

**THE CLASH OF WILLS: EXPLORING THE NEO-COLONIAL  
STRUCTURES IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S  
*THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES***

BY

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**Abstract**

The reconstruction and redefinition of African cultural identity has been like a hallowed mission embarked upon by most postcolonial African writers. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, has excited literary scholarship in this regard. However, many critics have only seen this text as that which chiefly alters the patriarchal praxis that holds sway in early Nigerian fictions as it introduces a strong female narrative voice. For others, it is a text that prioritises African democracy as opposed to western democracy, given the inclusive nature of its cultural world. As such, little or no study has been carried out on it as a postcolonial text that critically unveils what Edward Said sees as the infamous actions or drives of those who speak for the West and for what the West did. This paper embarks on this critical study through the lens of postcolonial literary theory. It demonstrates that other than the text's feminist and cultural orientations, that it exposes some neo-colonial structures that sustain the vestiges of such social pathologies as loss of meaning and African identity. It argues that these structures do not only hamper the authentic process of de-colonization but they also create doubt whether this process will ever alter the hegemonic "normality" created by colonialism. The paper concludes by calling for a more activist representation of these retarding structures by African writers for it will continue to initiate a rethinking process that might lead to the eventual rediscovery of the African true self.

**Keywords:** post-colonialism, neo-colonial structures, clash of wills, identity

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## Introduction

The quest for cultural identity and true self rediscovery has given rise to struggles and oppositions during and after the colonial periods, and many African writers have used their works to weave this reality as part of African literary discourse. For instance, the literary works of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep not Child*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *The River Between* as well as Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, we see the institution of political control among the native people by the colonial masters and the struggle waged against it by the former. No doubt at the attainment of independence, the African nations heaved a sigh of relief for having achieved freedom, but it was soon to be discovered that independence was given as a Trojan gift. The colonialists came up with a more dangerous and deadlier form of control by putting in place a structure that nourishes and furthers the colonial agenda. This new form of control termed neo-colonization has triggered a treacherous exchange of power between the whites and their faithful heirs (blacks): an exploitative situation whereby "us is being used against us".

The text under study has enjoyed a lot of critical reviews. For instance, in "Democracy and Governance in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trilogy and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*", Anthonia N. Chibuoke asserts that African traditional democracy is preferable to the western democracy considering its inclusive nature. For her, African cultural democracy is founded on consensus philosophy of communalism and morality and this helps to reduce disputes, but Western style of democracy is founded on liberalism, self-interest, seeking free market principles whose implementation has hurt the welfare of the poor African. Arguing from a feminist perspective, Itang E. Egbung in his article entitled "Reinventing the African Woman: Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*". He opines that even though the novel represents a colonial era, the female characters were created to reflect and are invested with the traditional powers of the precolonial women. They are self-assertive as well as definitive. Kehinde R. Akano, in his article entitled "Of Obsession and Female Identity: A Psychological reading of *The Last of the Strong Ones* and *The Joys of Motherhood*", maintains that Ezeigbo has been able to rescue the Igbo (nay) African women from artistic denigration and representation for she tried to rewrite the history of the African women by restoring their valiancy and heroism. Andrew C. Chigbu in an unpublished paper titled "Customary Laws, Practices and Sanctions in *The Last of the Strong Ones*" also explores the traditional African society and craving for a new sociological interpretation in

our cultural matrix. It presents a society where customary laws, practices and sanctions are central to the people's life and ultimately shapes their destiny. He equally observed that the way the womenfolk act as the custodian of these laws and practices are ever ready and resilience in defending them even in the threatening presence of *kosiri* is laudable.

Of course, it is evident from the reviews and some other available sources that none reflects the issue that is being raised by this study. The researchers excavated the different patterns of betrayals by warrant chiefs who are appointed by the people of Umuga to represent them. They turn against their people to lick the boots of their slave masters. Therefore, betrayal as a form of "Us against us" underscores the lacuna and the focal point of this study.

### 1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the postcolonial literary theory as its tool for analysis. Postcolonial criticisms carry out its analysis by embarking on the process of rewriting history and asserting cultural identities through strategies such as separatism, nativism, cultural syncretism, hybridity, mimicry, active participation as well as assimilation as opposed to the colonial metanarratives. It critiques cultural hierarchies and Eurocentrism of modernity.

Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Bill Ashcroft and so on are known critics that have lent their voices towards the attempt to re-assert the African vision, their experiences and histories. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* maintains that postcolonial theory is based on countering the false image of the "Orient" as represented by the Western world, which is termed "primitive" or "the other" (Said 25). Those adjectives are derogatory words used by the whites for the people they colonize. This however is in contrast with "civilized" that the West is known for. The consequences of colonialism have continued to bedevil the colonized world in the form of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, bloodshed and so on.

Apart from those, the colonizers have also succeeded in imposing both their language and culture on the "Orientals". This either led to the language and culture of the colonized people being ignored or distorted as is the case in the primary text of this study where political, social and religious culture is highly distorted. Peter Barry (1995) in agreement with Said and Spivak brings out four characteristics of postcolonial analysis through which cultural texts could be analysed:

1. An awareness of representations of the Non-European as exotic or immoral other

2. An interest in the role of language in supporting or subverting that power dynamic
3. An emphasis on identity as double hybrid or unstable
4. A stress on cross-cultural interactions

This study uses cultural syncretism stratagem, with a stress on cross-cultural interactions, to evaluate the neo-colonial structures put in place by colonialism in the text under study. Syncretism, according to Merriam Webster's Dictionary is a combination of belief or practices. And we see it in the text in both political and cultural aspects given the imposition of language and culture of the West on the people of Umuga.

According to Franz Fanon, "Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to over-simplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people" (190). It is this disruption of the cultural heritage of the people of Umuga that exposes the theme of betrayal exhibited by some disgruntled elements among the indigenous people of the community of the novel. These people who pose to be leaders are used by the white man for his neo-colonialist drive. The resultant effect is clashes that culminate to expose the Umuga people to war, chaos, and deaths.

## **2.0 The Neo-colonial Structures in *The Last of the Strong Ones***

### **2.1 Human and Political Structures**

The war that ensues between the whites and the people of Umuga is the result of betrayal of trust. The Obufo the highest governing body in Umuga employs the services of their own to write a letter on their behalf to the white man in-charge of their community intimating him of their readiness to work with him to ensure peace and tranquility in Umuga. But this man, out of his own selfishness or probably what he stands to gain from the deposed warrant chiefs, writes the opposite of what Obufo tells him to write. The reaction of *Kosiri*, which is the name given to the white man after reading the letter is to wage war against the people of Umuga. The act of betrayal exhibited by the letter writer leaves Obufo both bewildered and speechless. This is encapsulated in Obiatu's rhetorical speech before the Obufo in an attempt to explain the treacherous act played on them by the man they hired to write letter to *Kosiri* or probably, someone else with an ulterior motive:

He continued slowly, "Sons and daughters of Umuga, our people say that it is the one who tells the story that bears the burden not the bearer. How can I explain to you our surprise at the way *Kosiri* responded to our letter? Did

we not breathe peace into the words of that letter? Was there anything we did not do to see that the letter carried words meant to clear the ground for future friendly association with Kosiri. (62)

As a result of this letter, the colonialists now see the Obufo as a clog in their wheel of "development" and they apply any mechanism to subdue them. Even at that, Obufo is still oblivion of exactly what transpired that can make Kosiri despise them enormously.

The effect of neo-colonial structures imposed on African people cannot be overstressed because rather than development which the colonialists pretend to have brought to Africa it is crystal clear that the ulterior motive is mainly for exploitative purposes. They could not have effectively achieved this ploy if they had not employed the services of the greedy Africans who can go to any extent to achieve their personal gain. This is explicitly stated by the narrator of the novel:

We were informed of the most recent development in the struggle with Kosiri and Okwara. We heard that our reliable informant at Awka had brought news of the activities of two of the deposed warrant chiefs, Uzuegbu and Onyirioha, who were consorting with *Kosiri* to betray Umuga to the strangers. The news of Okwara was no less disheartening. He was asking Kosiri to provide him with security so that he can enforce, on the Umuga people, the strange laws of the meddlers. (Adimora-Ezeigbo 13)

