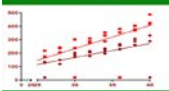


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Feminine Language in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Last of the Strong Ones*

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ABSTRACT

Literature generally evolves from a people's historical and cultural experiences. Though both male and female writers explore their culture for sources of inspirations, and occasionally, for their techniques, the linguistic items employed by both writers to portray their visions are slightly different in the nature of language use as seen in Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. This paper investigates language use in Ezeigbo's work using the feminist discourse approach with particular reference to Elaine Showalter's 'Gynocriticism', which is the study of women as writers. This theoretical thrust provides critics with four models concerning the nature of criticism of female writers' works. The paper affirms that in spite of what patriarchy calls the feminine in language use, which are gender differentiated linguistic behaviours Ezeigbo like most other female writers, employs language for distinctiveness and identity to express genuinely female consciousness in a personal, intimate tone. The preponderance of personal pronoun 'I' helps to present things in an involved and relational way; the frequent use of rhetorical questions are signs of conversational control, whereas the recurrent reference to land, nature and culture reaffirms women as great mothers. In all, Ezeigbo endows women with the power of speech as subjects in their use of linguistic features. Since the novel is a diversity of social speech types, language use also predisposes both sexes along linguistic differences. In conclusion the paper submits that language use as reflected in the feminist world-view, deals with women's development and identity and not 'otherness' as patriarchy perceives it. Therefore, through the careful selection of the linguistic items, Ezeigbo extends the limits of the English language to accommodate her perceptions of African cultural world view from the female perspective.

Key words: Gynocriticism, gender, the biological model, the linguistic model, the psychoanalytic model and the cultural model

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Introduction

Language and culture have been the dominant myths in the works of women writers. Culturally and historically women have often been silenced due to the patriarchal nature of the society and for this reason language is necessarily said to be male oriented and male dominated. Therefore, universal sexual differentiation of speech and script are expected to occur whenever social division exists between the roles played by men and women. Most often male writers position women's writing as the feminine; the absent referent in the predominant myth of language (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, p.652). The interaction between gender and language and especially the connection of power to that interaction is now widely observed. Women are identified with nature and matter in any traditional thematic of gender; for instance, John Milton calls the planet Earth "great Mother" (Rivkin & Ryan, p.651), patriarchy often classifies female language as always 'elsewhere' since culturally, the feminine is always 'absent' or the 'object' and habitually identified with nature.

It is generally assumed that speech differential reflect the social distinctions deemed important by the community of speakers; the male refer to the female dialogue as the feminine language. Margaret Homans argues that:

Feminine language together with nature and matter to which it is epistemologically linked, is traditionally classified as womanly, and the feminine is from the point of view of a predominantly endocentric culture, always elsewhere. A dualism of presence and absence, of subject and object, structure everything African culture considers thinkable. Women cannot participate in it as subjects as easily as can men because of the power, the persuasive way in which the feminine is again and again said to be on the object's side of the dyad (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, p. 651).

From the point of view of this myth, the feminine language makes possible and endangers the figurative (male) structures of literature. The differential valuation of the figurative originates in the way African culture constructs masculinity and femininity. The feminine is associated with the

woman or object, while the more highly valued figurative is associated with masculinity.

Homans further says that: "to take something as feminine is to get it wrong, while to have a figurative understanding of something is the correct intellectual stance" (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, p.652). Language is seen as supporting male supremacy, yet, it is also a means for female resisting oppression or pursuing their projects and interests. Female writings are also intelligible to those who privilege the figurative, and yet cannot adequately identify with specific female consciousness. According to Showalter in "Towards a feminist Poetics": "language invention is an integration of women's intelligence and experience; reason and suffering, skepticism and vision" (1987, p.109). Gender roles prove significant determinants of human behavior, their speech patterns therefore differ from the men in their socialization and the way they communicate their experiences. In "Language as Index of Female Space" Okereke asserts that: "language is gender specific and therefore creates a dichotomy between the man and the woman especially in traditional society" (1997, p. 414). Consequently, the possibility of eliminating gender from language is far-fetched since language is not only shaped by society, but society by the language.

