularly among young females, who are disillusioned by stark realities and nostalgically yearn for a perfect past. This nostalgia inspires fiction that mourns the loss of Nigeria's innocence, specifically, the post-World War I and the Nigerian Civil War era. The paper argues for the adoption of progressive tutoring practices, offering holistic approach for the new generation that could serve as parameter for national progress and integrity. It further posits that Nigerian women should be circumspect of Western-world-feminist views and understand that, educating female children in the traditional African values is essential for a sustainable socio-political and socio-economic uplift of society. It surmises that effective training yields positive consequences, particularly in terms of the values a woman acquires and transmits to her family and society at large.*

Keywords: Deconstruction, Female resourcefulness, Literacy in traditional Nigerian society, Modernity.

Introduction

The notion of female emancipation as trending feature of modernity in recent times has undermined the positive values of the traditional female upbringing, which had been the bedrock of the so-called primitive societies. Chesaina (2013, p. 222) argues that East African women are greatly indebted to their traditional fore-mothers who borrowed heavily from traditional rhythms of women's songs in their upbringing. Emenyonu (2004, p. 427), affirms that during the formative years, mothers told children "folktales in which community values were explicitly extolled." The implications of the above critics' assertions are that traditional women have been known as the creators and the custodians of storytelling and folktales, which have been the storehouses of culture and tradition of the African people. They further argue that traditional mentoring approaches emphasised rote learning and memorisation, that yield positive outcomes.

In pre-colonial Africa, female upbringing encompassed economic, socio-political, moral, and religious education, empowering her future mother, to navigate her surroundings. Nevertheless, many parents especially conservative mothers prioritise maintaining rigorous literacy standards through testing, which supports traditional education approaches. According to D'Almeida (1994, p.1), colonialism and African traditions are the primary factors influencing women's discourse. D'Almeida argues that African women emerged from a patriarchal system, where they are accorded inferior status, undermining their agency. The critic stresses that literature is significant in empowering women through self-expression, self-definition, self-discovery, and ultimately showcasing their value and contribution. Driver (1982, p. 203) opines that women should use:

Literature as means of giving autonomous value to women's experiences by helping women perceive the political, economic, and social oppression to which women were subjugated, as well as attempts to bring about new standards against which women would be measured and of dispensing with the old standards.

By Driver's assessment, women's literature is a parameter through which women's ideas; norms, thoughts, experiences, grievances, and achievements are examined, creatively and politically. Originally, the formation of norms in most African societies was based on a tested morally sound value system developed over the years. Ogbomo (2005, p. 368), informs that women in pre-colonial Africa played significant economic roles within their societies, especially as traders their

involvement in such economic enterprises meant they could accumulate wealth and establish a notable degree of independence for themselves. Since wealth and economic independence guarantee increased socio-political status, women were quick to exploit such avenues of advancement.

The essence of this study is to examine the continuities in female social learning in the era preceding Western educational influences. It argues that female children receive comprehensive training from their parents, aligning with accepted standards in both traditional and contemporary cultures. In addition, the article explores parental attitudes towards the birth of children, highlighting the diverse perspectives that exist. It identifies key aspects of these dynamics that remain relevant to Nigerian's progress, integrity and cohesion in contemporary times. The study is prompted towards continuing the course of feminist ideology of empowering female children in conduct and vocational training to make them critical voices in national development. To do the foregoing, Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* are used to establish the importance of inculcating societal-uplifting values in female children in contemporary society.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Deconstruction theory, enunciated by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s, became a significant movement in literary studies during the 1970s. Since then, proponents of deconstructive criticism have continued to misrepresent the deconstruction approach as merely a shallow examination of "word-play" (Bennett & Royle, 2016, p. 17), which hinders literary appreciation of literature and the reader's ability to interpret a piece of writing meaningfully. As a philosophical approach to textual appraisal, deconstruction, according to Jacques Derrida (1994, p. 139), is concerned with the idea that "everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her 'ghosts' [variable prognosis of meaning and message of the critical works as understood by the reader]; to think about presence (absence) as necessarily haunted, about meaning as specialized."

Derrida suggests that deconstruction occupies a space between two possibilities – the reader and engaging in multiple, dynamic readings, where the reader shapes the text and the text shapes the reader. The premise implies that reading is essentially meaningless unless the reader personally engages with the material. Derrida uses language to illustrate a scenario where every reading and text is inherently subjective and content dependent. Derrida's deployment of language is not new to such probing.

This is because language, according to Dobie (2009, p. 151), “had been viewed as a transparent medium through which reality could be set down accurately and shaped into aesthetic form.” What exactly does this complexity of representing the deconstruction theory of reading posit? Bennett and Royle (2016, p. 16) answer the question by explaining that deconstruction highlights the dual nature of reading, requiring both a ‘faithful’ understanding and ‘individual response.’ The implication of such claim is that reading is a personal responsibility, unique to each individual, and their duty to accomplish. This can be further interpreted to mean that reading is inherently personal. Reading being compatible with broader systems of meaning defined by the text. In other words, a text does not require a specific reader to fulfil its purpose within its intended context. Similarly, the text’s impact remains unaffected by the reader’s identity. Deconstruction is a method that enables critical examination of the underlying assumptions governing language and reasoning.

