



## **Feminist Issues in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets***

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### ***Abstract***

*African Female writers have investigated the misperception and misconception of female characters in the Nigerian literary space. Previous studies have investigated female characters from psychoanalysis, stylistic, pragmatic, and western feminist points of view with insufficient scholarly attention paid to the feminist issues in Adimora Ezeigbo's writing. This study, therefore, investigates feminist issues in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* with a view to finding how the writings of the female writers show areas of convergence and divergence in the presentations of the tenets of feminism. African feminism is adopted as theoretical framework because it reflects the identities, ideologies, experiences, and beliefs of African women in a male dominated African society. The text is purposively selected because it helps to achieve specific objectives of this paper. The study revealed that marriage, motherhood, sexual harassment and gender violence, men's infidelity and emotional instability and communal life and mother-in-law interference, characterise the discourse of female African writings. The study concludes that African female writers, through their writings, solicit social peace and tranquility among their family members and the larger society and construe women as an indispensable weapon to social economic and political developments.*

***Keywords:*** *Feminist, Issues, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's, Roses, Bullets.*

## Introduction

### Background to the Study

Many studies on gender have examined patriarchy, subjugation, and oppression of women in various forms and from several points of view (Akorede 2010, Opara 2008, Oko 1996). Most of these past studies focused on the stereotypical representation of female characters in male-authored texts. They all aimed at achieving self-definition and self-actualisation for women. However, the Nigerian women novels have grown beyond the stage of examining female characters who are docile and look up to man for their day to day survival. This is because such representation projects the negative portrayal of womenfolk as inimical. The new paradigms in feminist characterisation help to plead women cause. This is mostly done by focusing on the following topics such as education and career; activism and participation. This suggests that Nigerian women writers are not backgrounded to the kitchen but foregrounded as leading characters in both men and women writings. It is not surprising therefore, to see that some (though very few) of the male writers are gradually changing their styles of writing, as they now paint positive images of women in their

works. Nowadays, most African female novelists stereotype men in their writings as a means of “launching back an attack on them”. Men are given roles like rapist, armed robbers, hired assassins, cheaters, and unfaithful husbands. Meanwhile, to have an effective complementarity and inclusion of both sexes in the struggle for survival by the nation, it is necessary to reconstruct the identity of the male characters in Nigerian women novels and vice versa. This study, therefore, examines the portrayal of the male and female characters in selected novels of two female writers with a view to unmasking men’s stereotypical minds towards women and vice versa.

### Statement of the problem

Previous studies have examined the works of Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo from cultural, political, historical, and religious points of view particularly *Roses and Bullets*. Among such works are Ihueze, Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ozoh (2018), Guarracino (2016), Ojinmah (2012), Nwagbara (2012), Orabueze (2011), and Adeyemi (2011). Ihueze, Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ozoh (2018) research on the way female war writer express their views on war related issues. Using formalistic approach to

analyse Akachi-Adimora Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* and Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, the female war writers deployed creative literary techniques such as role reversal, creative recollections, flashback, transliteration, proverbs, and subjectivity in presenting viewpoints and African story telling techniques. The study concludes that, through the aforementioned literary techniques, the female war writers creatively crafted their works with history to portray the authors' feelings, attitudes, and ideologies to the Nigerian civil war. The similarity of the work to the current one is that they both use the works of Chimamanda Adichie and Akachi Adimora Eziegbo. However, the focal study is different. While the current does not examine war and war related issues, Ihueze, Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ozoh's work does so. The current study focuses on the feminist issues, while Ihueze, Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ozoh's work is not. From the foregoing, it can be observed that previous studies have focused on war related issues in the discourse of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo without paying attention to how the writer portrayed women issues in the novel under-study. This study examines how feminist issues are represented in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*.

### **Theoretical framework**

African feminism is an African brand of feminism which developed as a result of the reservations of some African women (like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Buchi Emecheta, Molaria Leslie-Ogundipe, Mary E. Modupe Kolawole and so on) to feminism. *African feminism* was founded in the early twentieth century by women by such by Adelaide Casely-Hayford, a Sierra Leonian ([www.msafropolitan.com](http://www.msafropolitan.com)). These women believed that feminism was a Western movement, and as a result, it only considers the situation of the White women. The need to propound a theory grounded in Africa and which could represent well the situations of the Black women led to the emergence of African Feminism. According to Nnolim (2010:115), African feminism centers on "the contours of the feminist literary landscape in Africa, in general, and Nigeria in particular, present a panorama of undulating topography. It is a house divided against itself and at present looks uncomfortably like the leaning Tower of Pisa". Since then, African feminism has focused on women related issues.