Opara's opinines that: "Language as used by Ezeigbo becomes a device that highlights the realities of the environment rather than merely the user's notion ... Ezeigbo's literary adeptness lies in her linguistic exploration and how she uses language to weave her ideological vision into her fiction" (159). Evidently, Ezeigbo is generally applauded for refraining from using the aggressive and pro-active idiolects usually associated with feminist movements and writings. Rather, she artistically applies assertive terms in the simple everyday conversational registers that reflect complementary relationship between the sexes.

Through the feminist idiolect, Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones* portrays women as the privileged and the figurative – that is, as present, thinking women – women who continually guard against fulfilling those imposed definitions that will return them to the 'object' position. Ezeigbo shares Homans' identification of the feminine as having to do with "women's own development and identity even though that identity is never en-

tirely separable from culture as a whole” (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, p.6510). Women’s language reflects their conservation, prestige, consciousness, difference, nurturance, connectedness, insecurity, sensitivity to others, solidarity, and all other emotional expressions; whereas, men’s language is heard as evincing their toughness, affectiveness, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, and control.

Scholars have examined many aspects of Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*, but this paper will look at language use, or gender differentiated linguistic behavior using the Feminist critical theory, with particular reference to Showalter’s ‘Gynocriticism’. This theoretical thrust provides critics with four models in the study of women as writers and their writings. These models include: “the biological model, the linguistic model, the psychoanalytic model and the cultural model” (Bressler 1994, p.105-106). The fact that male and female typically, differ in many morphological and behavioural traits, there necessarily will be marked differences in their employment of linguistics items in their works.

Gynocriticism has now become synonymous with the study of women as writers, and provides critics with four models concerning the nature of criticism of female writers’ works. Rice & Waugh infer that “gynocriticism is to construct a female framework for the analyses of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than to adopt male models and theories” (1992, p.95). Showalter, cited in Selden & Widdowson, also argues that: “while there is no fixed or innate female sexuality or female imagination, there is nevertheless, a profound difference between women’s writing and men’s, and that a whole tradition of writing has been neglected by male critics ...” (1987, p.219-220), her argument is in consonance with feminist attempt to extricate the female aesthetics from the barriers of male language, to give space and character to the female voice.

Also in discussing gynocriticism, Abrams & Harpham acknowledge that:

One concern of gynocritics is to identify distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women in the world of domesticity. For example the special experiences of gestation, giving birth and

our nurturing, or mother-daughter and woman-woman relationships in which personal affectional issues and not external activism are the primary interest (2009, p.173).

This assertion focuses on the female writers’ concern about revealing those essential qualities that nature endows women which distinguish them from their male counterparts as well as their unique experiences in the society, all of which the male writers cannot adequately describe as reflected in Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones* (*The Last*).

Language use in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last*:

The Biological Model in *The Last*:

This model draws the critics’ attention to how the female body marks itself upon the text by providing a host of literary images and personal intimate tone in the novel. Bakhtin describes the personal intimate tone as “a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and diversity of individual voices artistically organized” (Bressler 1994, p.33). This ‘diversity’ includes characteristic group behavior, generic languages which reflect in the choice of linguistic items the authors employ in their works. Therefore, Ezeigbo’s constant reference to ‘land’ an image that runs through the work; shows the woman’s commitment to the earth, and likewise portrays the intimacy between the woman and the ‘mother earth’ or what patriarchy calls the feminine in language. Connotatively, the woman becomes the womb, mother and tenderer of the earth. It reaffirms the general assumption of the myth that “women are inextricably linked with nature and matter” (Bressler 1994, p.33), ‘nature and matter’ refers to the woman’s spheres of interest to be all inclusive in the whole universe. Conversely, “the sky being overcast with heavy clouds and the rumbles of thunder echo the chaos that threatened Umuga” (p.1), these images give more involved informational features of the bonding between women and nature. As women watch the weather for cultivation, connotatively, so do they watch out for cloudy atmosphere within their homes to avert human ‘thunder’ that may ‘echo chaos’ to threaten their peace.