Derrida’s concept of “difference” in reading pieces reflects the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory which explores the subjective relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” object (de Saussure 1974, p. 24). According to Saussure’s opinion, ‘words’ were not the things they represented, as there is no natural, rational or divine connection between the word and its represented; representation, instead a word functions as ‘signifier’ that represents the ‘signified’ object. Derrida extends his argument beyond de Saussure by positing that, all language is governed by the principle which he refers to as: ‘difference’; which in French is “a pun combining the senses of deferral differentiation” (Derrida 1981, p. 19). Derrida suggests is that words lack direct presence, meaning, words do not always have direct connection to the objects they symbolise, instead, their meaning is determined by the difference between words within the linguistic system. Dobie (2009, p.152) extends this position by arguing that finding meaning requires identifying words that corresponds to observed objects and experiences. Literature is considered mimetic, as it presents and reflects truths about life, society and the human condition. As literary texts represent life in a significantly influential way, they are considered to have a life that warrants revelation and analysis. Deconstruction is a radically innovative approach that subverts and challenges traditional notions of language and meaning.

Although deconstruction is not widely recognised as a fully developed critical technique, literary school, or an ideology, its founder, Jacque Derrida, describes it as a strategic approach offering “rules for close reading of materials to bring about its interpretation, and writing” (Derrida 1998, p. 25). Deconstruction aims to uncover and

validate the multiple universes of meanings within a literary text. This implies that the meaning and interpretation given to a text is always temporary, not unified, stable, or unchanging. According to Dobie (2009, p. 150), deconstruction's revolutionary nature lies in its challenge to Western civilisation's understanding of the world, a tradition tracing back to Plato. Specifically, deconstruction targets the principles underlying Western thought truth and meaning, established since the 17th century through the philosophical works of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) who applied scientific rationalism to philosophy. Descartes refuses to accept any truth without sufficient evidence, insisting on rigorous foundation for belief. Descartes began with the one thing he knew with certainty; his, consciousness, which demonstrates his existence. Descartes inferred that the mind, untainted by external influences, operates independently of the body. This implies that, it is only when uncontaminated mind operates independently of emotions that the mental output is credible of: "I think, (*Cogito*), therefore, I am or exist." Decartes' elucidation of (*Cogito ergo sum*) (Koyre, 1976, p. 3).

Consequently, this singular certainty serves as the foundation from which all other knowledge can be derived. The Cartesian philosophical epoch, emerged in the 17th century, prioritizing reason over imagination, passion, and superstition to uncover, truth in the realistic world, leaving an enduring impact. Consequently, Cartesian thought has profoundly influenced writers, artists, humanists and theorists up to 21st century empowering them with the conviction to shape a better world. Deconstruction's frequent misconceptions can be attributed to the complex of influential critics like Luce Irigaray (1985), Geoffery Hartman (1981), Jacques Derrida (1983), among others. Additionally, misunderstandings arise from interpretations by those who oversimplify these thinkers' works as esoteric. These thinkers often employed unconventional organisational structures and innovative language; challenging conventional the understanding and acceptability. Despite the challenges of engaging with deconstruction, Tyson (2006, p. 249) argues that deconstruction offers significant benefits. Primarily, deconstruction enhances reader's critical thinking skills, enabling them to recognise how individual experiences are shaped by implicit ideologies embedded language. Tyson concludes that deconstruction's benefits make it a valuable tool for complementing other critical theories such as – Structuralism, Feminism and Marxism, which aim to expose and challenge oppressive ideologies that shape our understanding.

"Deconstruction" as portrayed by Goring, Hawthorn and Mitchell (2013, p. 171), is described as a movement rather than a school, and it rests upon the inference, as

Culler (1988, p. 20), posits, that, “the hierarchical oppositions of Western metaphysics are themselves construction of ‘ideological’ impositions.” As a concept, Goring et al observe that deconstruction undermines Western metaphysics by unsettling the hierarchical oppositions and by presenting them as ‘logocentric’ dependence upon a ‘centre or presence’. It reflects the idealist yearning to control the signifiers’ subject to some ‘extra-systemic ‘transcendental signified’ (Goring et al., 2013, p. 171). To understand deconstruction’s significance in revealing ideological influences on daily life and personal experience, it is essential to reconsider deconstruction’s perspective on language. This aligns with Jacques Derrida’s (1976, p.156) position that “language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without being aware of them.”

A close examination of language’s operation reveals that our everyday interactions and rituals belie the notion that language is by nature a reliable and stable element for communicating feelings, wishes and thoughts. Since deconstruction theory is centred on the belief that language is, as Tyson (2006, p. 250) succinctly captures, “much more slippery and ambiguous than we realize,” deconstruction focuses on the default ambiguity and obscurity of sentences, revealing that even seemingly clear and explicit texts can harbour multiple interpretations on two levels – literally and critical/literary. Evidently, deconstruction has a fundamental implication for the interpretation of literary texts that meaning is not fixed or definitive. Consequently, textual interpretation of a text can never achieve a complete or ultimate meaning. In consonance with reading and meaning of text, Derrida claims that “These texts are not to be read according to a hermeneutical or exegetical method which would seek out a finished signified beneath a textual surface. For him, reading is transformational (Derrida 1981, p. 63). This implies that critical reading becomes an ongoing process, constantly unfolding and evolving, much like an uncharted river, whose course and destination remain unknown. Having established that deconstruction as literary theory that acknowledges the complexities of meaning in literature and in real life, it is crucial to examine how Nigerian creative writers have employed the deconstructionist principles to promote the continuities of female social learning and values in the works of Chinua Achebe and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo.

