

Negotiating Spaces, crossing borders: public/private spheres in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*

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Abstract

In modern socializations, the public sphere is often a political space that gives entrée to the citizenry for unrestricted participation in public discourse. Expectedly, it opens up discursive spaces in which people either as individuals or as collectives can engage in critical debates for the transformation and growth of the common weal. This, more or less corroborates Jürgen Habermas' (1989) treatise in which no individual or group may be marginalized or excluded from the democratic process.

This paper examines Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's contestation of the expropriation of public spaces by both the imperialist ideology of the colonialists and the patriarchal orthodoxy of Umuga, the nineteenth century setting of her first novel, *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996). In this novel, the author demonstrates that the contours and constructions of the female body in particular, inevitably intersect with discourses of the political sphere which sets in motion the dialectic debates of the public/private spheres. She thus, rigorously contends for what this paper describes as an inclusivist public space in which the interlocutors treat each other as equals in a cooperative on matters of common concern. To this end, Adimora-Ezeigbo's women, once included in public spheres, shape, impact, and redefine them by producing alternative discourses, symbols, and images about womanhood, citizenship, and political participation in Umuga for the transformation of that society.

Introduction

Space, either public or private is often keenly politicized and contested. Being the place where public opinion may be formed, the public sphere is powerfully conceptualized as influential in the processes of evolving civil societies. However, social hierarchies which build on the biases of gender, class, ethnicities and such other categories, delineate certain socio-political spaces as exclusively for some while at the same time excluding others. African hegemonic traditionalisms and Western paternalistic ideologies seem to have somewhat disrupted the erstwhile utopian democracies of public fora provided for by the structures of public spaces in many African societies. Further to this, the genderization of space and the consequent identification of women with the inferiorized locale of the private/ domestic sphere appear to be typically reinforced in many patriarchal, contemporary African societies. This, therefore, calls for an urgent need to reconfigure this conservative concept of spaces. In this regard, African women writers are determined to imaginatively participate in the regeneration of their respective societies by projecting their voices into the public spaces of artistic, cultural productions and literary representations which provide fora for public discourse at local and global levels.

Also interested in investigating the pragmatic and democratic tradition of Anglo-American thought, Jürgen Habermas (1989) postulates a communicative ideal of inclusive critical discussion. For the German philosopher, it is important to maintain the public sphere as a place where citizens may regularly exert influence on the processes of good governance. It is as such, a place in which no individual or group may be marginalized or excluded from participation in the democratizing processes of the public sphere. Thus, for instance, as these fundamental principles became deeply rooted in eighteenth century Europe, that society witnessed the institutionalization of the public sphere which works on the ideal of the democratization of critical discourse and reason with the aim of communicating these to the state.

As spatial or socio-political arenas which emphasize openness and freedom, the frontiers of public spheres can be extended or even transnationalized to include, as Fraser (2005) demonstrates: “transnational”, “regional”, “diasporic” and even “global” public spheres. Thus, for instance, the virtual public of the digital space is a modern-day development of the public sphere. Its vast resources of speed, dynamic, multi-modal functions, and

ability to deploy a wide range of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the creation and dissemination of cultural representations are crucial in the development of public discourse.