Genuine African feminism regards self-reliance, cooperative work and social organisation as values which must be treasured by African women while also,

rejecting over burdening, exploitation, and relegation of the African woman into a state of inhumane misery. It objectively looks at women in societies which have undergone the struggle for national reconstruction and encourages them to engage in another struggle against the African men to fight for the liberation of their African countries. African feminism also embraces traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women as it seeks to uncover other modes by which African women can access power other than the outward demeanours of submissiveness. The essence of African feminism is not antagonism towards African men, even though it prods African men to recognise the subjugation of women, but a common struggle with African men to remove the yokes of foreign domination and European exploitation.

### **Synopsis and Analysis of *Roses and Bullets***

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*, is a novel of war and love. It is the story of two young lovers, Eloka and Ginika, who found love in each other's eyes and desperately wanted to keep it in spite of the searing influence of war and bullets. The title of the novel is symbolic; Roses represent love while bullets represent war. In the novel, love is engendered by tumultuous situations of war. The novel reveals the saga of how many women are turned apart by the effect of Biafra.

Beyond a tale of two lovers, *Roses and Bullets* chronicles a story of didacticism, moralising philosophy and exercise in alerting humanity about the futility in seeking for social change and justice through the prism of war. The novel is wrapped around the story of the Biafra war, it reveals the horrifying condition of women in the disorders of the civil war. *Roses and Bullets* reveals that women have had to suffer huge loss about all that war offers. The love between Ginika and Eloka was halted and destroyed by the Nigerian Civil War, and further complicated by other circumstances. The novel focuses on the families of these two enigmatic characters, and their conflict-ridden relationships.

### **Analysis and Discussion of findings**

This section analyses the tenets of African feminism in *Roses and Bullets*. The tenets in the text under study include marriage, portrayal of men, love for the family, sexual harassment and gender violence.

## Marriage

Marriage is an important motif in African feminism. Unlike Western feminism, African feminism is perceived as an avenue to collaborate with the male gender in a joint struggle to achieve a better society. The relationship between Eloka and Ginika ended up in marriage. When Eloka introduced Ginika to his parents as the girl she wants to marry, the father noted that Ginika is beautiful and 'unspoiled'. His father smiled, "you chose well, my son. She is beautiful and young, I can see she has not been spoiled. When I see the way girls run after soldiers, especially officers, I cry in my heart..." (*Roses and Bullets*, 169). It should be reiterated that the relationship between Eloka and Ginika is selfless. Unlike some other young girls that run after soldiers, Ginika's love for Eloka is unconditional. Eloka's parents' approval of their son's choice of a wife shows that in Africa, marriage is a very sensitive issue which requires parental consents. The parents did not stop at the physical assessment of Ginika; they also planned to carry out an investigation about her family line. Eloka is so sure he made a right choice. This is explicated in "Yes, she seems a good girl. We will make enquiries to ensure she comes from a good family: the type of home we would want our daughter-in-law to come from." "You can make enquiries, if you like," Eloka said, but I would like to marry her as soon as possible." "Nna, that is all right" His mother's eyes were soft and bright. "I agree the girl is very beautiful" I hope she is well mannered. Agwa bun ma, character is beauty. Let us hope she has a good character." (*Roses and Bullets*, 170).

Adimora-Ezeigbo tells her reader about the traditional wedding ceremony between these two lovers. This is an attempt to make a distinction between genuine relationship between a man and a woman and a short-term one between those who run after soldiers and are messed up. A true relationship leads to marriage and the girl must receive her parents' blessing before leaving for her husband's house (*Roses and Bullets*, 193-194).

Eloka and Ginika's genuine love for each other is sealed when they get married. Ginika meditates deeply on the marriage before plunging into it. She knows that marrying Eloka would rather than stop her education, aid it. Eloka had promised they would not have children until after the war. Eloka also plans that when the war is over, Ginika could take the qualifying exam and go straight to Nsukka, where they would be together as they studied. However, their marriage and love for each other experience a major hiccup when Eloka get enlisted in the army in the cause of the Nigerian Civil War.