Synopses of Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*

Arrow of God was published in 1964. It is Chinua Achebe's second novel. The novel captures the practices of Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu at the onset of the colonial intervention in the Igbo community in Eastern part of Nigeria. The novel investigates the conflicts existing between the Igbo communities and the colonial lords. Achebe extrapolates that the advent of the European offset both traditional, political, and spiritual powers of the deities, communities, as well as the individuals in Igboland. The novel brings to fore the sterling contributions of women towards the upbringing of their female children. For instance, Matefi is saddled with the task of preparing a meal for his in-law during a reconciliation visit, underpinning the women's substantial domestic responsibilities (Achebe, 1964, pp. 14, 62). Ulu's chief priest - Ezeulu- ends in tragedy because of his pride. He bluntly refuses to conduct the new yam festival for his community because of his anger, on the fact that when Winter Bottom incarcerated him, Ezeulu, his people refused to bail him from the white man's prison on the grounds that he sent his son, Oduche to the white man, to represent him, his culture, and his people. More so, Ezeulu refers to Winter Bottom as his friend.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo wrote *The Last of the Strong Ones* as a talking-back paradigm to the patriarchal institutions in Nigeria, that have a jokey way of insulting women at all cost. It is an historical account of the European imperialism into Igboland. The narrative features the lives of four major women activists - Ejimnaka, Chimeme, Chibuka, and Onyekozuru, whom through their eyes that all the patriarchal injustices are exposed. Adimora-Ezeigbo strongly advocates that Nigerian women are the custodians of their traditional norms and values, and so, they should put on strong resistance to rebel against all forms of patriarchal afflictions. The novelist highlights that when the colonial imperialists (Kosiri), arrested all strong men in Umuga and imprisoned them, that it was the collective resistance of women that kept the society and even employed the service of a letter-writer, from the neighbouring village to send a letter to Kosiri, to release their men from his prison. Adimora-Ezeigbo employs the oral traditions of storytelling and myth to portray the rich traditions of the Igbo culture in particular, and Nigeria generally. The novelist deploys Womanism - the African version of feminism, to project the resilient of the African women.

The Girl-Child and African Worldview: A Conceptual Understanding

In certain quarters of pre-colonial society, the birth of a female child was joyously celebrated, especially if she was the first born, opening her parent's wombs. The celebration signified blessings, wealth, peace, good fortune, and, marriage stability for the family. More so, the girl-child held significant social and economic value, fostering extended family relationships through sons-in-law. This is evident in

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958, p. 45) thus: "...'Yes', replied Obierika. My daughter's suitor is coming today and I hope we will chinch the matter of the bride-price. I want you to be there." The birth of female children would, of course, provide landed property and other forms of wealth. Again, the girl-child would expand her husband's family, contribute to farming and increase descendants. Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964, p. 13) posits "... Edogo, instead of working for me tomorrow take your brothers and the women to build the barn" The elaborate celebration(s) surrounding the arrival of female child often sparked envy in, families with only male children.

The female child also enhances her father's prestige and integrity in the society. A well-grounded girl was typically sought after as a bride by traditional rulers, chiefs and other prominent figures, thereby bringing recognition and honour to her parents most especially the father. Achebe captures the wealth of a girl-child as a wife: They were just in time to see the arrival of the five wives of Nwaka and the big stir they caused. Each of them wore not anklets but two enormous rollers of ivory reaching, from the ankle almost to the knee. Their walk was perforce slow and deliberate, like walk of an Ijele mask lifting and lowering each foot with weighty ceremony. On top of all this the women were clad in many coloured velvets (Achebe, 1964, p. 68). In traditional African setting, the female child was regarded as a prospective mother, home-maker, a virtuous wife who would inculcate disciplines, admirable and desired qualities, in her future children. In consonance with the unique roles of the girl-child in both in pre-colonial (traditional), and contemporary societies, Sargent (2009, p. 39) admits that "women play particularly important roles in both bearing the future citizens of the nation and in socializing those future citizens." The female child is seen as a role model in the family, setting desirable qualities for both other female and male children to follow. To confirm this, Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996, p.66) indicates that Chieme's birth as the first female child after two boys, was welcomed with great joy by her parents.

To make these expectations and roles realistic, the girls underwent special informal training guided by their mother from infancy through adolescence. They were constantly with their mothers in the kitchen, learning essential skills like cooking, washing, and various trade, including pot-making, palm-oil production, palm kernel extraction. The female child was taught how to take care of everybody in her family, as well as being trained on shouldering responsibilities, including fetching water and firewood. Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel* (1974, p.24) illustrates this philosophy through the girls in Mazi Laza's family, who embody it in their daily

lives. Their chores included carrying harvested yams, fetching firewood and water, cooking and sweeping and compound maintenance. No consideration was given to age or innocence the girls were expected from work. The girl-child also learned to build cooking fires, sweep, and maintain a tidy compound. Meanwhile, as they learn, the older females were married off, and the family continued to grow.