For African feminists, scholars and critics such as Ifi Amadiume, Tuzyline Jita Allan, M.J. Daymond, Obioma Nnaemeka, Molar Ogundipe, Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi, Patricia McFadden, and several others, their politically committed discourses and various theorizations engender praxes and colloquies of feminisms which capture the specificities of African cultural imperatives. Thus, their theorizations such as Stiwanism, Womanism, Motherism, Misovire, Nego-Feminism, and Personism all require equity and access as crucial elements in the formulation of the public sphere. Thus, for them, it is the stratification of societies especially those based on gender, class, ethnicities and other such powerful hegemonies that deepen the possibilities of marginalization. This implies that the maintenance of the democratic practices in civil societies must be sustained by the democratizing principles that are foundational to the public space. Also in this regard, postcolonial African women writers variously explore the interplay of space, self and agency. For instance, Tsitsi Dangarembga, in her first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) illustrates how the concept of the public sphere is critical especially in the lives of her female characters. Through the life story of her girl-protagonist: Tambu, and through her relationships with her brother, Nhamo, and uncle, Babamukuru, Dangarembga explores the relationship between gender and space within Shona culture and how these connect with larger political issues of gendered space in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Relevant to the present discussion are other critiques of space and its configuration in African literature. For instance, Grace Okereke in an enlightening article, foregrounds gender delineations in the literary public sphere. In her article, she posits that articulatory space and its 'liberational' or 'asphyxiatory' impact affect vocality of male and female voices in African literature. In demonstrating the cumulative effects of these on gender dialogue, Okereke shows how "African gender myths of vocality configure speech and vocality as male prerogatives, while silence is seen as a female virtue" (Okereke 1998: 136). Thus, by placing dialogue within multiple societal spaces, Okereke illustrates how literary space is delineated in gender terms in which silence and inability to verbalize are associated with women. Given this backdrop, it is no wonder then that African women

writers according to Senegalese scholar, Siga Jajne, have to resort to “voice-throwing” (quoted by Kolawole 1997: 6); evoking a traditional concept of forceful intrusion in order to oppose any kind of silencing or exclusion.

Also, M. S. C Okolo conceptualizes the African public sphere as a “site where public opinion is generated and distributed [...] a place outside state censorship and devoid of all external coercion” (Okolo 2009: 60f). In a related discussion, Ayo Kehinde in examining the contemporary postcolonial moment of the public sphere in Nigerian fiction notes that: “equality among listeners, not necessarily of wealth or social influence, but in the ability to speak and be heard [...]” (Kehinde 2010: 74) is an important attribute of public spheres. He further observes that “the public sphere is an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters, a place where interlocutors set aside characteristics such as differences in birth and fortune and speak to one another as if they were social and economic peers...” (Kehinde 2010: 75). Specifying some of the novels of Achebe, Okri, and Adichie, Kehinde shows how these writers intervene in the public discourse of their country (Nigeria) serving as the ‘conscience’ of their nation. Both Okereke and Kehinde problematize the exploitative potential of the public sphere which is largely conditioned by gender discrimination and power relations worked by powerful xenophobic patriarchal institutions. These issues underscore the point of departure for this paper.

One of Nigeria’s foremost and prolific writers in contemporary times, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, contests the forcible expropriation of the public space in her novel *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996). In spite of its physical slimness, *The Last of the Strong Ones* remains one of its author’s more complex and intriguing novels. The first part of a trilogy, the novel propels a vast expanse of profound themes involving a contention with gender, familial relations, economic, socio-cultural, and other profound political issues which extend beyond the borders of Umuga and directly connect with Nigeria’s crises-ridden realities. Several critics and scholars have volubly engaged in, among other things, Adimora-Ezeigbo’s feminist interest. For instance, Arndt (2008), Ladele (2010) and, Newell (2008) variously call particular attention to important issues of the novel’s intertextuality and relationship with orature, women’s reconstruction of their identities, and the novel’s interlocutions with Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as well as the problematic issues of gender and marriage. Yet, the author’s thematization and symbolism of space in this novel as potential for

the re-ordering of a more equitable society have to date not received much critical attention. Indeed, space is phenomenally important in *The Last of the Strong Ones* as the novel is a contestation of the traditional prescription of gender into male/female spaces where the woman is inferiorized and subordinated. In this novel, Adimora-Ezeigbo's spatial configurations engages the ideological undercurrents of gender and most eloquently contests the conventional symbols of space in the nineteenth century picturesque, Igbo village of South Eastern Nigeria in which the story unfolds.

