A Pragmatic Reading of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trilogy

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Abstract:
Language, as a medium of expression, has been creatively put to use by literary scholars in order to excite the imagination of the reader and to deepen the meaning of the writer's expression. Language has also become a veritable tool of rhetoric for a writer who desires to propagate an enduring ideology in his or her fiction. It is in the above realms that this paper employs the pragmatic literary approach and the psychoanalytic literary criticism to identify and evaluate figurative use of language in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's three ideologically linked novels which are: *The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols*, and *Children of the Eagle*. The findings show that the author deploys art to succinctly and successfully espouse the causes of family values, women empowerment and gender complementarity, in ways that adumbrate her fidelity to art, thus rendering her novels appealing to her readers.

Introduction

Language is a medium for expressing views, thoughts, information and messages. Language in literature is essentially employed to render whatever is being put across to the hearer or reader rhetorically appealing. When a writer uses figurative language, it becomes symbolic as such expressions are removed from their ordinary and everyday usage and meaning(s). This is to achieve an imaginative effect and to paint a clearer and lasting image in the reader's mind. Such language use serves as a tool for attracting the attention and interest of the reader, thus, rendering persuasion about an ideology easy. It is against this background that this paper examines Adimora-Ezeigbo's use of figurative language to deepen the meaning of her narratives in

her trilogy namely; *The Last of the Strong Ones (LOSO)*, *House of Symbols(HOS)* and *Children of the Eagle(COTE)*

Literature, as a "living" or practical concept, could be viewed, in relation to figurative language, from the perspective of pragmatics. Modern pragmatic theorists and critics, including Wayne C. Booth, David Daiches, Richard Walsh, James Reeves and M.H. Abrams, are pre-occupied with aesthetics in literature, as pragmatic criticism "emphasizes the artistic strategies by which an author engages and influences the responses of readers to the matters presented in a literary work" (Abrams and Harpham 69). These strategies, which range from the use of poetic language to narrative techniques, are amplified by David Daiches when he expresses the view that fictional works, being records of imaginary events, are given life and value by the writer through the use of language that is artistic and which engenders interest. In this regard, he perceives "style" as the "use of language which distinguishes art from mere communication" and the "handling of words in such a way as to produce both recognition and insight" (34). Daiches sees the deliberate method of expression in a literary work, that is, the artistic selection of words, as capable of creating a lasting impact in the mind of "the sensitive and experienced reader who will see in such work more than the mere record of real or imaginary events" (38). What these quotations indicate is that Daiches is a pragmatic literary critic who places sufficient premium on language in the explication of a literary text.

Daiches' standpoint is akin to the views of another scholar, Tony Afejuku, who opines that literary works "arouse feelings and emotions" when writers of such works "use words with strong poetic and evocative connotation; words which are often affective, metaphoric, imagistic, rhythmic and symbolic" (267-68). Clearly, for Daiches and Afejuku, the study of the way in which language is used to articulate feelings or to express what an author means in particular situations, is a sine-qua-non in any explication of imaginative literature.

The point about the importance of poetic language is made even more poignant by James Reeves when he writes that "the success with which a writer composes everyday prose depends on the skill, patience and experience with which he handles the language" (23). The implication of Reeves' perspective, also, is that figurative and imaginative language are central to style in literature. Adimora-Ezeigbo brings all these elements to bear in her fiction by her ample use of figurative language in the prose genre, which, ordinarily, does not place much premium on such use of language.

Furthermore, in relation to literature, the pragmatic school of thought views works of art as "something which is constructed in order to achieve certain effects on the audience (effects such as aesthetic pleasure, instruction or kinds of emotion)" (69). The affectivity of art on the reader makes delving into psychoanalytic literary criticism, although to a lesser degree, inevitable. The balance between literature and psychology is expressed by Badegul Can Emir when he describes the two disciplines, that is, literature and psychology, as the branches of science that deal with the human soul. He opines that while psychology studies human behaviour and their causes, literature "depicts human behaviour through fiction" (49). It is in this regard that Adimora-Ezeigbo's three novels under focus could be evaluated from the perspective of artistic language, deployed to elicit certain reactions from the reader; artistic or heightened language that is capable of lifting the soul.