The author persistently uses the image of “women carrying water pots”, water represents life’s

many essences: health, cure, fertility, wealth, agriculture, food, communication, linkages, cleanliness and cleansing, purification, purging, the spirit and soul of the people, relationship between the spirit and human world and a host of other substances; and the pot denotes the cultural atmosphere. Since women are intricately bound to the culture, the author dwells extensively on the devastation *Kosiri* has done to the culture and substance of the people - the devastation to the image of "the sacred forest of *Agwazi*"; a stream and a home for the 'goddess of fertility' - once the soul of the people - but now a source of fear and death as *Kosiri* desecrates the stream by fetching water from it using iron cups and metal pots. *Kosiri* also catch the sacred fishes and monkeys and cook them with the firewood gathered from the forest, which are taboos to the people and sacred forest. *Kosiri*, or what *Armah* in *Two Thousand Seasons* calls the *Predators*, signify the undermining nature of the white man on the Africans and their cultures. *Ezeigbo* uses the symbols of the church and school buildings to represent the presence of *Kosiri* in *Umuga* (p.112), and the burning of these two symbols by irate youths signify the people's protest and rejection of *Kosiri's* presence. Ironically, when the need arises for the community to do a letter to *Kosiri*, the *Umuga* elders hire *Orizu*, an outsider and a graduate of *Kosiri's* school who betrays them. Whereas, the elders are seeking peace instead of war, *Orizu* threatens *Kosiri* with such utterances as: "Umuga people are ready to see which of the tortoises is male or female" (p.56), the maleness and femaleness of the two tortoises suggests strength and weakness. *Ezeigbo's* choice of this harmless creature to symbolize strength and weakness shows women in-depth knowledge of their environment and invariably the inner strength of the woman.

Ezeigbo presents the images of gods and goddesses that reign in the affairs of *Umuga* to include: *Idemmiri* the great goddess of wealth (p.44); and the only "goddess ... who has a husband" (p.79); the "wife of *Nkwo*" (p.80), she is highly venerated and her husband defers to her in all things. In the image of this couple the author captures the complimentary relationship between the husband and wife as an African cultural way of life and wishes that the relationship between *Nkwo* and *Idemmiri* should be the norm in all homes. In spite of the exalted position

of the *Idemmiri* she honours her husband and in turn he adores her. The women carefully decorate *Idemmiri's* shrine with abstract patterns and her worshippers celebrate her lavishly. The people also pay particular attention to the shrines of *Isigwu* 'the ageless goddess'; these are gods and goddesses that add value to their well-being. On the other hand, the god "Agwu, the spirit of disorder and deformity" (p.85), is highly dreaded. This god may also represent *Kosiri* the plunderer of their traditions or some dreaded men as heads of families. Often only female writers will dwell extensively with 'gods and goddesses' as the soul of the people. Though male writers like *Chinua Achebe* in *Things Fall Apart* looks into some of these gods and goddesses but he gives no in-depth analysis of their functions and connectedness to the people as *Ezeigbo* does.

Through the biological model the relationship between mother and daughter is emphasized. When *Onyekozuru*, one of the women leaders, seeks to know from her mother why she is married off to such an old man *Umeozo*, in reply her mother gives the truism that she too married her father in his old age and more so, that *Onyekozuru* is an exchange for a large parcel of farmland *Umeozo* gave them which they could not repay. Again when *Onyekozuru* becomes depressed for losing her lover *Obiatu* to *Ejinnaka*, her mother advises her to wisely relate with *Ejinnaka* in order to keep company with *Obiatu*.

The striking images of human and animal motifs that abound to mother-nature are almost always implied in the women's writings. As *Ezeigbo* marks the female body on the text, *Ejinnaka* one of the women leaders, decorates her home with beautiful patterns such as the image of "bold womb-like murals ... symbols of fertility" (p.11), the womb procreates and increases the world, this is one of the major concerns of the African woman. Another arresting image comprises: "... most exquisite shapes of several eagle-like birds, swooping down from immense heights ..." (p.11). The eagle is noted for its strength, foresight, homeliness, and care; its monogamist nature represents peace and harmonious relationship, the author advocates. *Ejinnaka's* mural art is reflective of the total life of love, peace, harmony, vitality, hope and elegance in her home. Through the image of the eagle the author also endows the women with extraordinary strength

and the ability of soaring high in all spheres of life. Through the author's creative use of language, the narrator describes Ejimnaka as "comely and solidly built. She is middle-aged and still full of strength and vitality". Ejimnaka's beauty is also described as "the glory of womanhood", her beauty goes with the artistic designs on her walls.

