



Colonialism and the Changing Nature of Gender Relations in Southern Nigeria: A Case Study of the Igbo Society

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Abstract

In various pre-colonial African societies, men and women played significant roles that contributed to the growth and development of these societies. Studies indicate that these roles were complementary; both genders had defined rights, privileges, and responsibilities, which they exercised to enhance the prosperity of the society and the well-being of its inhabitants. These roles fostered gender relations in which both parties recognised their spheres of influence and boundaries. Pre-colonial gender relationships fostered an amicable society and gender complementarity. Apart from the domestic roles women played, they were also politically active and religiously powerful. Unfortunately, the fortunes of women began to decline during the colonial period as they were tactically silenced. As part of the factors in the relegation of women, men were first introduced to Western education, while women were made to stay at home to attend to the needs of the men. This paper, therefore, sees colonialism as the disruptor of the harmonious gender relations. The analyses are anchored in postcolonial theory. The paper concludes that gender complementarity is the road map to the growth and development of society. The methodology adopted in this discourse is a multidisciplinary approach, using both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Gender, Relationship, Pre-colonial, Colonialism, Development

Introduction

Gender complementarity was the norm in pre-colonial Nigeria, including among the Igbo. Both men and women played their roles equitably, which led to peaceful coexistence across the different spheres of human endeavour. Agriculturally, men were renowned as the cultivators of yam, which was considered the king of all crops, while women planted vegetables, cocoyam, okra, and cassava to complement men's efforts. Before crops were planted, men cleared the forest and set fire, and women cleaned the farmland and prepared it for planting. They both planted their respective crops. During the weeding period, women weeded the grasses to prevent them from consuming the crops. While women were weeding, men staked the yams. Njoku (2008) notes that yams were the chief agricultural produce. They were recognised as a man's crop. Other crops, such as cocoyam, maize, okra, fluted pumpkins, pepper, and beans, were recognised as women's crops. These were regarded as secondary crops, and their cultivation was subject to the rhythm of yam cultivation.

The cultural concept of gender in traditional Igbo society was flexible and complementary; each gender played its role equitably. Egbung (2008) notes that in traditional Igbo culture, women were given prominent positions because of the roles they played in society. Since the Igbos were predominantly farmers and traders, women were active participants in the agricultural and economic development of the society. Therefore, the concept of gender in traditional Igbo

culture was one of complementarity between the male and the female genders. In agriculture, while the men planted yams, women cultivated cocoyam and vegetables. In traditional Igbo society, each gender recognised its roles and played them effectively and efficiently without compulsion. This led to the overall development of the society, as everyone had a sense of belonging. Egbung (2013) argues that the image of the African woman in precolonial Africa was that of an industrious, hardworking, and independent woman. The traditional African woman played a complementary role with her male counterpart, and this made her socially relevant. The traditional woman's occupation was farming, trading, and other means of livelihood, which made her economically independent. Role differentiation in pre-colonial society worked for the betterment of the society, and it enhanced their growth and development. There was equity, tolerance, and peaceful co-existence. Uko (2017) notes that the pre-colonial or traditional woman in Africa lived in a largely egalitarian society, a society that clearly assigned roles to both genders without bias, a society that accepted and appreciated diversities in what the two genders could do and how they behaved. That implied that if one gender performed a role and the other performed another, it was not due to any incapacitation or inadequacy, but because the functions of both man and woman sought to complement each other for the enhancement of the family or society. Corroborating Uko's argument, Egbung (2013) also notes the active participation of women in traditional society that contributed to the growth of the society, before the advent of colonialism that disrupted that once-vantage position of women. She argues that women in traditional Igbo society were given prominent positions because of the roles they played in the society; they were active participants in the agricultural and economic development of the society because the concept of gender in traditional Igbo culture was that of complementarity between the male and the female genders. The gender relations that existed in pre-colonial Igbo society have been transposed into literature. That is why these writers explore gender complementarity in their works by creating male and female characters who are assertive, hardworking, and who contribute to the growth and development of their society. This transposition is imperative because literature mirrors society. Kato (2013) notes that literature, then, is a reflection of the society that produces it.