The body of critical works on Adimora-Ezeigbo's fiction has been concentrated mainly on the sociological relevance of her novels and her thematic pre-occupations. Not much, to the knowledge of the researcher, has been written about her fidelity to art or the pathos that such artistic use of language are likely to elicit in the sensitive reader. One of such sociological perspectives is the one by Itang Ede Egbung who explores the author's yearning for a "harmonious complementarity between men and women in the society" (90). The critic believes that the author successfully "re-invents and re-creates active, assertive

and self-confident women who play prominent roles in shaping the social, political and economic spheres of society (90). Egbung's stance justifies the researcher's view that Adimora-Ezeigbo, in her trilogy, elevates women when she deploys the art of silence on men as she highlights the achievements of women in the society she recreates.

The critical analysis of Adimora-Ezeigbo's fiction that is closest to the researcher's work is Mojisola Shodipe's examination of *The Last of the Strong Ones* against the backdrop of the author's language in relation to gender and the negotiation of meaning. The critic explores the "creative manipulation of linguistic and rhetorical sources in the establishment of positive Igbo heroism as seen in the personification of social protest in the female characters" (175). In the novel, according to Shodipe, "surface and deep structure features have enormous significance for the role of language […] as they offer the author a wide choice of linguistic items for the expression of a viewpoint or ideological posture" (180). Shodipe's concern is with the choices of literal and figurative language, Igbo norms and values open to the author and with which she captures the incidents she narrates. Whereas the critic limits her scope to the author's first novel as viewed from a purely linguistic perspective, this present investigation is justified as it explores some of the artistic devices deployed by Adimora-Ezeigbo that are perceived to be affective. These artistic strategies are also seen as elevating the stories above mere sociological or historical narratives of the characters, incidents and the milieu depicted in the trilogy. The figurative strategies easily discernable are proverb, idiom, panegyric and hyperbole.

Proverb

Proverb, like maxim, is an aphorism which is "[A] generally accepted principle or truth expressed in a short, pithy manner" (Gray 21). Such statements are designed to teach lessons about life. Proverbs express truth in a serious and pointed way and are, therefore, appropriate tools of affectivity in a discussion on

figurative language in Adimora-Ezeigbo's novels under investigation, When used in literature, this feature is considered didactic, serving to actualise the inexorable role of "the writer as a teacher" (Achebe 8). Adimora-Ezeigbo makes ample use of the literary device in her trilogy to enrich their language and to make her message clearer.

In Children of the Eagle, for example, the general maxim, "punctuality is the soul of business" is put in another equally figurative and alluring way by Nnenne, one of the daughters of Eaglewoman, as she reacts to their discovery of urchins so early in the streets when they go for an early morning walk:

> "They are rather out early, aren't they?" Obioma wonders aloud. "This is the festive season: Christmas is round the corner." Nnenne reminds her, changing position: "An early bird, as the saying goes, catches the worm." She marches in front, crying: "Come on, ladies, let's get going before the sun becomes a nuisance." (190)

Nnenne's remark of an early morning bird catching the worm is indeed a truism and captures the generally held belief that any serious endeavour becomes successful when a person sets about the task early. The remark could also mean that someone who arrives first has the best prospect of being successful in carrying out a task. The passage underscores the premium that the author places on orderly and appropriate conduct, a message she passes across through a character without equivocation. Eaglewoman's daughter, being a serious-minded person, herself, could not but marvel at the presence, so early in the day, of little children serving as urchins. Her command to her sisters to increase their pace of walk in order to make maximum use of their exercise is accentuated by the proverb of the early bird that "catches the worm." Although these rhetorical figures are derived from the Igbo linguistic reservoir, they have universal appeal. The proverb of an "early bird" which "catches

the worm" is one that is made popular by Chinua Achebe, another novelist of Igbo stock, in *Arrow of God*. Adimora-Ezeigbo's use of figurative language, in this regard, captures the essence of the pragmatic view of Daiches that a writer, through appropriate use of language, can enrich and vitalise human action (35). It is to further explain the vividness of pithy statements that Aristotle writes, as translated by Freeze, that proverbs, when "well-constructed" are "metaphors from species to species" (xliv). Freeze's comparison of proverb with metaphor is apt, as the two elements share the same quality of deploying concrete items to express abstract thoughts in order to create a picture in the reader's mind.