Eloka and Ginika love each other dearly even after their marriage. Eloka does part of the house chores in order to assist his wife. “Mermaid, I have swept our room and tidied it. You’ll like it when you see it... “Mama will have a fit if she hears you swept your room,” Ozioma said. “Don’t let her hear you. She will say you’re spoiling your wife.” (Roses and Bullets: 196) Eloka’s mother’s supposed reaction portrays the belief of the African men that women are acquired properties and one of the reasons for marrying them is to do all the house chores. They believe it is a taboo for a man to be involved in house chores. As a matter of fact, men that cook, sweep or fetch water for their wives are perceived as being hypnotised. As a result, such women are referred to as witches. In spite of the happenings around them, the love between the couple is getting stronger. They had both vowed to remain together till death do them part. Ginika told herself she would love Eloka till death did them part, as she had vowed the day the pastor joined them as husband and wife (Roses and Bullets: 208). She also recognises him as the best man for her (Roses and Bullets: 96). However, their beautiful home and marriage was affected by communication gap when Eloka joined the army. Eloka’s absence gives way to some ugly occurrences which could have been completely avoided if he was around. Eloka’s absence gave room to mother-in-law victimization. Ginika suffers immeasurably in the hands of a wicked mother-in-law who displays a cantankerous attitude towards her. The mother-in-law’s attitude shows that women sometimes oppress themselves and in the words of Yakubu (2014), they may also be their own worst enemies. This point out the fact that, it is not only men that oppress women, hence, both gender need to relate in love and unity for peace to reign in the society. The problem Ginika faces with her mother-in-law and the loneliness she experiences made her to accept the invitation to a party that never hold but end up in ruining her life. Here, Adimora-Ezeigbo is making a point that communication is very important between a husband and a wife. Just like in her novel, *Children of the Eagle*, she uses one of the characters, Nnenna, to tell her readers the importance of communication and to emphasise that it is an essential ingredient in marriage. Eloka’s absence from home led to happenings that destroyed his marriage to Ginika. This means that a break in communication may cause a fragmentation of social relationship. In Eloka’s absence, Ginika in order to excuse herself from her mother-in-law’s hostility and bad attitude towards her, followed a friend named Janet, to a dance party that never holds. Ginika was not really enthusiastic about the party; she only agreed to go with

Janet because she becomes frustrated with Eloka's mother and she wants to run away from her trouble. Unfortunately, she was drugged and sexually molested by Lieutenant Ugoro (*Roses and Bullets*: 271). If not for her husband's absence, Ginika would not have had any reason to attend the party. Adimora-Ezeigbo has pointed out here that one of the side effects of the civil war is that it caused separation and tore homes apart.

Analysing this further, Adichie seems to be passing across another important message, which is the point that marriage is a relationship between two people. Since they are the direct parties to the relationship, a man and woman are supposed to determine their future by themselves and not by third parties.

### **Portrayal of Men**

In *Roses and Bullets*, men are portrayed negatively. With the kind of love that exists between Chief Odunze and his wife, no one would think he is having an affair with another woman. Ginika was surprised to hear about her father-in-law's unfaithfulness and betrayal of his wife's trust, from Janet.

*"Chief's lover lives there with her two younger children. He visits her regularly and I see him because my room faces the house. She is from Awka and her name is Nwoyibo Moneke. You will meet her today when she comes for her share of the relief materials we shall distribute this afternoon." Ginika had heard enough, She was not prepared to discuss her father-in-law with Janet who was a total stranger she had just met. However, her heart was thumping with excitement as she reflected on the information. How could her father-in-law do this? Wouldn't his wife be furious if she found out? Didn't he consider the family before taking a mistress and giving her one of the choicest living quarters in the compound? What a scandal! She blinked her eyes in sheer distate and disgust". (*Roses and Bullets*: 216)*

One wondered what Chief Odunze is doing with a much younger woman than his wife. Ginika observed that her mother-in-law is more beautiful than the woman. "She's beautiful," she stated. "Is she not married? Where is the father of her children?" She thought, however, that her mother-in-law was more beautiful than the woman even if she was a lot older (*Roses and Bullets*: 219). Men are portrayed as unfaithful to their wives by having mistresses. They also see women, especially young girls as objects to only toy with. When Ginika and her Aunt Chitto are trying to get vehicle to convey them to Etit, the drivers of

the cars they stopped refused to help them because Ginika was with her aunt. Although, a driver offered to render help to Ginika; it was with an ulterior motive.