Several African female writers have demonstrated the concept of complementarity between male and female characters in their works. They emphasise it because of its importance to the overall growth and development of society. Among them is Ezeigbo (2006), in which women participate actively in the council's decision-making, called Obuofo. Egbung (2013) notes that Ezeigbo advocates complementarity between men and women for the good of society. Ezeigbo achieves this by creating assertive and outspoken women who are members of the Obuofo, the inner council committee of the Umuga community.

This involvement of women in the community's decision-making empowered them politically. They became agents of positive change in the politics of their community. Ezeigbo (1996) argues that Igbo society operated a type of democratic system in which men and women had equal access to political participation. This distribution of power and the concept of role differentiation by gender and sex were features of Igbo society. Though the society was highly patriarchal, different political and social systems and mechanisms existed for women to exercise and manage their affairs.

The clamour for gender equality emerged with the advent of colonialism, as women began to feel marginalised, exploited, and oppressed. This mentality arose because the colonial government worked more with men; they were the first to be educated. Mba (2008) argues that the metropolitan state, Britain, had a class-based gender ideology of separate spheres for men and women, with men occupying the public domain and women the domestic.... The colonial system...favoured men over women in terms of economic opportunities, allocation of resources, education, and political office. This preferential differentiation, in turn, enabled Nigerian men to exercise a greater degree of social, legal, economic, and political control over their women than they had previously.

This newfound hierarchical dichotomy and men's control over women were strange to African women, who were used to gender complementarity, hence the revolt and the desire for gender equality. Women in the colonial era demonstrated their hatred for the interruption of their peaceful co-existence by protesting against the colonial government that imposed taxes on them and the enforcement of British Food Trade Regulations through the 1929 Aba Women's Riot and the Egba Women's Riot of 1946, respectively (Uko 2017). The women in this era were a formidable force in African history, irrespective of their assumed invisibility and docility under the colonial administration (Opara 2004). The desire for equality gave rise to feminism, a theory that encourages women to reject inferiority and strive for recognition in society. Uko further argues that, with the advent of colonisation, new patriarchal conceptions arose

about the appropriate roles of women as colonial administrators and missionaries changed the position of women in economic and social endeavours. Colonialism directly disrupted the traditional system of production and reproduction among the indigenous peoples and introduced social inequality and oppressive forms of social stratification throughout the levels of gender relations and interactions.

Colonialism came and altered the privileged position of women in traditional society. Egbung (2013) argues that the emergence of colonialism disrupted the privileged position of women in Igbo society because it brought with it rigid gender ideologies that encouraged women's invisibility in public space. Colonial hegemony heightened patriarchal tendencies, marginalising and dehumanising women. This marginalisation led to women's late entry into Western education. Lack of education exposes one to depravity, subservience, dependence, and inferiority (Egbung & Owan, 2019). Patriarchy, a system that thrives on the domination of women, flourished with the advent of colonialism. Opara (2004) argues that patriarchy became expressly discernible in African culture jostled by the incursion of Western values, which destroyed the dual-sex system of authority and political power that had existed in some African societies. This paper, therefore, adopts the postcolonial theory of analysis to deconstruct and subvert colonial influence on the African people, which has given rise to gender inequality and marginalisation.

Theoretical framework

The focus on theory is crucial to any critical endeavour. This has become imperative because critical theory is the foundational basis upon which any critical procedure must stand, and from there emerge (Nwahunanya 2010). And since literature mirrors society, there is no discussion of the reality that literature cannot capture and imitate. This is made possible because the picture of society and life presented in literary works compels the reader to believe that life in reality is only being replicated in fiction (Nwahunanya). The concept of post-colonialism is apt in this paper because of the principles guiding the theory. Nwahunanya (2010) argues that the issues raised in post-colonial criticism include the dilemmas of developing a national identity in the wake of colonial rule; how writers from colonised countries attempt to articulate and celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from colonisers; how knowledge of subordinate people is produced and used; and how the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonised as inferior.

Advancing the argument further, Seldon and Widdowson (1993) argue that postcolonialism seeks to undermine the imperialist subject. Bressler (2003) opines that postcolonialism is a heterogeneous field of study, and even its spelling offers several alternatives. Some argue that it should be spelled postcolonialism with no hyphen between post and colonialism, while others insist on using the hyphen, as in post-colonialism. Many of its adherents suggest there are two branches, one that views postcolonialism as a set of diverse methodologies that possess no unitary quality, as suggested by Homi Bhabha and Arun Murkerjee, and those who see postcolonialism as a set of cultural strategies "centered in history".