The sabotaging activities of Owara and the deposed warrant chiefs here do not just come from the spur of the moment. They are masterminded and encouraged by the *Kosiri's* imposition of their own political system on Umuga without considering the political system that is already on ground prior to their incursion. They equally impose leaders who serve as puppets and who can even demean their personalities to be in power. The level of betrayal exhibited by these puppets is encountered in rhetorical questions posed by Okoroji in the meeting of Obufo: "What has gone wrong with some of our elders? Who would have thought that this could happen? Respected elders like Onyirioha and Uzuegbu and now Okwara, allowing *Kosiri* to use them and to cause these sons of Umuga to become traitors to their fatherland?" (14) As shown, the activities of these warrant chiefs leave Obufo with no choice but to reject them as Onyekozuru expresses: "We sacked the warrant chiefs. Even though they are our own people, they preferred to serve the aliens." (8) Of course, this act of sacking can be seen as a testament of Umuga's resolve to recover their

lost identity, but it does not prevent them from feeling the crushing impact of the political maneuverings of Kosiri in their lives.

## **2.2 Socio-Economic Structure**

When a certain group has more economic power than the other in a given society, there is every tendency that the group that is more powerful decides what the culture of the society would be like. This is why Said asserts that "Ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied" (12). Ngugi still on this matter of power and culture relations lends his voice in exposing the evils of colonialism in its totality:

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of cultural bomb is to annihilate people's belief in their names in languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. (1986:3)

Evidently, the tampering with the cultural heritage of Umuga people is one of the factors that brings about clash of wills in the novel. Apart from using their people against them, they also desecrate the things that they hold dear. To the people of Umuga, an insult to their culture is an insult to their life wire as expressed by Ejimnaka: "Kosiri put an obstacle across the path of our life and we shall not rest until we clear it" (7). Onyekozuru, another character expresses the level of desecration of their environment:

Who can blame the goddess? What did Kosiri and his servants not do to Agwazi, her sacred forest and streams? First, they fetch water from the stream using iron cups and metal pots. Then they caught the sacred fish and cooked with firewood gathered from the forest. Even the sacred monkeys were not spared... (5)

The impact of these distortions and disruptions is shown to pain the Umuga people more as they see the overzealous warrant chiefs keep tight lips because they are at the corridors of power. We also see this pain as they see that Kosiri literary abuse their elders. Respect for elderly is a crucial aspect of Umuga culture, thus when they see Kosiri force those they see as able-bodied men to fetch water for their cows and attend to their rest-house, they no prophet to tell them that they have been enslaved as Chieme observes:

He is carrying out the orders of Kosiri to compel our people to engage in unpaid labour. Our young men are taken away to construct roads, take care

of kosiri's rest-houses, fetch water and firewood for the alien oppressors without payment. Okwara is assisting kosiri to enslave our people... (8-9)

This action of Okwara baffles the people of Umuga who are not ignorant of his betrayal. The exclamation of Chibuka captures it all: "Ewuu, what some people do to get power and privilege!" (102) One could say that some of these subtle disapprovals project *The Last of the Strong Ones* as a resistant literature which according to (Arinto 56) is that which "Seeks to again inscribe the history of the third world which has been distorted, misinterpreted or all together ignored in Western discourse. Resistance literature shows how imperialism has undermined the people's consciousness in its destruction not only of political, social, and economic institutions but also cultural institutions". Adimora-Ezeigbo has done marvelously well in bringing to the front burner the men behind the mask in perpetuating neo-colonialism. They are Africans themselves, who fail to question the activities of the white man. In all these, Adimora-Ezeigbo shows that the Umuga community never failed to show resistance. In the case of Onyirioha, they refer to his action: Abomination committed for the love of power". In fact, they brand him an "oluku-spoiler of tradition" (174).

### 2.3 Cultural Cum Religious Structures

The neo-colonial structures in Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel are further made manifest in the way the white colonialists truncate the African standard of training the younger generation to follow the path of respect for the elders. Walter Rodney expatiates this in his assertion about absolute control of power by the whites: "Colonialism went further than trade. It meant a tendency towards direct appropriation the social institutions within Africa (272)." Africans ceased to set cultural goals and standard and lost full command of training young members of the society. Those were major steps backwards.