Ezeigbo's use of symbols, words and collocations also depict her language use as she captures the image of the 'two he-goats in the pen' (p.62), their continual bleating, straining efforts against their leashes, and the protests against their incarceration. The image illustrates the pricelessness of liberty even for animals, and further shows Kosiri's confinement of the Umuga people and the people's clamor for freedom in their ethnocentric space. On the other hand, the captivity of the 'he-goats' also averts their molesting of the pregnant she-goats which may result in still-births or abortions. Equally, this reflects on the sexual indiscipline of some men when their women are pregnant.

Ezeigbo foregrounds a generational relationship through the women as "the family historians, story-tellers and the custodians of tradition" (p.71), as they link up the eager children with the folklore of the people and the legends of the tribes; their exploits and attributes. She shows women's economic potentials and resourcefulness, in Ejimnaka and Chime's words respectively: "I could not entertain having to eat out of any man's hand or being under his heel all my life" (p.21), and "I was not going to depend on anyone to provided for me" (p.82), for these reasons Ejimnaka takes to farming and mat-making and trading while Chime engages to chanting and trading.

Ezeigbo's language use is also seen through the image of the "ukpaka tree ... heavy with mature ripe fruits, hanging from its branches" (p.147), this image depicts not only motherhood, but presents the tree as a source of agriculture, health, cure, food, energy, grave, and a contest arena between the agents of Kosiri and the people. Again, "The mighty tree" (p.119), signifies governing, mothering and the strength of Obufo the ruling body, while "the birds" (p.119), signify the governed. The fall of the tree (the mother), invariably means the collapse of the people and the birds (the children) unsurprisingly take

refuge in the forest where they are exposed to all forms of danger. While the "ogbu tree" (p.149), becomes the contest arena, (the contest between tradition and modern, between the oppressor and the oppressed), and a place of burial for Ejimnaka buried under the same tree. Ejimnaka slips off the tree and dies as she struggles to stop the warrant chief's son, from picking the fruits from her tree. In the biblical times, the tree has most often being a final resting place for great kings and their nobles; in 1 Samuel, Saul and his children, mighty men of valour were "buried under the tree in Jabesh" (31:13). Still in the Holy Bible, in 2 Samuel, we also note war-fare on top of the 'Mulberry tree...' (5:24). In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison represents the image of the tree as ugly, where blacks hung up to rotten in Sweet Home, and incidentally, the tree is a direction to freedom and reconnection to the ancestral body.

Through language use, the author praises the beauty and care of the woman's body. Chibuka says: "I took care of my body to make it look beautiful again ... it gives me pleasure to wear my jigida and have my skin adorned with uhie and uri..." (p.44) In praise of Ejimnaka's beauty, Oyenkozuru says: "To behold her was to behold the glory of womanhood. ... Her hair was thick and stylishly arranged" (p.50). Morrison also praises the beauty of the woman in all her works. In *The Bluest Eye* she declares that the novel was her "effort to say something about the fact that beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could do" (Afterword 1998, p.8). Similarly in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, in spite of the grievousness of the war, Debbie the protagonist observes the smoothness of the women's body as the mud cake then fall off their faces and bodies. She remembers that they were as smooth as: "it had been many years ago in London when she had had to pay a large amount of money to get the same effect" (1982, p.211).

Through Showalter's biological model Ezeigbo marks the female body in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Her female characters transcend the constricting modes of female oppression in society: the tradition family, economic dependence and illiteracy. Thus she transforms the women into dynamic and self-sustaining figures that challenge societal obstacles without fear. Ezeigbo's women reecho Acholonu's accession that: "What determines social statures in Africa is economic

power and hardly gender" (1995, p.44). More so, feminists reject patriarchal aesthetics such as the interpretation of literature as mimetic other than, purely verbal and linguistic.