*A car came soon after and they ran forward. An army officer was sitting in the back. "Yes, come in, pretty lady," he said to Ginika. Sir, we're two." Ginika pointed to her aunt. "Please, help us. We have been standing here for a long time." "Driver, move," the officer said, looking away. Ginika shook her head. "He thought I was alone." Her aunt laughed. "He was already thinking of a pretty lady he would ravish. Idiot, let him go. That's how they spoil our girls"...Two more cars stopped but when the occupants learned that Ginika was travelling with her aunt, they started their cars and sped away. (Roses and Bullets: 289-290)*

During the Civil war, women were molested by the Biafran men. Young girls were the major target and Ginika was also a victim.

### **Mother-in-law interference**

Ginika's experience with Eloka's mother showcases interference of mother-in-law in many marriages in the African setting. Eloka's mother believes that it is the duty of a woman to ensure her husband gets her pregnant. She confronts Eloka with these words: "I want you to know that I'm displeased with you. I know Eloka is partly to blame, but it is the duty of a wife to make sure her husband plays his role properly, especially in the matter of getting her pregnant," (Roses and Bullets: 223). It is not surprising to hear this from Eloka's mother anyway, because in patriarchy, women are always on the receiving side. They are blamed for everything that happens in the home. In the first instance, the mother-in-law has a wrong impression of the main purpose of marriage. "...Why do people get married? Is it not to have children? Ginika, answer me now? So you married Eloka without intending to have children, to give him children and grandchildren to me and my husband?... So you want to move about empty..."(Roses and Bullets: 223). To her, raising children is the only reason for marriage. As a matter of fact, she and her husband encouraged Eloka to go into an early marriage because they want to see their grandchildren. Meanwhile, Eloka has a different plan.

*He wanted to get married, as his parents had suggested, but for a different reason. They wanted grandchildren, but he did not want to have a child at this time. He was not going to marry her*



*so that she could give him a baby now; perhaps after the war; they would start a family. He wanted to marry her because he loved her and wanted her for keeps. He wanted to share his life with her and to share hers. It was not his idea to use her and dump her, as many men were doing to women in Biafra. He didn't just want a win-the-war wife, as many flippantly refer to women they were sleeping with, without commitment. And many girls slept around with men out of frustration or need. She was too precious and, besides, it was not his habit or style to treat a woman that way (Roses and Bullets: 163-164).*

Adimora-Ezeigbo used the plan of Eloka as quoted above to establish her reasons for a good marital relationship between a man and a woman. She also pointed out the difference between a genuine relationship and a counterfeit one. Eloka's plan reveals that marriage requires commitment. This is in line with Nwakire's advice to his sister when she informs him of her plan to marry Eloka. "...marriage is a very serious matter and demands commitment" (*Roses and Bullets*: 181). Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) asserts that the African female writer is committed "...to the corrections of these images of the woman in Africa. To do this, she herself must know the reality of the African woman: [she] must know the truth about African woman and womanhood" (10). With this assertion, it should be reiterated that Adimora-Ezeigbo's intention was to correct the wrong impressions and bad images that had been painted towards marriage.

### **Love for the family**

African feminism celebrates sisterhood and familyhood. Auntie Chitto treats and caters for Ginika like her own child. In Ginika's predicament, she does not leave her. She does not even scold or say words that would make her sad. Rather, she abandoned her own problem and followed Ginika to Etiti to look for Eloka.

*"Ginika saw her aunt's eyes cloud over. Weighed down by her own problem, she had completely forgotten her aunt's problem. How kind of her to come readily on this journey, leaving the children with Nne and pushing to the background her own worries"(291).*

Also, Auntie Chitto's husband, Uncle Ray led the search for Ginika (*Roses and Bullets*: 359). He demonstrated his love towards Ginika by participating in her eventual rescue (*Roses and Bullets*: 366). Even Miss Miriam Taylor, Ginika's

teacher and friend plays a very significant role in her life (*Roses and Bullets*: 366).