This backwardness is witnessed in Umuga as a major cultural intrusion by the colonial masters. The Umuga culture is such that sees stealing as an abomination but in the novel where Uzuegbu's son is found stealing Ejimnaka's oil bean, and is confronted by her, he tells her categorically that he is the son of Uzuegbu, the Warrant Chief and that nobody can stop him from doing whatever pleases him in their community. In Umuga, when one steals in the dark, it is presumed that such a person still has an iota of shame in him, but this boy not only steals but does that in a broad daylight. It is in the bid to teach this boy a lesson that a renowned leader of Oluada, Ejimnaka who has participated

actively in the activities of Obufo: the highest governing body in Umuga loses her life. Such level of impudence exhibited by Uzuegbu's son portrays vividly an example of an Igbo adage which states: "that when an adult goat is eating the grass, the younger ones will be looking at its mouth". This is the peak of betrayal because the adults' quest for power has impacted negatively on the youths and they are watching and learning.

This same act of betrayal also goes for the religion of the people of Umuga. According to Al-Khatib, "the colonizers under the cover of civilizing the barbarians tried to impose his religion over them and this means severing them from their history and primitive traditions" (88). This excerpt explains why there is clash of will in the area of religion as the Umuga people vehemently rejects the religion of the white man except for few who cling on it for what they stand to gain. Okwara's benevolence to the white man by offering him a land to build his church is seen by the Umuga people as an act of betrayal: "Okwara has done much mischief in Umuga.... He did not only bring this new god to Umuga, he also gave land to *Kosiri* and they now have a building to house this god and another to teach the children the language of *Kosiri*" (102). Of course the ripple effects of such acts as this are felt throughout the traditional space of Umuga community, raising doubt at various points whether the true cultural identity of the people could ever be rediscovered.

### 3.0 Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that the neo-colonial structures encountered in the selected text expose both the betrayal and enslavement of the Africans by the Western world, they are able to achieve this by adopting "us against us" approach. The factor that fuelled this approach is the greedy nature of the African man, who counts himself first before others. The hollowness portrayed by the warrant chiefs leaves much to be desired. Their actions lend credence to Achebe's axiom which states that: "When a new saying gets to the land of empty men, they lose their heads over it" (qtd in Asomugha and Nwabueze, 52). However, the pockets of resistance exhibited by the Obufo has noteworthy. For it shows Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's creative vision in trying to re-enact the importance of the Africans preserving their culture and history. This is a clarion call to elites to stand up to their responsibilities in opposing anything that would continue to expose the Africans to unnecessary oppression even in the future. It also makes Achebe's statement that "...a counterfeit elite inflicts double jeopardy on society" (qtd in Asomugha and Nwabueze, 51) very instructive.

This study has equally shown that (Bill Ashcroft *et. al* 2) are right when they state that, "All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or the other to overt subtle forms of neo-colonial domination and independence has not solved this problem." From incidents of the novel, it is crystal clear that the effect of colonialism has eaten deep into the fabrics of the African society and will take long to be expunged. However, it is not totally unachievable, but requires the contributions of all and sundry as all hope is not lost to achieving good governance in Africa.

### **Recommendations**

This study recommends that literary artists should stand up to their responsibility of using their literary works to critique the evils in society as this would help in bringing such evil as modern-day slavery to a stop. This is in consonance with the call made by African literary artists to use their works as a weapon for bringing positive change in African societies. For example, Ernest Emenyonu encourages African writers to see it as a task to understand where the "rain began to beat them" and also be able to "know how to dry their bodies" (Emenyonu xi). The study also calls for the attention of government at all levels to be mindful of how they go into all sorts of pacts with foreign countries who may be having one thing in mind but showing them an enticing part to ensnare them into jeopardizing the future of their people. Here, the words of Achebe are quite instructive: "No government, black or white, has the right to stigmatize and destroy groups of its own citizens without undermining the basis of its own existence" (qtd in Asomugha and Nwabueze 67). The modern-day slavery cannot be possible if the government of the day does not undermine the existence of its entire citizenry.

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