Language use in Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last*:

Linguistic Model:

This portrays the differences in women and men's use of language; whether women can and do create a language peculiar to their gender and utilize such language in the writing. Widdowson is of the opinion that at the heart of literary creation is the struggle to devise patterns of language which will bestow upon the linguistic items concerned those lines which will convey the individual's writer's vision. Linguistic differences between men and women can appear at various levels of grammar, as well as in patterns of conversational interaction.

Ezeigbo's language use echos in her frequent use of the personal pronoun 'I' to present things in an involved and relational way. For instance: "I was told I was not there ..." "... I did not suffer needlessly..." "... When I emerged from mourning, I felt like a newly-hatched chick ... I had so much time at my disposal that I did not know what to do with it ... If I found myself ... I felt guilty ... I was being indolent and dishonest ... I began to hire people ... I did not have to do all the work alone ... I shared with paid worker ... I was very angry ... I did not want to have any more children ... I therefore rejected a husband ... I was free to have a man of my choice ... I was asked to leave ... I could not choose any of them ... I could not choose anyone..." (p.43). On this typical page, the occurrences of first person pronoun, shows the 'involved nature' of the author's writing. In functional terms the use of this pronoun also suggests the drawing of the reader into the text and through it. Ezeigbo maintains a high degree of continuity among the 'things' in the text and so reduces the need to use specification. "Gender-based variation of the first-personal pronoun 'I' (and related phrases such as I think) are observable in female writing" (Holmes 1994, p.23; Preisler: et all 2014, p. 43). The author's use of first personal pronouns than generic pronouns further points to a more personalization of the text.

Biber & Reppen also observe that: "involved writ-

ing in women's writings, other than first personal pronouns is analytic negation" (1998, p.40), such negations in this text include: "I was not happy that my husband was that old, but I did not complain loudly, my father was not well-to-do. "His first wife, Udumaga was not young; Udumaga did not compete with me" (p.39). 'My marriage was unexciting (p.40), "my husband did not take me out" (p.41), "I did not wake up from the bad dream" (p.42). "I did not realize how much I slaved to make others happy" (p.41), the number of negations on these few pages confirm Biber and Reppen's 'involved' writing through negation observable in women's works. The society imposes language use which certainly impacts on females' writings.

Ezeigbo exploits rhetorical questions to mirror the feminine in language use as she laments the tragedy that has befallen Umuga: "Is it not the monkey that says that she cannot dispute the fact that the baby monkey she is carrying on her back has eaten the utu fruits, since she does not have eyes on her back?" (p.56). 'What about his son who was taken away?"(p.129). "What did these accursed ones who betrayed the land of their birth want to say to obufo?" "... Did obufo listen to them?" (p.131). "With what tongue would we narrate the account of the war of kosiri which ravaged our land for seven months?' How could we share words to tell future generations that kosiri fought a war of blame against our people and won?' (p.141). Lakoff argues "that the use of facilitative rhetorical questions by women might be more plausibly interpreted as signs of conversational control than as signs of subordination as had been previously contended" (p.54). This paper shares Lakoff's view that the use of rhetorical questions speaks of orality as embedded in the psyche of African writers especially on the consciousness of the women. Ezeigbo uses phrases like "monthly flow" (p.73), which also reflects cycles of life and a calendar of events; "the future is pregnant and uncertain (p.152), points to the ambiguities of life; 'You who suckled at the breasts of Umuga earth" (p.153), indicates the land of nativity. All these lexical items are effectively womanly; more so, these vocabularies are also populated with the social intentions of others, but Ezeigbo compels them to serve her new intentions, and invariably set her work apart from the cultural ways men write.

Conversely, if the males have a monopoly over language at the expense of the females, language will come to what Hall calls “closure”; where things appear to have only one, given unalterable and ‘superclass’ meaning” (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998, p.106). Male monopoly over language will also negate what Derrida calls “dissemination’ ... meaning is never ... singly or fixed, but constantly proliferating and shifting and slipping, whether it be in spoken or written language” (Webster 1991, p.102). Since language is a social and shared communicative system, and not an individual phenomenon, it therefore backgrounds the monopoly of the privileged and the figurative.