In traditional African society, the girl-child held significant value. During the advent of Western education and colonialism, many African parents hesitated to send their daughters mission schools, whereas their sons attended in large numbers. This was done so sons could serve as their “eyes within these institutions. In Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1964, pp.45-46), Ezeulu advises his son Oduche to return home if he finds nothing valuable, but to bring back beneficial knowledge. The reluctance to send female children to school did not stem from hatred or dislike. Rather, parents sought to protect their daughters’ morals from Western influence. Valued as precious gems, girls were expected to marry and raised future leaders and citizens. Consequently, the potential strength, and intelligence of female children remained largely unrecognised. Furthermore, some parents displayed resentment towards less capable sons, especially when compared to their more intelligent and resourceful daughters. This sentiment is echoed in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Okonkwo, the protagonist, frequently expresses fondness for his daughter – Ezinma who reminds him of her mother, a former village beauty (Achebe, 1958, p. 32). Again, at another time, the father laments “...she should have been a boy, he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter”. (Achebe, 1958, p.44).

Traditionally, fathers prioritize their son’s behaviour, recognising their role in carrying on the family name. Consequently, daughters were denied access to formal – /Western education, perpetuating parental economic interests. However, modern women writers now fervently, advocate for Western education and socialisation to empower girls and restore their diminished rights and dignity. This shift is echoed by organisations like UNICEF depicts. Education is of the most critical areas of empowerment for women, ... it is also an area that offers some of the clearest examples of discrimination women suffer... Offering girls basic education is one sure way of giving them much greater power – of enabling them to make genuine choices over the kinds of lives they wish to lead. Today, many women in professional roles, blurring the lines between traditional feminine than masculine traits. In academia, science, and business, women have consistently outperformed men across all educational levels and fields (Hornig, 1987). It is inspiring to encounter women who embody complete

feminine development excelling as wives, mothers, home managers, and cultural contributors.

As Riviere (2000, p. 131) claims, women do not “lack feminine development. They are excellent wives/ mothers, capable home managers; that maintain social life and assist culture; they do not lack ‘feminine interest’.” For instance, despite their busy schedules, women prioritise their personal appearance and take resourcefulness and industry seriously. This multifaceted approach to life earns women success, respect, and influence within their communities. To buttress this, Sargent (2009, p. 39) claims that “... they (women) are likely to give their children their first sense of the nation to which they belong and their future role in it. Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Children of the Eagle*, for example, extols the value(s) of a woman thus: woman is important to God, and to man... women are not a minority. It is necessary that they wake to their responsibility for the good of humanity. Women have a spiritual role to play in salvaging humankind... Woman needs to occupy the rightful place God reserved for her: beside man, not behind or before (Adimora-Ezeigbo 2002, p. 115).

Female children often emulate their mothers’ attributes and values. The intimate affectionate relationships they observe between their parents shape their expectations for future partnership with their husbands. In traditional African cultures, sensitive topics like sexuality are handled discreetly, unlike the open discussions promoted by some feminist movements. Buchi Emecheta claims that the secrecy surrounding sex in African societies thus: I know this is a situation which our western sisters will find difficult to understand. Sex is important to us. But we do not make it the centre of our being, as women do (in the western world) ... sex is part of life. It is not the life (Emecheta, 2007, p. 554). In traditional African societies female children take pride in their domestic skills, unlike modern feminists who clamour for equal rights with men their traditional upbringing remains steadfast despite modern influences. These women achieve marked success in their professions throughout their lives. Sargent (2009, p. 39) while considering what is likely to be the outcome if women’s values/virtues are peradventure rejected by the society, states that “in fact, if women do not identify with the nation, their children are less likely to do.” Female children have high degree of adaptation to reality and they often manage to sustain good and appropriate relationship with almost everyone with whom they come in contact with. This contributes to national progress and integration as women play crucial roles in resolving disputes and promoting understanding among diverse groups, from local to federal levels.

Traditional African society's approach to female literacy would have arguably been universally admired today, but pervasive male dominance led women to realise that their lives were controlled by men. Within marriage institutions, women are governed by rules created by men, ostensibly for the benefit of all. Women are noticeably absent from decision making processes. According to Riviere (2000), the female child exhibits profound differences in intelligence, range of activities, achievement levels, and depth of understanding possible to her (Riviere, 2000, pp. 130-131). However, the narrative has shifted due to feminist movements which have globally highlighted the significance of women's contributions, particularly in nation building. Moreover, the phallogocentric societies often hold women in high esteem. Women's contribution to both traditional and modern societies are invaluable: mothers shape their children's behavioural pattern and also prepares them for the future and wield significant influence both domestically, and publicly by fulfilling roles distinct from those of men. By considering the significance that comes from the challenges mothers face, Theodore Roosevelt, 26th President of the United States of America (USA) posits that: It is the tasks connected with the home that are the fundamental tasks of humanity... If the mother does not do her duty, there will either be no next generation, or a next generation that is worse than none at all (*Awake!*, 2005, p. 3).

A Cross Examination of Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*

The diverse upbringing of female children highlights the unique role each mother plays in managing her domestic responsibilities, and caring for family members. The issue of female participation and involvement in decision-making, particularly in political and social matters is not unique to the modern feminist movement. It has a long history in the traditional Nigerian (African) society. During British colonisation, which introduced indirect rule and warrant chiefs, women witnessed some African men collaborating with colonial powers betraying their people.