The trajectory of this novel, the historic clash of the *Kosiri* "the strangers who had come to desecrate our home and steal our land" (5), with Umuga and the particular, heroic input of Umuga women in a desperate bid to save the land of their nativity— their "father's land", prefigure the thematic concerns of the author. The central conflictual tension in this novel is occasioned by the colonial presence whose imperium permeates every sphere of the material, individual and communal life of Umuga. This forceful imposture accompanied also by its disruptive politics, spatially dislocates and upturns the socio-cultural realities of Umuga tradition that it is the "traveller who must make the return journey and not the owner of the land" (6). Space becomes an immediately compelling reading in the new arrangements of Umuga as the people, especially the women, rise up to reconstruct the realities of their tradition and the bedrock of their existence. Responding to this upheaval, the female protagonists step forward to take back their land. They are intensely aware of their individual and collective role and function in the process of rebuilding their nation. They force entry into the public sphere and set themselves the onerous task and clear program of "preserving a clear memory of the events of the moment and others soon to follow" (2). The author therefore centralizes female characters in this novel as they self-confidently compel an interrogation of the patriarchal logic of Umuga culture that excludes women from the public sphere. Thus, to initiate this ideological shift, the women "muster one voice" and as *oluada* (top women representatives) "they stand together" (7). In their resolve, *oluada* refuse "to cooperate with any power or anyone that planned to undermine the culture, the traditional judicial system and the economic well-being of Umuga" (9). The *oluada* is, therefore, set up in this novel as a creative women's space in which women are able to first attain self-affirmation and with the confidence of a re-born woman, they

strategically enter the public space of *obuofa* (inner council of men and women) and remarkably influence the inauguration of a historic revolution in the life of Umuga.

The Last of the Strong Ones is a novel that simultaneously fictionalizes and theorizes war. The conflict in Umuga reaches a crescendo at the opening of the novel. Confronting in an epic battle the forces of imperial expansionists invading the land, the novel opens with “heavy clouds overcast” in the sky, which is at once an ominous physical foreboding of the change threatening the peace and stability of Umuga in a “season when a lot of troubles were occurring with lightning speed” (1). The catastrophic whirlwind of the colonial encounter sweeping through Umuga is the same event that had earlier swept through the similar topos of Achebe’s neighbouring and fictional Umuofia, causing things to permanently fall apart¹. And the point needs to be made emphatically that Adimora-Ezeigbo is not merely reversing the cultural contents and symbols of *Things Fall Apart* in her own novel, *The Last of the Strong Ones*. On the contrary, and indeed, substantially influencing her vision and craft is a quest for an alternative iconography of African womanhood, to provide the much needed counter-narrative to the gender blind, failed narratives of African nationhood that has for long been the bane of many African societies.

The author’s consistent battle cry is for men’s and women’s collaboration. In their various associations of *umuada*: association of daughters; *oluada*, top women representatives and the *obuofa*, the inner council committee, Adimora-Ezeigbo’s female characters work with men to forge a formidable attack against the external and internal forces of the *kosiri* (pejorative Igbo name for colonialists) and their local cohorts. The author presents realistic portraits of each of her women. The reader encounters distinguished women who are easily recognizable as each tells her story; giving personal details of their lives and how these ultimately intersect with the political developments of Umuga. Chieme, for instance, at the precipitous convocation of *oluada* at the opening of the novel, eulogises Ejimnaka as “lioness that leads the pack [...] the thundering tigress of Umuga” (7). In this brief introductory, Chieme points out her fellow sister’s qualities and how these coincide with national aspirations; illustrating how their lives

¹ In another essay, Ladele (2010) demonstrates the profound areas of Adimora-Ezeigbo’s contention with Achebe’s classic, *Things Fall Apart*. The second part in which ‘things fall apart never to fall together again is in part, derived from Biodun Jeyifo’s essay of that title.