It is not only Nnenne who highlights the people's cherished norm. As part of her style of making the women in her fiction assert the values cherished by society, there is a strong condemnation of the role played by some men who are considered traitors for aiding the systematic colonisation of the Umuga people by the white men as we read in The Last of the Strong Ones. The white men are referred to as "Kosiri" in the novel. Therefore, when the elders in the community get information that the same "traitors" were being used for menial functions such as the fetching of water and gathering of firewood for the white men, Ejimnaka remarks that: "Those who bring home ant-ridden faggots must be prepared for the visit of lizards" (9). This proverb, uttered disdainfully, aptly describes the situation of things when people create room for others to take advantage of them. As far as Ejimnaka is concerned, and in line with general belief, especially in the African society, the things that trouble people are brought upon them by their own actions. Therefore, the association with, and the servitude displayed towards the white man by some of the hitherto respected men in the society, who perform such ignoble roles because of immediate gains, are viewed as responsible for the humiliation they suffer in the hands of the former. Incidence of sycophancy and treachery are common in the political settings

of a developing country like Nigeria where politicians engage in self-serving actions and easily betray the people's trust.

Expressing her frustration and highlighting what the people perceive as a major setback of colonialism, Okwudiba, an old woman, doubts and questions the people's new tastes for bread and other food items introduced by the white man into the Umuga community. She asks:

> No matter how enticingly you paint the picture. Has anybody wondered what poison lurks inside these strange foods which have infested our diet from foreign lands? They are spreading new diseases among us and many of us do not seem to be aware of this. Our people say that it is not everything that shines that has value and that the sweetness in things kills. *(HOS* 94)

The last sentence in the passage above is another way of buttressing the popular saying that not all that glitters is gold, with the phrase carrying every truth in it. Okwudiba's skepticism is not a surprise. As an old and conservative woman, the whiteman's culture and values are an aberration and perceived as a disruption of her own way of life. She is bound to sound a note of warning to the younger people in the community not to readily jettison their indigenous tastes in their desire to indulge in adventurism and show preference for things that are foreign or exotic. This general truth is what is also expressed in the statement by Onyekozuru in The Last of the Strong Ones after she has been spunned by Obiatu, the man she had romantic feelings for but who abandoned her for another woman. She says: "I experienced the truth of that proverb which says that a woman who waits for her lover hears the footsteps of spirits" (57). This is another Igbo proverb that expresses Onyekozuru's state of mind when she waits in vain for Obiatu to visit her like he used to do. It portrays the anxiety associated with such expectations and her imagination of spirits is a reflection of her

unease or discomfort. The fruitless wait for Obiatu by Onyekozuru is so perfectly captured by the proverb adopted by the author that the meaning and import of what she goes through is made clear to the reader.

Psychoanalytically, such a fruitless wait for a man by a woman is capable of diminishing her self-esteem and creating a feeling of inferiority as well as shame in her. Although her anxious and fruitless wait for Obiatu is gain for another woman who has successfully won Obiatu's heart, Onyekozuru's experience is humiliating. Again, the quoted lines are a deep reflection of the Igbo creative imagination which the novelist rhetorically captures. This type of style is given fillip by Aristotle's words, in Freeze's translation, that "speech, if it does not make the meaning clear, will not perform its proper function" (351). Since the function in the passage is for the reader to understand what Onyekozuru feels about her experience in the doomed relationship with Obiatu, the proverb that mirrors the state of her mind, likening her anxiety to near weird imaginations, is apt.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's use of proverbs in her fiction is considered effective and captures the essence of Aristotle's pre-requisite of style, quoted by Wellek and Warren, as "the choice of words, verbal pattern, and rhythms that will most effectively express and convey "the writer's message" (311). The writer's message is made persuasively clearer by these devices among which also is idiom.