In *Arrow of God* (1964) Achebe portrays women as the backbone of Nigerian families. Ezeulu's wives embody this labouring year-round to provide for their husband, children, and step-children, while also hosting visitors (Achebe, 1964, pp. 9-10). Despite Ezeulu's lack of financial support, except for occasional festival yams, the women strive to sustain their families. Achebe illustrates this disparity when Ezeulu tasks Matefi with preparing a meal for his in-law during a reconciliation visit, underpinning the women's substantial domestic responsibilities (Achebe, 1964, pp. 14, 62). In the traditional Nigerian societies, female literacy played a vital role in

ensuring women's economic stability. Without these values, women risked poverty and dependence on their husbands' aprons. Cases like Aziagba', who was not formally married, and Chieme's who was divorced due to barrenness, show the importance of women's financial autonomy (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, pp. 33, 79-85). Achebe's *Arrow of God* also illuminates the lioness in a woman when through Akueke's hard work, she is able to provide for her child and herself for one year in solitary condition when her husband battered her, ill-treated and sent her home to her father (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 11).

Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), exemplifies role(s) in instigating resistance, with key activists - Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka ("Oluda" group). They unite to remove Okwara, a warrant chief who disobeyed colonial authorities ("Kosiri") and undermined the "Obuofo"- council committee's reforms aimed at improving Umuga. Adimora-Ezeigbo emphasises this role to challenge the notion that patriarchal African/Nigerian societies exclusively recognise, masculine voices in decision making. This portrayal raises awareness about women's consciousness of their societal politics and themselves as political entities within traditional culture. The novelist commends the women of Umuga for their commitment, by contrasting them with men like Uzuegbu and Onyirioha, who consorted "with Kosiri to betray Umuga to the Strangers" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 13). This, of course, can be readily accepted as the truth when Ejimnaka affirms that "it is the men who are afraid, not the women" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 16). This underscores the boldness and daring nature of women in traditional Nigerian societies, arguably surpassing that of men.

Rice and Waugh (1996, p.123) underscore that deconstruction uses the term 'subject' instead of 'self' or 'individual' to challenge the assumption that the human beings are fully, formed before entering the symbolic order of language. In humanism, each individual possesses unique subjectivity, yet, simultaneously shares a universal human nature, highlighting the complex interplay between individuality and shared humanity. This blending of individuality and shared humanity revolves around the concept of a sovereign self, whose critical core transcends the external influences of environment and social conditioning (Ihidero, 2020, p.80). Deconstruction interrogates this man-dominated worldview, by arguing that the subject, with its unique subjectivity, is constructed through language and discourse, resulting in a fragmented and fluid identity (Tyson, 2006, p. 252). Language is an importance element in the theory of deconstruction, as it is through language that people enter the symbolic order and achieve full

subjectivity (Derrida, 1981, p. 21). The reason Nigerian creative writers have employed language and meaning, to upturn the symbolic orders, empowering women the opportunity to exhibit their civic responsibilities by enlightening the world of their major contributions to showcase their civic responsibilities and contribute to human development. From a deconstructionist's viewpoint, repositioning the female subject in the symbolic order is achieved through language and meaning, thereby bringing women to the forefront.

Traditional Nigerian societies emphasise holistic literacy for female children, encompassing economic, social, religious and even domestic aspects where mothers teach her daughters self-will, strength and management skills to care for younger siblings. Economically, mothers instil in girls the importance of self-sufficiency, teaching them that, their ability to provide for themselves and others depends on their individual productivity. Thus, traditional settings encourage girls to participate in various economic activities alongside their mothers, such as – mat-making, palm-kernel processing, large scale palm oil production, farming, water fetching, and more. Chieme recounts that by age ten, she was already responsible for fetching water from Agwazi and Obizi streams, feeding the goats, and gathering firewood from the surrounding forests. Besides, as a female child, Chieme was tasked plastering mud walls with water, red earth and banana leaves (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 66). Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, portrays also instances of such traditional values being inculcated in the female children. Aziagba, Ejimnaka's first daughter, wakes up early to fetch water from the stream despite being a mother of three children (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 5). However, Chieme's two nieces also participate in fetching water from the stream for their aunt (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 64). In Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964), women also participate in daily chores fetching water from Nwangene stream, often rising early (Achebe, 1964, p. 7). A closer examination of modern society reveals a lack of these qualities in young girls. A typical modern woman opts to hire help, allowing their daughters to indulge in leisure activities, such as watching films or grooming, rather than contributing to household chores.

Fetching water or firewood once common chores for girls, are now rare practices in modern or civilised societies. Many female children are pampered by hired help, employed by their fathers to handle all domestic chores. The pressing concern is: without these fundamental values (e.g household chores, child-care), what does the future hold for women in terms of contributing to national integrity? Will future women rely solely on men to handle domestics or economic responsibilities traditionally associated with women? A mother serves as the primary caregiver,

responsible for her for child's health, literacy, intellectual development, character formation, and emotional well-being. As a child primary educator, a mother faces the challenge of guiding her children through their critical, formative years. The Regional Summit on Children's Rights in 1997 at Burkina Faso proclaims that "when it comes to stimulating a child's intelligence and curiosity, as well as developing his/her creativity, a mother's role is vital." In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Ejimnaka is an industrious woman who specialises in the trade of weaving mats for sale as well as engaging herself in some more petty trading, such that in the dark days when things are not going smoothly, she supports Obiatu her husband. She asserts that:

... Obiatu almost lost his life in the clash... He lost (all) his money as well. Soon enough, the guild had need of the money, but Obiatu could not produce it, he was eaten up with worry. And the, days that followed were dark and ominous. We tried discreetly to raise money. I gave him all my savings, and even my capital... it was a long time before my business flourished again. (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 33)

Aziagba on the other hand manages and supplies for her three children by cracking palm kernels (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 19). Similarly, in Laye (1954), the author underscores the importance of women in African society, showcasing their potential and deserving respect. Laye's mother exemplifies the significance, embodying supernatural influence, moral values, and domestic expertise. She shares equal authority with Laye's father, managing the household with autonomy and ensuring its smooth operation. This depiction of African women as spiritually and morally superior, by Laye, contradicts the prevalent narrative of subservience, humility and docility that characterised Africa in the 1960s. Laye, reflecting on his mother, offers the following:

In our country, the woman's role is one of fundamental independence, she has great personal pride. We despise only those who allow themselves to be despised; and our woman very seldom give cause for that my father would never have dreamed of despising anyone list of all my mother. He had the greatest respect for her and so did our friend and neighbour that was due, I am sure my mother's character, which was impressive; it was due also to the strange powers she possessed. (Laye, 1954, pp. 57- 58)

In the traditional Nigerian society, women (mothers) bear the responsibilities of providing, feeding, and caring for their families in all ramification. Most often, men remain less involved disregarding their contributions to household upkeep. In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Chieme criticises her father's irresponsibility, despite the fact that he was working as a sawyer in Igbedu Land. In-fact at the end, Chieme wonders how her industrious and famous rich grandparents – Nlebedum and Nnuola could beget sons like her "Lazy and irresponsible father and Okezie, his hard-drinking and pleasure-loving brother" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, pp. 67-71).

In the traditional society, mothers prioritise providing their daughters with comprehensive training. This instruction aims to equip them to set positive example for younger siblings. Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* portrays the validity of this notion through Onyekozuru's accounts. As the eldest of six children, Onyekozuru recounts her strict upbringing, designed to enable set a good example for her three sisters and two brothers. (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 38). Besides, every female child is a prospective good cook, because she learns it from her mother, Onyekozuru declares: "My mother... was an excellent cook and made mouth-watering snacks like Ogbara oti, bean cake, fried corn and roast breadfruit. No child came to her hut without enjoying her liberality. She was a generous woman. She taught me how to cook (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 38). This eventually enables her, (Onyekozuru), to prepare delicious meals for her husband when she gets married (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 40). As a hardworking child, she has no problem in coping with her marriage because she is already used to that kind of upbringing. She states; "I was brought up to work hard and so I lack nothing" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 40).

Chieme is also another character who acknowledges her mother's major contribution as being a good one. She succinctly declares: "My mother played a major role in that she taught me how to cook and take care of the house, how to look after babies and livestock..." (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 66). Adimora-Ezeigbo emphasises the importance of African mothers providing in their daughters with a well-rounded upbringing, including literacy and life skills, to prepare them for future family responsibilities. Chibuka supports this notion, quoting mothers who teach their children essential skills: "...her children- how to cook and take care of little children" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 92). Notably, even in affluent households like Igwe Anoka's, where slaves and servants handle domestic chores, mothers ensured teaching their daughters proper home management. Igwe's

daughters are expected to marry and start their families, and their mothers ensure they are adequately prepared for these roles (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 92).

In the Nigerian societies, a good mother with positive attributes is expected to teach her daughter perseverance and endurance, particularly in the face of challenges specific women in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Onyekozuru's experience illustrates this lesson, after her husband's death, Onyekozuru finds love again with Obiatu, cherishing relationship for its emotional and sensual fulfillment (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 50). Consequently, Obiatu's sudden decision to marry Ejimnaka, recognising Onyekozuru's pain, offers wise counsel: "Forget about Obiatu, pick up your life where you dropped it. Do not also hunger after what you cannot have, or it will break your spirit and dry her bones" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 52). Such courageous advice aims to teach the female child a valuable lesson: to recognise what is not hers and choose to move on. Life is a mix of sweet and bitter experiences, but painful encounters should not lead to despair or contemplation of harming oneself. Instead, they should fuel resilience and inspire women agency to forge ahead, and establish unexpected friendship with those who may have caused them heart break.

Chieme's experiences show her mother-in-law, Ugochi's, supportive role. Ugochi encourages Chieme not to give up hope of having children, citing the absence of barrenness in her lineage. She goes further to consult a traditional healer ("dibia") who would prepare fertility medicine for Chieme (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 74). Moreover, by Chieme taking such step portrays that an African woman is the one that invariably suffers the pain or shame associated with barrenness; even when most times the man- husband- would have suffered from inherent low sperm count. The African societies are still faking ignorance of this fact even in the 21st century men where men out-rightly accuse women of barrenness. A typical example is buttressed in Abi Dare's novel: *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020), from where in the eyes of an illiterate Nigerian girl from a village setting in Ikate. She is asking to know why Ms Tia should be the person who suffer from the wickedness of both her mother-in-law, and the so-called church, in the manner of a psychiatric centre. At the place, Ms Tia is beaten because her mother-in-law has painted her as barren: "the evil of childlessness has been chased out. praise be to the living him" (Dare, p. 265). Abi Dare ignites Adunni's anger and agitation for female uprising against patriarchal injustices, and against the female -folks. Ms Tia confesses to her: ...He cannot get me pregnant... His mother didn't know. He didn't tell anyone. Ken is infertile, unable

to - He said because we'd briefly discussed not having kids, he didn't think he needed to tell me ... (Dare, p. 271).