Language use in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last*

The Psychological Model:

This is based on the analysis of the female psyche and how such an analysis shapes the woman’s writing process. Men use their privileged access to language as a right to the world of public discourse and their statements seem to carry some form of representativeness and authority which permit the establishment of the primary framework or terms of an argument as contrasted with women who are struggling to gain access to the world of public discourse. Stuart Hall opines that: “the struggle over meaning, the multi-accentuality of the sign, goes with the struggle over access to the very means of signification” (Rivkin & Ryan 1998, p.106). Male writers’ monopoly in the struggle over access and meaning is a number-game in the literary world; where maleness has become part and parcel of that dialectical process of production of consent to shape the consensus dominant social interests.

All the same, female writers are familiar with these social stratifications; false universal value, or accurately parochial national tradition, experience of which shows in the complex reality of difference in the use of their linguistic items. One such complex reality of difference is the way female writers domesticate their linguistic items to give them universal meanings. Ezeigbo describes memory as “womblike ... where the seed for future earthing and sprouting are stored” (p.12). The author equates the female memory with agricultural seasons with their seed time and harvest; as women store generational stories and hand same over from one generation to

another. The author also places the women in the subject position, as they take up the duty as custodians and critics of the community, recording events as well as reconstructing the lives of the people. Ezeigbo domesticates the gifts *kosiri* uses in enticing the warrant chiefs to include: “soap, matches, blankets and kerosene” (p.16), and not “strong drinks and guns” (Feuser p.50), indicating some maleness - which the white slave traders - used to lure the African chiefs in exchange for their families and friends as slaves, as portrayed in Ousmane’s *Tribal Marks*.

On special experience of conception, childbirth, nurturing, marriage and motherhood which are the greatest goals and achievements for the African woman, with Ezeigbo’s feminine use of language she explores these peculiar female experiences with the skill that surpasses that of any male writer. Onyekozuru narrates: ‘I was prepared early for marriage. My mother played a major role in this. She taught me how to cook and take care of the house, how to look after babies and livestock’ (p.66). If a young wife does not know how to cook, keep home, farm and relate with in-laws, the community castigates her mother. Teffo asserts that: “in African societies marriage and fertility are culturally shared values ... A man is considered a man of some standing in the community when he gets married. A woman’s prestige in the community is also enhanced by marriage” (1991:55-6). Stereotyped gender roles continue to assign domestic service and child care to women, whether they engage in other businesses or not; whereas human achievement, interest and ambition are attributed to men, and only the female writers may wish to reverse these categorized roles.

The author pays particular attention to the welfare of the family. All exchange of greetings seek to know about the welfare of the children. “Mothers worry when their children were sick ... and sun the grand-children’s clothes” (Ezeigbo:32&37). “My mother ... ended up taking care of their children as well as hers; children from the neighbouring homes also went there to play” (38), Oyekozeru says. The physiological differences between men and women account for differential gender roles and only female writers pay attention to these sex descriptions. The woman’s role in the reproduction and care of the young is biologically determined to the extent that she almost

always loses her selfhood in seeking to provide for her young.

With language use, Ezeigbo foregrounds African rich cultural values in health care. Onyekozuru's mother nurses her father's "wound regularly with herbs and other medical preparations brought by Ezeobi the dibia" (p.67). When Obaze shots Onyekozuru on the shoulder, the wound is also "treated with herbs and bound with banana leaves" (p.115). Herbs and other medical preparations are cultural ways of treating injuries and other ailments effectively, and the dibias are the traditional doctors who know the language of herbs and cure. In the same vein the author brings to the fore the traditional ways of caring for the pregnant woman and childbearing. Pregnant women "eat plenty of vegetable and fruits" (p.98). During delivery the midwife orders "for boiling water ... banana leaves were spread and the sharp aguba (pen-knife) was sterilized. ... Mother told me not to cry or I would cry in subsequent births" (p.100). This generic stratification of language use is peculiar to women and is socially significant in the woman's world-view. Edward Arnold submits that: "historically, as with class and race, literature has arguably tended to subordinate and marginalize the position of women ... until relatively recently there has been very few if any literary works which deal with the trials and tribulations of childbearing and rearing" (Webster1991, p.73). Men's privileged language may fail them in the description of the "trial and tribulation of childbearing and rearing" because of their total lack of experience in this connection. These linguistic features represent a great socialization into gender; they mirror the different social processes found in nature and also echo the encoding of different meanings. Women must break off from male domination and restrictions to articulate genuinely female consciousness.