Ginika's aunt is like a mother to her. She sees in her the characters of a good mother that she expects from Auntie Lizzy. She enjoys her Auntie Chitto's company more than Auntie Lizzy's, who is supposed to care for her like a mother. According to Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chitto's house was the happiest and liveliest Ginika ever knew. That is why she stayed with the family at the earliest opportunity (*Roses and Bullets*: 6). In a conversation with one of her school friends, she stated, "I like being with my aunt and her family and feel at home with her more than my father or my stepmother" (*Roses and Bullets*: 103). Auntie Chitto's home is full of love. The relationship between the couple, Auntie Chitto and Uncle Ray depicts an ideal family. Uncle Ray enjoys his wife's company as well as his children's. He always compliments his wife and makes her feel good. Likewise, he plays with his children and usually eats with them.

*After the children had trooped out, Uncle Ray asked, "Why are they not eating with us?" Ginika had expected the children around him; he played with them a lot. Ginika could picture him on the carpet, as they climbed all over him. One day she laughed so much when she came into the house and find little Nonso perched on Uncle Ray's back as he assumed the position of a horse. Nonso had swayed his body forward and backward, riding his father and crying, "Oya, move! Carry me to the playground." Uncle Ray had neighed, pretending to be a horse, and Nonso had screamed with laughter. (*Roses and Bullets*: 136)*

One of the important tenets of African feminism is applied here. According to Catherine Acholonu (1995), the proponent of Motherism, which is one of the variants of African feminism, a motherist is a lover of children. A motherist can be a man or a woman. This is demonstrated through the character of Uncle Ray.

### **Sexual Harassment and Gender Violence**

In *Roses and Bullets*, Ginika was abducted and locked up in a room in the Barracks because she was accused of killing Sergeant Sule Ibrahim. In the room, three soldiers sprained her ankle and raped her.

*She struggled to free herself but they held her and pushed her to the ground. She screamed and one of them clamped a rough hand on her mouth. Divesting himself of his clothes, the*

*sergeant grabbed her legs and prised them open... I go fuck you, ashawo. You kill Sule. He be better man pass all your rebel brothers. Dat thing you no give Sule, I go take am today. Ashawo!. Make you do your own, he said, pointing to one of the soldiers. (Roses and Bullets: 495)*

In addition, Ginika was drugged and raped when she went with a friend (Janet) to an army camp because of the antagonistic behaviour of her mother-in-law. As a result, she got pregnant for the unknown Soldier which destroyed her marriage and led to the final tragedy in the novel. Eloka's reflection thrown into light how women especially teenagers can be sex-objects in war situation that is being sexually exploited without them knowing the men's true intentions. It is obvious however, from Ginika father's narration of his only sister's story, that sexual harassment is not peculiar to war period.

*But my youngest and only sister was still quite small and I dreamed about how I would send her to a good secondary school and to the university after that. I came home after my studies to discover that my sister had been impregnated by her teacher in primary five and had died as he tried in assisting her in aborting the pregnancy." It was the most shattering experience of my life at the time. You can imagine how I felt. She had died just before my ship docked at the Port Harcourt harbor. So the first social event I witnessed on my return from abroad was my sister's funeral. It was then I swore that such a thing would not happen to me again, and that I would take adequate steps to protect my female children or relations. This happened before I married your mother." (Roses and Bullets: 106)*

## **Conclusion**

This paper has investigated recurrent feminist issues in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*. Through the tactical deployment of African feminism as theoretical foundation, it is revealed that the issues in the text are not limited to the theme of war. It includes marriage, motherhood, sexual harassment and gender violence, men's infidelity and emotional instability and communal life and mother-in-law interference, which are the basic tenets of African womanism. The study asserts that African women writers see marriage as the bedrock of modern society. Unlike western feminists, African womanist hold marriage in high esteem; therefore, the success of every woman is assessed

by the success recorded in their marriage. Unlike male writers that background female characters in their works, female writers foreground male characters as epitome of emotional instability and marital infidelity. Also, emphasis is laid on motherhood. The joy of every mother is placed on the success of both the children and husband. Having a child and husband is a basic social requirement in order to avoid stigmatisation. Furthermore, communal life is cherished and held in high esteem. This study concludes that African female writers solicit social peace and tranquility among family members and the larger society.

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