If, Ms Tia, Adunni reflects, has already known that Ken, her husband has low sperm count, and he is not fertile enough to raised children: Why did she not shout out? Why should she allow a problem that is not originally hers, to make patriarchy bring so many traumatising conditions – psychologically, physically, and otherwise upon her? After all, if she were the one, Ken, the man cum husband/patriarchy, would not have taken it with levity. The agony, trauma, and pains of such unjust beatings, which Ms Tia suffered through the wicked things those women are doing in the name of church; provokes Adunni so much that she reasons beyond the ordinary illiterate girl, serving as a house-help to Big Mummy. Adunni vows to avenge the injustices committed against Ms Tia. In African cultures it is a common practice that women sometimes proffer assistance to their fellow woman in times of trials and difficulties. But Ms Tia's mother-in-law is working on the villain perspective connoting: "secret, hidden, dark ...deadly, devouring... poisonous, inescapable fate attributes" (Omoera and Ibanga 2021, p. 8). In the traditional settings, mothers prioritise their husband's and children's well-being and dislike seeing their children idle. Adimora-Ezeigbo illustrates through Chieme's recollection of her mother's busy routine. Amidst her tasks, Chieme's mother would regularly look up and scold any idle child, emphasising that "only the ill and the dead" can afford idleness (Adimora-Ezeigbo 1996, p. 67).

A close examination of modern Nigerian society depicts a decline in valuable training for female children. Instead of learning domestic skills, many young girls spend their time watching films, using smart phones, and engaging with other technological gadgets. Even feminist mothers who advocate for male participation in domestic chores, struggle to encourage their daughters to resist unhealthy practices. As a result, many young women enter marriages lacking a sense of duty, responsibility, and commitment to their children, husbands, and institution of marriages. The trend of career mothers hiring house-maids to handle childcare duties raises concerns about national integrity. Where do modern mothers and their children fit into this picture? Traditional values instilled in female children are crucial for a nation's progress, as women play a vital role in building strong families. As primary caregivers, women shape human development and facilitate actions. This affirms what writers of "The challenges Mothers Face" in *Awake!* (2005, p. 3) state: ... A child's first words and its pattern of speech are usually learned from its mother... The mother generally spends more time with the children

each day than her mate, so she may be their chief teacher as well as principal disciplinarian.

In traditional settings, barrenness is met with sorrow and rejection from families. However, Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) promotes resilience and empowerment of women facing this challenge. When Chieme's husband, Iwuchukwu, divorces her due to infertility, (Adimora-Ezeigbo 1996, p. 77), her world seems shattered. Yet, Chieme's industrious woman nature and determination propel her forward. She channels her energy into activist works, finding solace in these pursuits. With unwavering resolve, Chieme sets out to become: "one of the best funeral artistes in the land of Igbo and Oru" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 83), transforming her pains into purpose. A woman's unwavering determination is essential towards a progressive national progress and integrity. To achieve this, women must refuse to let adversity define them. Instead, they should harness their creativity, living fulfilling lives and contributing to the nation's social and economic growth. A truly empowered woman recognises that her strength and reputation do not depend on her relationship with a man. She boldly confronts challenges, grasping life's opportunities with confidence, such triumph makes her an inspiration, cementing her status in the contemporary societies.

Arguably, good teachers are comparable to good mothers who skilfully cope with the specific demands of instruction (Ericksen, 1985), but they also possess a fund of knowledge about what they are doing. In agreement with the notion above, Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, points out a particular instance where Chibuka's mother decides that the affluent modern kind of training (fearless in speech, loud in laughter, looking people direct in the eyes, listening to and enjoying conversation), which Eyiuche, Chibuka's aunt had given during those childhood years she lived with her in the wealthy Igwe Anoku in Agbaja town, is not corresponding with the type of traditional teaching, she would want her daughter to receive; she embarks on a mission to retrain her to reverse the "damage Eyiuche had done by raising (her) like a wealthy man's daughter" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 96). Again, her mother informs her not to pay too much attention to adorning her body with "uri" and "uhie", but to conduct herself like a well – brought up maiden.