This study aligns with the branch that views postcolonialism as a set of cultural strategies centred on history, because the experiences captured here are historical African experiences. Experiences of Africans (Igbos) before the advent of colonialism changed everything. Postcolonialism is an attempt to reinvent cherished African values. This perspective is captured by Egbung and Akpagu (2019), who argue that postcolonialism is a theory that undermines Western values and champions African values (2). Following the same line of thought, Seldon and Widdowson (1993) argue that, from a postcolonial perspective, Western values and traditions of thought and literature...are guilty of a repressive ethnocentrism. Berndt (2005) argues that postcolonial discourse has examined the modes of identity formation and resistance, as well as the impact of language, social structures, and cultural traditions on these processes. It interrogates colonial ascriptions and challenges the disabling images forced upon the native population of occupied societies. These images forced on Africans (Igbos) affected their way of life. This gives rise to Egbung's (2018) argument that oppressive Western values should be jettisoned and African values, lifestyle, and identity promoted.

The Igbos had a culture of complementarity that led to the division of labour between the male and female genders. This culture enhanced the smooth running of their traditional society. This is illustrated in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. In this text, women are involved in the political affairs of society. This portrayal by Ezeigbo debunks the colonialists' impression that Africa lacks culture and history. Okereke (2013) refutes the claim, stating that the Western colonialists' assertion that the African lacked civilisation, culture, history, in fact selfhood, became an

adhesive that generated a dialogic response from the African. The educated African, in his response, authenticated the image of the African by vesting him with selfhood, dignity, a unique civilisation, culture, and history. (257)

Analysis

Pre-colonial Gender Relations in *The Last of the Strong Ones*

In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Ezeigbo recognises the importance of both genders in preserving the oral tradition of the Umuga community. That is why she brings men and women together for that purpose. The narrator tells us that “we were a group of twenty women chosen to work together with sixty men to preserve our tradition and guide our people back to our way of life before *kosiri* infested us with their presence” (2). In this context, *Kosiri* refers to the colonialists who came and disrupted the once-prevalent position women held alongside their male counterparts in traditional society. Beyond preserving the people’s tradition, both genders were also grouped to oversee the community’s political affairs; four women and twelve men, making a total of sixteen, formed the inner council committee.

The prominent roles played by women in this novel refute the notion of female inferiority and the belief that men are the custodians of history. Ezeigbo shows us that two women were chosen to take on the duty of recording events, as well as to serve as witnesses, custodians, and critics of the unfolding events. The success of our new task rested squarely on our maintaining an accurate sense of our people’s history by looking into both the past and the future and recording the present with unflinching skill.

The place of women in the novel contradicts Chinua Achebe’s portrayal of women in *Things Fall Apart*, where women are portrayed as docile, voiceless, and cowed. In *The Last of the Strong Ones*, women are part of the community’s decision-making body. They meet first as *oluadas* and take a common decision before joining the men in the *obuofo*. In the end, *Oluada* agreed to participate more intensely and vigorously in *Obuofo* and to continue to represent the women actively in the political body. *Oluada* resolved to support the removal of *Okwara* as warrant chief if he continued to obey *Kosiri* and disregard *Obuofo* and its reforms to improve Umuga as a whole. *Oluada* refused to cooperate with any power or anyone who planned to undermine the culture, the traditional judicial system, and the economic well-being of Umuga.