Idiom

Idioms are expressions which depict the manner and style of speaking that do not necessarily convey their meaning when the words are analysed separately. Usually, idioms are peculiar to certain language groups or individuals but have universal applications because they teach lessons about life. They are a form of maxim and are deployed for persuasion. Idioms, like proverbs, play very significant functions in Adimora-Ezeigbo's trilogy as they not only show the artistic ingenuity of the writer,

they also aid in situating the work around the Igbo linguistic and cultural setting as well as leaning of the characters as most likely desired by the author. The co-location of Adimora-Ezeigbo's evocative and culturally relevant language use aligns with Patrick Colm Hogan's opinion that "stories in every culture both depict and inspire emotion" (17). A clear example of idiomatic language expressions that conjures various images in the mind of the reader occurs when Aziagba tries to shield Eaglewoman as a young girl from Nathaniel Okeke:

> The long wait for her to finish school and ripen maddened him and taxed his patience beyond endurance: but Aziagba insisted. With eyes limpid with desire, he devoured her. She felt the violation of those hungry eyes. Aziagba was the buffer that held his instinct at bay, keeping vigil night and day, keeping the purloiner at arms length till the ripening of time, till the fullness of time. A fortress that could not be stormed. A bulwark of indomitable strength. Short of ravishing her with his offending throbbing member, he fondled and bruised her breasts with inflamed fingers. *(HOS* 75)

The above quoted passage is laden with idiomatic expressions with every sentence bearing extra-literal or deeper meanings. Thus, the words, when taken on their own, bear different meanings from the message they are designed to convey. A purloiner is a thief or someone who takes what does not belong to him or her. Used on its own, the word, purloiner, does not describe Okeke appropriately, but because it is used in an idiomatic sense, the figurative meaning makes it clear that the man is a persona-non-grata and, therefore, unworthy of Eaglewoman, although she is betrothed to him as a result of economic consideration. As far as the family or Aziagba is concerned, Eaglewoman does not truly belong to the man, Okeke. The object of the discourse, Eaglewoman, is regarded as

a fruit that ripens with the expression meaning "maturity". The man, Nathaniel Okeke, is also said to have "devoured her" with "eyes limpid with desire." Literally speaking, the eyes cannot devour a human being. The meaning being conveyed is that the man desired the woman sexually, so much so that he "ate" her with his eyes. This is akin to what the bible refers to as lust of the eyes which is condemned. The personification, like the other aesthetic figures, are appropriately used to convey the feelings of animosity and defiance by the family in the circumstance. No wonder, Okeke is despised because African mothers are known to protect their daughters from potential "devourers."

Another instance of idiomatic expression occurs in *The Last of the Strong Ones* when in the wake of the conflict that arises between the people of Umuga community following the foray of the whiteman, one of the women, Chibuka expresses the need for prompt action against their people who are perceived to be supporting the white men's moves:

> "Okwara has done much mischief in Umuga," Chibuka lamented…. Obuofo must do something about these abominations before things get out of hand. We must look for the black goat when it is day-light. I heard that Okwara's fourth son is one of the converts and that he even understands the language of Kosiri. Ewuu, what some people do to get power and privilege! (102)

Literally, a black goat is so referred because of the animal's colour. However, in the context of the above excerpt, a black goat means a traitor just like the black sheep in English expression. The admonition by Chibuka is for the people to identify those acting against the interests of the community early enough before much damage is done, as it is practically impossible to detect a black goat at night because the two are of the same hue. Although the expression in the passage is used idiomatically, the choice of the contrasting images of black goat

and day light conform with Aristotle's view, as expressed by Freeze, that persuasion is better attained when such expressions are perspicuous because language use is better understood by the reader following the "clarity and precision of presentation" (351). In other words, the images in the idiom create "mental pictures" and help the reader to grasp the contrasting imagery of darkness and light represented by the people regarded as traitors and the patriotic citizens of the community, respectively.