“flowed into the rhythms of each other’s lives like the confluent streams of the Agwazi and the Obizi” (18). Ejimnaka life-story is followed by those of Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka. Mostly about their childhood and eventual marriage except for Chieme, the reader gains intimate and close knowledge of the women. As they then move through their personal experiences, each of the women is prepared for entry into larger socio-political circles of life in Umuga. These personal stories are profoundly critical, both structurally and thematically, in this novel. Through these seemingly ordinary stories, the author strategically works for the spatial inclusion of women in the public sphere as they inflect their strong, ineradicable presence into the politics and history of Umuga.

In the five chapters following the women’s stories, the plot quickly crescendos into the actual war. War is not merely tangential in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s literary oeuvre; indeed, it seems to be her forte thematically and symbolically. Her first novel, two non-fictional works on war and the thematization of war in her recent novel, *Roses and Bullets* (2011), are all indications of the author’s profound engagement with war. As indicated however in the present novel, theirs is not an exclusive women’s war, it is rather a multi-directional war, simultaneously waged against on the one hand, foreign domination as well as against the treachery of local compradors—the warrant chiefs such as Okwara, and the four previously deposed ones. Significantly, Adimora-Ezeigbo’s women do not fetch, carry and cook or run errands for the men in the battle front as some previous fictional narrations have depicted women. Rather, what the author more pertinently dramatizes, is radical women in action. As war combatants, they are possibly a slice of the famous 1929 Igbo women’s war in Aba (and this is pertinent when we consider that Adimora-Ezeigbo’s novel belongs to that immediate cultural setting). Thus, the semiotics of the ‘women’s War’² as this story literally translates into, signifies in profoundly ideological terms a war, not of the sexes but for a commodious, androgynous space.

Adimora-Ezeigbo’s self-conscious narration of women into Nigerian national history through her novel seems to contest their spatial disenfranchisement. The collaboration of the warrant chiefs with the white colonialists is not only a treacherous betrayal for her female characters;

² Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1996) explores the concept of the ‘women’s war’ to simultaneously, specify and illustrate Nigerian women writers’ contestations in their prose fictions as well as to underscore the ‘violence’ in the process of their writings.

often, it worked to limit or keep them out of the public spaces. In the fray, the four female protagonists, exit their traditional spaces and on their own initiatives and enter the public/political domain of military manoeuvres demonstrating optimal prowess as they reinvent new narratives for Umuga. The author thus holds up these four spectacular women— Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka, who stand out in the epic saga of Umuga's resistance. As powerful female embodiments they create physically, psychologically, spiritually, intellectually and historically spaces for the articulation of new political statements not only about the place of African women. Adimora-Ezeigbo's women, join the ranks of African feminists who develop their own endogenous strategies and activism which in spite of paternalistic orthodoxies and cultural traditionalism, spurred women's movements on the continent. They become for the keen reader political and cultural beacons, capable of generating an important counter-hegemonic discourse and ideology for the good of the land.

The author's story transcends a mere narcissistic feminization of the national history of Umuga. Adimora-Ezeigbo's formidable female characters become the bridgehead for the new historicism she envisions. Indeed, they are the sturdy bridges on whose backs Umuga struggles for a new national ethos, connecting with the author's theory of snail-sense womanism³ in which the stance of the women is conciliatory and inclusivist. The author forges a new historicism differentiated from previous fictionalized histories in which her contention challenges the foundations of traditional history, with its masculinist imperatives and values. Adimora-Ezeigbo's contestations thus connect with the outstanding, path-clearing work of Bolanle Awe (1992; 2001) and that of other feminist historians around the globe. Their efforts demonstrate that Nigerian and other African women played and continue to play visibly, qualitative roles in public and private spheres of traditional life, often bestriding political, economic, religious and even military arenas. As Awe, for instance, points out, the roles of women as the 'saviours of their societies' (2001: xiii) were no longer accorded the pride of place in the annals of the emergent masculinist national histories, rather women became marginalized.