Furthermore, Chibuka is made to work on the farm, to go to market with her mother and to help her in the trade of palm oil (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, pp. 93-94). The

essence of such reformation of character is for her to be industrious, so as to be self-reliant in adult life. Of course this education works positively in her when she finally gets married as she states that: “as the number of my children increased, I worked harder at my trade so that I could take care of them and myself” (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 100). Every female child possesses inherent of goodness and virtue, which blossoms as she matures. She becomes a beacon of joy, consolation, hope, encouragement to those around her. Adimora-Ezeigbo illustrates this in the life of Chibuka who experienced no joy/happiness both from when she was living with her parents and in her marriage to Iheme. Consequently, a pivotal moment brings profound change: the marriage of her first son Nnatu to Adaobi, Igwe Anoka’s daughter (Chibuka had lived with her aunt, Eyiuche, Igwe’s daughter-in-law for ten years, forming a deep connection. Reflecting on this new family bond, Chibuka confesses:

My son’s marriage changed my life and I became happier than I had ever been. Adaobi was a good wife and did everything to make her marriage succeed... She took over most of the cooking so that I gave more time to my trade. An intelligent woman, she was quick to notice the unhappiness in my marriage. She tried to make me happy and to anticipate my needs... She brought with her the zest for living and the cultivation of the simple joys of life... Ada-obi revived in my feelings which my parents had suppressed and Iheme had trampled upon. I was surprised that at my age I could respond so easily and whole heartedly to a mere child of eighteen years. (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 103)

A nation’s progress hinges significantly on the contributions of virtuous women in key areas of national development: social, economic, political, and religious. The involvement of such women enforce hope for national integrity, as their positive attributes inspire and radiate to everyone. In consonance with this, Ericksen’s (1985, p. 5) notion about good teachers who “select and organize worthwhile course materials, lead students to encode and integrate this information in memorable form, ensure competence in the procedures and methods of a discipline, sustain intellectual curiosity, and promote how to learn independently.” In examining mothers’ concerns about the training their female children receive, Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1964) opines that among the education a female child receives, that she should not be late in preparing and serving her husband’s meals. That such irritates the man most especially, if it becomes a routine that he eats his supper when other

men had eaten and forgotten (Achebe 1964, p. 7). Achebe's endorsement of traditional female education, underscores domestic skills, contrasts with modern feminist perspectives. Scholars like Shulamith Firestone (1970), rejects past practices as out-dated, advocating for the dissolution of biological families. Furthermore, dismissing the traditional education disregards essential domestic qualities, potentiality undermining family continuity. A woman lacking these skills may triage individualism over familial responsibilities.

This raises concerns about the modern woman's role in national integrity, as she may not value the traits necessary for building and maintaining strong families. Achebe answers this: "I know that such a thing does not trouble the present age" (Achebe, 1964, p. 13). As long as the traditional values continue to strive along with modernity, such should continue to point the right way to the present generations of women as a yard stick in the proper training of the female children. In Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) women in traditional society demonstrate remarkable commitment and industriousness. They engage in various economic activities to support their households, including long-distance market trading. The novel mentions Eke Okperi market, where women from Elumelu and Abame, display exceptional craftsmanship, producing the finest pots in the region (Achebe, 1964, pp. 18-19). These women impressively carry heavy loads, often balancing, a towering load of five or six or even more big water pots held together with net of ropes on a long basket for sale. Some of them equally carry long baskets of seed-yams, and others carry goats for sale too (Achebe, 1964, p. 21).

It is the belief of every mother in the traditional Nigerian society that her female children learn to be associated with other women's problems as in finding a solution to such. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, clearly illustrates that when Ezeulu discovers that Oduche, his son, whom he sends to the missionary school to be his eye, has caught and imprisoned the sacred python in a box, he opens it and allows the python to slide away into the bush. As a way of avenging his anger, he swears to himself. "Today I shall kill the boy with my own hands". (Achebe 1964, P.45). When Oduche's mother, Ugoye, hears that from her husband's mouth, she begins to cry and other women join her. But Matefi, her co-wife advises her; "Send him away to your kinsmen. We are fortunate the python is not dead". (Achebe 1964, p.45). The essence of such portrayal indicates that, every woman is her sister's keeper and she shares in whatever suffering the other mother is involved in.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a similar incident of this "myth of sisterhood" is also depicted where Nwoye's mother, being Okonkwo's first wife, takes care of Ojiugo's children by feeding them when Ojiugo, their mother goes to plait her hair. She lies to Okonkwo that the mother has mandated her to do as a way of "trying to minimise Ojiugo's thoughtlessness" (Achebe, 1958, p. 24). The "natural man's" (Okonkwo) anger shown again blaring so highly on the day the second wife, Ekwefi, cut his plantain leaf to use in making food for him- Okonkwo, that he tends to forget about the revered week of peace, and he proceeds to beat Ekwefi. The women, her co-wives anger again shown again blaring so highly on the day the second wife, Ekwefi, cut his plantain leaf to use in making food for him Okonkwo, that he tends to forget about the revered week of peace, and he proceeds to beat up Ekwefi. The women, her co-wives could not go to sleep while their sister is afflicted with blows, they rally round her and plead for mercy from their husband for the erring one.

Conclusion

Nigerian women have historically exemplified exceptional management disciplines, culinary expertise, and self-reliance, serving as inspiring role models for their daughters. Using Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* as deconstructive reference points, this paper argued that women should be fully involved in the decision-making processes and actively participate in society's socio-political and socio-economic affairs. It further argued that the female child should be taught perseverance and endurance even in the face of challenges specific to her gender. The article opined that a well-trained female child becomes a source of joy, consolation, hope and encouragement to those around her. But, unfortunately, it seemed that modern career women often lacked valuable teachings and values instilled in female children in traditional African settings as portrayed in the examined texts. Nevertheless, while advocating for gender equality, women should identify vital values lacking in their daughters and implement necessary changes. The conclusion reached is that a female child rooted in traditional African values is more likely to contribute positively towards national progress and integrity.

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