It is not only the turbulence experienced by the people at the community level that is expressed idiomatically. Even at the level of the individual characters, idioms play vital roles in aptly capturing the mood and spirit of occurrences. Lamenting the challenges and frustration that she is going through in her marriage, Ogonna is resolved to endure the unpleasurable union in order to raise her children without distraction. In response to Nnenne's suggestion that she gives up the marriage, she retorts:

> The time will come when the dark cloud will lift…. Then I will act with strength. One thing I am sure of at the moment is that I will not wash my hands and crack nuts for a fowl to carry away and swallow. But, above all, the noise of what I am going through must not sip into mama's ears. She has suffered enough. She deserves to be allowed to have some peace, to enjoy her hard-earned comfortable life in Umuga. *(COTE* 94)

Taken on its own, the expression "wash my hands and crack nuts" conveys a different meaning from what the narrator wishes the reader to understand. Used literally, the two actions, "wash my hands" and "crack nuts" are distinct and different from each other. Another way of also interpreting what the narrator states is the biblical prayer of not sowing for another person to reap. In other words, Ogonna uses idiom to express her desire not to abandon the work she has begun in raising her children and building her home to another woman, a total

stranger, who would not know and may not appreciate the sacrifices she had made for her family. Again, the expression highlights the value African women place on the family. Ogonna is prepared to forego her happiness rather than abandon her children and allow another woman to take her place in the life of her family. Through idioms like the ones above, Adimora-Ezeigbo projects her values of harmonious family life and the important role of the mother in the home. To heighten her narratives inorder to engenda better reader appreciation of the heroines in her trilogy, Adimora-Ezeigbo is perceived to deploy hyperboles to underscore their significance.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a figure of embellishment. Its function is to decorate a character or exaggerate a situation. Hyperbole "may be used either for serious or ironic or comic effect" (Abrams and Harpham 166). It is sometimes deployed to ridicule a situation. Adimora-Ezeigbo engages the element as a strategy to convince or persuade the reader about the worth of a character by elevating such character and to establish the authenticity of the situations she presents in her fiction. *The Last of the Strong Ones*, more than any of the novels, is replete with hyperbolic statements about the four women whose histories or lives' endeavours the novel captures through the recorders of history. Some of the scenes in which hyperbole occurs are mostly serious scenes while others are ironic. Ejimnaka laments that: "Our neighbours are afraid of kosiri. Whenever he sneezes, the people of Umuchulu and Umukokwa wet their loin cloth with urine" (17). What is recounted in the extract is certainly exaggerated to heighten the disdain felt by the people against those they consider as betrayers for joining the colonialists in the subjugation of the people. In practice, the mere sneezing of a white man should not result in an adult man urinating on himself. However, the expression is to point out the level of subservience of the collaborators when they are before the white man.

Ironically, and as if to establish a paradox, the author expresses the roles women play in society by the remarks of Obioma, the Preacher and daughter of Eaglewoman, when she says: "women are not a minority. It is necessary that they wake up to their responsibility for the good of humanity. Women have a spiritual role to play in salvaging mankind" *(COTE* 115). To attribute the onerous task of salvaging humanity or mankind to women is an exaggeration and is akin to taking the argument of their importance too far. However, the language use serves the author's purpose of hyperbole in order to underscore the invaluable role women play in society as wives, mothers and care-givers who are expected to ensure that the units of society, especially the family, are intact in order to preserve the foundation and well-being of children who move on eventually to constitute citizens of the larger society. It is also in this vein that Ejimnaka, in House of Symbols, is attributed with the gift of making a difference in her world when she is described by her grand-daughter, Eaglewoman, in the following manner:

> With the eyes of a little girl, she remembers her grandmother. Ejimnaka was a firebrand, igniting even dead ashes: this is what she remembers of her. The diviner had told them that Ejimnaka did not allow him a moment's respite until he had done her bidding. She would suddenly appear, like a comet, at divination hour, block his view, thus clouding his vision. (13)

The above passage features both a metaphor and hyperbole with Ejimnaka compared to a firebrand whose role is exaggerated and said to ignite or set fire on "even dead ashes" (13). The simultaneous use of hyperbole and metaphor in the same expression is sanctioned in the Aristotelian canons of rhetoric as a style capable of persuasion spelling out that: "if we wish to ornament our subject, we must derive our metaphor from the better specie under the same genus" (Freeze 355).