³ Adimora-Ezeigbo elaborates on this phenomenon in a monograph titled: *Snail-Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model*, No. 17 April 2012 Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos. The author uses the natural habits of the snail to explain the conciliatory attributes of her brand of feminism.

Several other Africanists, literary critics and anthropological feminists including Stratton (1990), Cobham (1991), Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1996), Oyewumi (1997) and Bryce (2008) have variously remarked, with deep concern, the masculinist ethos that has for long dominated Nigerian literary-scape in which gender and nationality appear to be in contrastive relationship. They point out that the dominant narratives do not seem to admit women into the anti-colonialist and nationalist struggles which in turn throw-up stereotypic images of women as passive and unintelligent. Adimora-Ezeigbo's imperative in *The Last of the Strong Ones* it seems, is to enter into the national space to compel a paradigmatic shift that would redefine the lives of African women. Discussing feminism and the complex space of West African women's writings, Newell posits that women "make use of fictional narratives to engage in a dynamic process of contestation and negotiation with gender and meaning. Many use the novel to propose new ways of perceiving womanhood in their societies and thus generate a gender-scape for the circulation of African women's perspectives." (Newell 2006: 137). Newell's "gender-scape" coincides more precisely with Bryce's recent observation that Nigerian women including the author, "constrained by nationalities' priorities that privilege masculinity, have given way to a challenging reconfiguration of national realities [...]. This constitutes a shifting of the ground of identity-construction in Nigerian fiction away from the fully constituted masculine self" (Bryce 2008: 49f). Adimora-Ezeigbo, in this respect, enters this historically adversarial space that has for long overridden the voices of Nigerian women and she illustrates how women in this novel are engaged in the nation's macro politics, significantly influencing political action against the intruders.

The mantra that the personal is political has considerable effect on the perception and experience of space. In their different domestic spaces, the cadences of the women's everyday lives nuance the macro-politics of Umuga in its state of precipitous disjuncture. Yet, the confines of their marital spaces do not limit Adimora-Ezeigbo's women. As Newell observes, 'the wives microcosmic struggles for self-fulfilment run parallel to the community's struggle to preserve its autonomous decision-making structures from the onslaught of colonialism' (Newell 2008: 92). Thus, sometimes facing extreme, personal privations and injury, the women take up arms for the common good; marriage is only the spring board from which they enter into the public sphere. Adimora—Ezeigbo seems to

conceptualize marriage as a space for the development of interpersonal relationships based on true love and affection. This present study expands that scope and uses these relationships to illustrate the author's attempts at reinventing and reconfiguring the private/public spaces. In her configurations of these marital relationships, Adimora-Ezeigbo enters into the politics of gender and discourse of patriarchy.

For instance, the marriages of the women enable the reader enter into the private, emotional closets of the women. As they perform their daily duties of nurturance; cooking, caring for their households, painting and designing their huts or bodies, the reader encounters their most vulnerable and humane aspects, endearing each of the women as especially unique. In this way, the author calls attention to the disparate personal experiences of the women, thus emphasizing plurality rather than a homogenization of their experiences. For instance, the intimate details of her marriage to Umeozo are revealed and when death suddenly ends it, Onyekozuru regains her composure and throws herself into the socio-political pressure groups, making a positive impact in the national life of Umuga. Refusing the leviratic tradition of *nkushi*, she learns to enjoy her new freedom. Onyekozuru's subliminal yearning for freedom cannot go unnoticed and the relevant question is, from what does Onyekozuru anticipate her freedom? Onyekozuru's freedom is emblematic; signalling her release from the limiting space of domesticity to enter as she does other areas of life beyond the restrictiveness of her private life. Emerging from mourning, she personally attests to feeling like "a newly-hatched chick" (43). Onyekozuru tries to rediscover her world, taking more interest in the social and spiritual life of the community as well as her own personal life. She luxuriates in the 'pleasant sensation [that] would spread all over me as I would lie or sit up on a mat, as one of my friends would tenderly touch up my body with uri' (44). This process of renewal is both physical and emotional. It starts with taking care of her body to make it look beautiful again; wearing her waist beads--*jigida* and having her skin adorned with *uhie* and *uri*, (local tattoo materials). Onyekozuru is psychologically and physically prepared to take up the more arduous task of nation building.