Every socially significant verbal performance has the ability to create praise words. Through language use the author in privileging the women refers to them as the: "Lioness that leads the pack", "the wise one; the thundering tigress of Umuga" (p.7). "Heads of the stream" (p.8). "Daughters of Umuga, eloquent voices and perceptive minds ... custodians of Umuga's history and secrets" (p.34). Ejimnaka, mother of the land, you were born to lead" (p.35). Ukonwa is

a strong woman and she is "respected and even feared in the umunna" (p.69). Their remembering is inexhaustible and nourishes the "powers of recollection of the youths. ... In the home of a powerful woman who had three wives" (p.83). Women are "the memory of the community ... like a string that links the generations, keeping alive our history and our tradition" (p.85). With language use the author pours encomiums on the women to enhance their social differentiation, and to bring out the extra-ordinary in them; attributes that most often male writers would not ascribe to women.

The female writer adequately represents the psychology of sufferings, deprivations and the trauma of widowhood especially in the hands of malicious relations. Onyekozuru boldly rejects levirate marriage – she refuses other in-laws' hands in marriage after the death of her husband. Likewise, Ramatoulaye in Ba's *So Long Letter*, rejects the brother-in-law Tamsir's marriage proposal; she emphasizes: "I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand" (p.58). Most often, it is only the female writer that can articulate wife inheritance and the inherent distress to the widow.

Maria Umeh in "African Woman in Transition in the Novels of Emechata" observes that: "formerly the image of the African woman was depicted exclusively by African men in their writings, and that was a one-dimensional romanticized image of the African woman, primarily as mother or wife, it is contrary to what Ezeigbo depicts in her novels". She further remarks that: "Rather than simply portraying the African woman symbolically as part of the warm and secured African past, she Ezeigbo, offers faithful portrayals, patterns of self-analysis and general insights into the female psyche, ignored by or inaccessible to the African male writers" (1982, p.191). In describing her sexual fulfillment with Obiatu, Onyekozuru says:

My heart somersaulted many times like an acrobat ... I felt moist all over and my body spoke a new language I never knew existed ... Like an ogbodu, my soul stood apart, secretly, and watched my body put up a fantastic performance (p.55).

Through language use Ezeigbo describes the amazing response to sexual orgasm Onyekozuru

ru attains for the first time in her life, which goes a long way to condemning unequal marriages between younger girls to much older men.

Language use in Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last*

The Cultural Model:

This model investigates how social stratification in the society in which the female authors work and function shape their goals, responses, and points of view. Bakhtin agrees that: "social stratification is also primarily determined by differences between the forms used to convey meaning and between the expressive planes of various belief systems" (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998, p.33). Some of Ezeigbo's 'expressive planes' in her language use embrace the way she captures the customs and traditions of the people through proverbs, wise-sayings and local colour; most of which are about relationships, apologies and the beliefs of the people; some of which she represents in animate and inanimate images. On relationships she writes: "the dance of the basket separates the grain from the chaff" (p.15), tough times separate the strong from the weak, the loyal from the disloyal with particular reference to the conflict between Umuga and kosiri which shows the patriots and the traitors like the warrant chiefs.. "The bow that shoots eleke deserves the prize of a thousand arrows" (p.21), whoever will stand up against kosiri deserves the respect of the people, it also refers to prize that will be given to whoever marries Ejimnaka. "I was a bat, belonging neither to the birds of the air nor to the earth bound animals" (p.26), neither here nor there, an ambiguous person. Here Ejimnaka is neither a maiden nor a married woman after she moves out of Alagbogu's home against the tradition. "It is said that when a commoner wishes to criticize a king, he wears the disguise of a masquerade, but that is not my style" (p.60), Onyekozuru fearlessly confronts Obazu with the truth of his impotency publicly though she is a woman. "Locusts are able to devour a huge forest because they move in swarms" (p.37), shows the power in cooperation, as against individuality which is insignificant and ineffective. "When mother goat chews grass, her little one watches her mouth" (p.38), reflects the relationship between children and their parents. Onyekozuru's mother was married at a tender age to an elderly man, so is Onyekozuru. "The pumpkin stem that

is left untended creeps into excrement" (p.68), a child who does not adhere to discipline ends in destruction.