This unity and resolve, as captured by Ezeigbo in the novel, demonstrate the force women command in pre-colonial traditional Igbo society. The selection of members of the inner council committee (*obuofo*) is based on merit. Despite being a couple, *Obiatu* and *Ejinnaka* are both deemed qualified to serve on the committee. “*Obiatu* and *Ejinnaka* were husband and wife. Both were chosen on merit, as members of *obuofo*, and by different interest groups”. By contrast, under colonial rule, *Obiatu* would have been chosen as the man of the house, expected to bring decisions to his wife. The flexibility of the Igbo system permits both genders to function in complementarity for the good of society. However, this flexibility did not suit some patriarchal figures in the council who feel that women should be silenced, particularly when women refuse to be controlled by their whims and caprices. *Abazu* is a titled man and a member of the *obuofo* who feels he can use his position to intimidate *Onyekozuru*, a woman. He makes known his desire to marry *Onyekozuru* after she lost her husband, but she rejects the offer because she is done with having more children. *Abazu*, who will not take no for an answer, goes further to expose his long-kept secret to her. He assures her that she should not be worried about having more children, since he is impotent. *Onyekozuru*’s resolve not to yield destabilises him, as he has exposed himself. This forms the beginning of his aggression and intimidation towards the woman. He feels frustrated because a woman has turned down his offer, and feels rejected because his strategy of appealing to the narrative of his impotency fails him. He uses the opportunity of their *obuofo* meeting to vent his frustration on *Onyekozuru*. Colombo et al (1998) describe frustrated people as those who strike out against the perceived cause of their frustration. However, this reaction is not always possible because the true source of the frustration is often too nebulous to be identified or too powerful to act against. In such instances, the result may be a displaced or free-floating aggression; in this situation, the frustrated individual or group usually redirects the aggressiveness against a more visible, vulnerable, and socially sanctioned target, one unable to strike back.

In this case, *Onyekozuru* strikes back because Ezeigbo has empowered the woman to speak traditionally, socially, and politically. She strikes back by clipping *Abazu*’s false wings of manhood, which he displays in the public domain, whereas he is empty inside. *Abazu* shouts her down each time she makes an honest point during a discussion on the ground. “Woman, shut your insolent mouth and watch your words,” *Abazu* challenged. The hostility of *Abazu* towards

Onyekozuru is very obvious to the recorders and the observers who are not members of the obufo. “We, watchers, noted Abazu’s reaction whenever Onyekozuru spoke. We wondered at it and asked ourselves what could be the cause of this unprovoked aggression and cruel glitter in his eyes.” Abazu thinks he can intimidate the woman because of her vulnerability, but Ezeigbo recreates her as the traditional African woman who knows her rights in society and refuses to be cowed by the whims and caprices of an exploitative man (Abazu).

Abazu is a metaphor for the colonialist, and he is also a colonial product. Just as the colonial masters saw nothing good in Africa, imposing their belief system on Africans by installing a warrant chief in the person of Okwara against the wishes of the people of Umugu, so Abazu sees no value in any contributions Onyekozuru makes at the Obufo meeting, simply because she rejects his amorous demands, even after he has tried every strategy available to him, including a personal secret he has kept for so many years. He hides his inadequacy as a man by marrying a woman from the descendants of slaves. The narrator tells us that: However, it was an open secret to the members of the extended family that the woman he married, who had many children for him, came from a family of slaves from a neighbouring town. Why a man of such accomplishments and family background should marry a descendant of slaves was a mystery.

His insatiable desire to dominate and conquer the woman, as a colonialist, pushed him to seek Onyekozuru as a second wife. He forgets that the secret he is revealing is the one he has kept in his chest over the years. His false ego deceived him into believing that by exposing his secret, the woman would succumb. “His body exuded much strength, which he carried with an air of arrogance”. His arrogance propelled him to marry a slave woman who would do his bidding and still keep his secret. His revelation to Onyekozuru explains why he married the slave woman, something nobody had figured out over the years.

I could understand then why he had married a slave – a woman who would keep his secret and accept him as he was. A woman with an imperfect background, grateful to be the wife of such an important man. A woman from a distant town, her background unknown to the people of Umuga. I knew I had to be careful with him and his secret, too. The burden of it lay on my bosom like a stone. I wondered who the father of his children was.

Abazu’s violence against Onyekozuru reflects what transpires in an African society among men who are products of colonialism. This has been transposed into literature by African female writers such as Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Ottoh-Agede and Igono (2025) argue that violence of diverse forms is often metaphorised in some African literary works as a semblance of culture and religion.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the gender relations between the male and female genders in precolonial African society, where there was complementarity, using the Igbo society. The paper explores this concept using Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*, in which both genders play complementary roles in the political and social spheres of the Umuga community. The paper, however, concludes that, due to colonial influence, the male gender began to undermine the role and importance of the female gender, thereby engendering conflict. The paper identifies metaphor as an aspect of style that enhances the exploration of the subject matter.

Suggestions

1. This paper suggests that gender complementarity should be the approach towards gender relations, as both genders have critical roles to play in the growth of society.
2. When this is applied, society will be better for it, and there will be no room for any gender to feel oppressed or exploited.

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