Decorating and exaggerating Ejimnaka's person and her roles to her community are appropriately expressed by the hyperbole to underscore the intensity of her personality and contributions just as the metaphoric description is capable of stamping those roles permanently in the mind of the reader. Similar to hyperbole as a figure of embellishment or ornamentation is the panegyric or praises of the heroines of the author's trilogy.

Panegyric

Perfecting the art of elevating someone, especially the women in her fiction, out of proportion, Adimora-Ezeigbo moves from hyperbole to outright panegyric where she celebrates her heroines by the way encomiums are poured on them by other characters. Some of these praises are expressed either literally or metaphorically. The four "Oluada", Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka, in The Last of the Strong Ones, are highly praised by the two women chosen by the Umuga community to record the history of the town, especially from the perspectives of the four matriarchs. The first eulogy is addressed to Ejimnaka when the women visit her:

> Ejimnaka, mother of the land, you were born to lead. Favourite child of the great Ezeukwu – who was the terror of the Agbaja strong man, Chief Ezeugbo Onyamba, when he sent Abam warriors to attack the hapless chief and his people. Oluada, cream of Umuga daughters, you have regaled our memory with the story of your remarkable life. Your history will be remembered by posterity. *(LOSO* 39*)*

Ejimnaka is not the only woman eulogised. The other "strong ones," Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka are eulogised respectively in the following expressions: "Oluada, we await your words of wisdom. Mother of the land, we step gracefully in your footprints. You will live long to lead Umuada.

Onyekozuru, daughter of Ezeigwe, we are here to listen to your story" (41), "Chieme, Daughter of Nlebedum, the warrior renowned for strength and Nnwola, the singer and leader of women. Oluada, who showed the world that women's reputation does not depend on a husband… Woman mountain, seeded in tradition" (98) and "Chibuka, daughter of Umeahunanya, the strong man who communed day and night with ancestral spirits. Leader of women, your life instructs the world that the hour a farmer begins work is the morning of his day. Oluada, you are the mushroom that breaks the earth without a hoe" (124).

Characteristically, panegyrics are couched in the forms of direct addresses to the objects of interest and this time, it is the four matriarchs of Umuga. The four examples cited are in that format and extol the virtues of the subjects, sometimes exaggerating those virtues. Another example of the panegyric occurs in the scene in the second novel in the trilogy, *House of Symbols*, when Okwudiba, one of the recorders of history, in the preceding novel, speaks glowingly about Ejimnaka as "My Lioness…. The meandering river that conquered arid zones and reached the sea, not tired" (84). This passage continues the high style rhetoric which has been identified in the preceding passages. Ejimnaka is praised as a "Lioness." The female lion is reputed to have enormous strength and possesses other favourable characteristics that the praise-singers believe Ejimnaka possesses. She is the "meandering river that conquered arid zones," also signifying her fruitful service to the community and her impact generally. The panegyric style here is employed to amplify her bravery, strength of character and dependability. Adimora-Ezeigbo's style fulfils Aristotle's recommendation of "oratorical prose" taking a "poetic colour." This, according to the rhetorician, in the translation of the "Art" of rhetoric by Freeze, constitutes "the finest discourses" (139).

Panegyrics also have the quality of the sublime which, according to Andrew Lang in his introduction to Longinus' treatise, is "capable of transporting the hearer or reader to the highest

point of imagination" (4).Heightened imagination and elevated emotion are what a writer who is committed to art sets out to achieve.

Conclusion

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, in her trilogy, demonstrates sufficient skills in her manipulation of language for rhetorical effect and to "recreate remembered scenes" (Afejuku 267). In this direction, she deploys language, figuratively, to heighten her fiction in order to create perspicuity and lasting impact in the mind of her reader. The elements of language discussed and their rich rhetorical significance underscore her fidelity to art. Her proverbs and idioms, as well as hyperbole and panegyric, deployed in varying degrees in the novels, enhance their appeal and align with the postulation of James Reeves that "the success with which a writer composes everyday prose depends on the skill, patience and experience with which he handles the language" (23). The implication of this is that imaginative language is central to style in literature.

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