Some of the wise-sayings include: "kosiri pick us up as snails" (p.16), shows the vulnerability of the people. "Feeling naked like a plucked chicken" (p.46), feeling exposed to danger. "Embracing the sheep and the wolves" (p.89), the new religion accepts all and sundry. "Our people say that the followers of the mask spirit are its eyes" (p.15), the indigenes empower kosiri to devastate their culture. "A traveler's eyes constantly peer at the sky to ascertain the weather condition" (p.17), Kosiri as a traveler should be sensitive and not interfere or impose their culture on the culture of the people. In response to kosiri's source if powers Ejimnaka replies: "His power feeds fat on people's weakness and on disunity" (p.16), Ejimnaka advocates the unity of the people and their awareness of the exploitative nature of kosiri and their agents.

Ezeigbo seems apologetic in her use of some proverbs and wise-sayings: "a skinny person becomes uneasy when reference is made to a tattered basket" (p.102), one with a guilty conscience or one with some form of deformity; feels anxious when the guilt or the defect is mentioned. "It is the rat in the house that told the rat in the bush that there is fish in the house" (p.109), one's enemy is of one's household. "Like hens looking for places to lay their eggs" (p.113), people in a state of confusion.

Some transliterations or local colours include: "It is time we got to the head of the talk" (p.8), "the kernel of the discussion" (p.5-6), to get at the main discussion of the day. "Do I have your ears, daughters of the land" (p.8), to have the attention of everyone present, "the night had advanced far and the noon was at the brightest when Obiatu tied the loose ends of our discussion" (p.18), the time is 11 p.m. "Something is feeding on your flesh" (p.51), you have a bugging problem. "Tell those who sent you that you did not find me at home" (p.59), not ready for a discussion. "I did not tell the world you are an empty shell. You are only a big drum that is hollow inside" (p.59), refers to Abazu's impotency or sterility.

Ezeigbo has an advantage over male counterparts since she is a female writing about women.

She represents womanhood credibly; a departure from the stocked female images presented by some chauvinistic male writers. Michel Foucault in "The Order of Things: New Historicism", says: "what is true depends on who controls the discourse" (p.378). The author exploits language use to control female discourse. She uses language that is more attentive to the effective function of conversation and orality. She is prone to using linguistic items that solidify relationships and she deploys proverbs and indigenous tropes to reflect the environment.

Conclusion

This paper submits that language use in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* defines the work as a feminist work that is easily discussed and assessed through Showalter's 'gynocriticism'. In the biological model women identify with nature and through language use the author gives them distinctiveness and a developmental pattern. In addition, the author's choice of linguistic items sets forth information in 'generic language'. In the linguistic model, Ezeigbo employs the peculiar use of first personal pronouns in encoding the relationship between the writer and the reader in the text. And through involved and relational language, she draws the writer and the reader closer and this also reveals in her use of rhetorical questions. The author's language use points to greater personification of the text. The psychological model foregrounds the social stratification in the author's language use even to the understanding of the privileged male. The cultural model expresses the social stratification in the way the novelist conceptualizes and accentuates cultural elements to reflect the African world-view. She domesticates cultural items such as proverbs, wise sayings to mirror the feminine language.

In all, Ezeigbo endows women with the power as subjects in their use of linguistic features. Since the novel is a diversity of social speech types, which includes the fact that male and female typically differ in many morphological and behavioural traits, language use also predisposes them to linguistic differences does not lead to male-hate but sex differentials that are complementary. According to Catherine Clinton: *The Underside American History*: in Nseobot Ekpenyong, "the modern heroine is confidently moving

into the social, political and literary arts to define and lay claims to those moments of existential choice whereby she projects herself as the subject of her history" (p.75). It is culturally believed that the importance attributed to a statement depends on who makes it, since culture is still an imposition from patriarchy who dictates the woman's position in society, Ezeigbo's language use, deals with women's progress and uniqueness that place her heroines as the subject of their histories.

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