Significantly, each of the women's intensely emotive life story ends with some eulogy of the woman's great pedigree. For instance, Ejimnaka, 'mother of the land' is described as 'favourite child of the great Ezeukwu-who was the terror of the Agbaja strong man, Chief Ezeugbo Onyamba [...]'

(35). Onyekozuru is 'daughter of [her] father, Ezeigwe, the master blacksmith, whose skill baffled even spirits [...]' (53). Chieme is 'Daughter (sic!) of Nlebedum, the warrior renowned for strength [...]' (85). Chibuka is daughter of "Umeahunanya: the strong man who communed day and night with ancestral spirits..." (107). The author's homage to the nativity of the women, is a symbolic gesture which indicates her deliberate inclusivity strategy. It appears that Adimora-Ezeigbo wants to emphasise or sustain the dialogue with the men (through their fathers and their husbands). This perhaps connects with Okonjo-Ogunyemi's (1996) theorization of the condition of the woman in her household as well as in the public.

According to Okonjo-Ogunyemi, the woman is 'not only a native born in her father's house, but is born again as a 'slave' in her master/husband's house' (1996: 8). Okonjo-Ogunyemi, inevitably, links this image of the slavish condition of women with the larger socio-political matrix of their colonial and postcolonial experiences. The womanist critic further suggests that in order to set women, and by extension, the nation free, the discourse of nativity must be manipulated to 'turn the notion of birth around' (1996: 9) This manoeuvrability is Adimora-Ezeigbo's *tour de force* in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. The author thus subtly contends for a women's space in order to deconstruct what is generally considered as the natural order of nativity in her effort to legitimize the platform for change in the narrative of a new nation in Umuga.

In the most rudimentary constructions of space, various hierarchization and narratives of superiority and the arbitrary imposition of subjective positions on others presume a Manichean dialectic of binary opposition. The socializations emerging from such dangerously splintered constructs are taken as mutually exclusive or neatly divided in either/or polarizations. For instance, the postulation that women belong to limited domestic spaces while men have a higher and more complex calling in the more distinguished roles and function of public affairs, politics and economy underlies such a position. Also, in colonial discourse, space is usually polarized by ideologies of imperialism that racially divides the colonizer from the colonized. However, society is never so irreducibly patterned.

Conclusion

As exemplified in this novel, women are typically under-represented in the public sphere but as Umuga women insist, inclusivity is crucial for transforming society. Also, as demonstrated in this paper, the activism and resoluteness of Umuga women to overthrow the conditions of their oppressions that had for long kept them in marginal positions is truly remarkable. Adimora-Ezeigbo's women forcibly enter public spaces, breaking the bonds of limiting traditionalism. In their engagement with the politics of their location, Umuga women from this study, chart an alternative history. They transcend their given space to conjure counter-spaces in which they challenge the dominating powers that authorize and limit their capabilities which is particularly exemplified in Chieme, who virtually wrestles Agwu, the spirit of disorder, to change her life story.

In this novel, Adimora-Ezeigbo rethinks the concept of public sphere. The author creates female characters in spaces that are so overwhelmingly masculine in thought, orientation and ideology with a view to developing a new spatial ethos for the women. The central consensus of her women is to recuperate the marginalized and de-center male hegemonies. The women in their mutually supportive political and social pressure groups perform tremendous exploits that bring them out of limiting and constrictive spaces. Thus the author's vision is neither cultural isolationism nor a women-only ethos; she demonstrates that women, as those in her fictional space, must connect and bond with one another emotionally, politically and spiritually. The author strategically repositions her female characters to exploit the socio-political structures of traditional Igbo society for the effective transformation of that society.

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