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Womanist Issues in Adimora-Ezeigbo's Children's Literature

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Abstract:

*Few women writers have foregrounded the social welfare of children in children's literature as this speaks to nationalist discourses and the welfare of women as Adimora-Ezeigbo has done in many of her children's literature. Much attention has not been given to womanist issues in children's literature by Nigerian writers. This says much about the lack of importance accorded children's literature in Nigeria as a worthwhile literary endeavor. At best, moral and didactic overtures, values and undertones have usually been attached to children's literature as the major reasons for its existence in Nigerian literature. Thus, there is a need to examine womanist ideology in children's literature. Therefore, this paper focuses on two of Adimora-Ezeigbo's children's literature, *The Prize* and *The Buried Treasures* texts which reflect the subtle ways by which nationalist issues and women's welfare issues are subtly embedded into and foregrounded in literary works for children. It is observed that this is a huge leap in terms of womanist discourses in this otherwise little-regarded literary genre. Also, the attention paid to the discussion of issues of women's emancipation in line with Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism in the texts shows an attempt at creating awareness about women and women related issues in subtle ways which children can easily grasp. Lastly, Adimora-Ezeigbo's idea of women's emancipation through the dialogic snail-sense feminist idea further puts the potential of children's literature as a viable womanist tool into better perspective. Considering the importance to the future of Nigeria and that of feminism, the paper recommended that more research should focus on womanist ideology in children's literature. Also, women writers should focus on embedding womanist ideology into children's literature.*

Keywords: Children's literature, emancipation, snail-sense feminism, African womanism

1. Introduction

Focusing on the ways in which African women's cultural experiences differ from those of their Western counterparts, African women writers and women literary critics evolve ideas on women which situate their experiences within the African cultural environment. In her seminal work on the various African cultural locations and how these locations have shaped the literary endeavours of women into different strategic theoretical poses, Mary ModupeKolawole submits that:

Several factors mediate the location of African women in gender discourses and some of these are personal, others are communal. One faces a problem in any attempt to generalize about all the women on a continent as diverse and as vast as Africa. Colonialism brought different kinds of affiliation to different parts of the continent. National, ethnic and regional idiosyncrasy, predominant religious influence, tradition, modernism, and post-colonial conditions intercept the writers' perception and consciousness. Nonetheless, these women are not only speaking back, they are fighting back as they deconstruct distorted images or misrepresentations of African women. These voices are not monolithic but multiple and the relevance of this outlook to African indigenous beliefs and attitudes also highlights the varying reactions to western feminism as a universal or universalizing theory. (5)

Apart from enunciating the intertwining nature of experiences at different levels as these affect women and their literary output, Kolawole opens up the kernel of the diverse experiences which gave birth to the different strands of reactions discernible in African women's writings. This reinforces BolanleSotunsa's observation that the difference in the cultural backgrounds within Africa 'necessitates a difference in [women's] outlook and worldview' (32). One level at which these differences are realised largely remains the recourse to traditional cultural affiliations to express what living within these spaces means for women. Critics and writers rarely focus on womanist issues in children's literature. This paper, therefore, focuses on the womanist ideology in two selected texts of Adimora-Ezeigbo, a prominent Nigerian children's literature writer.

2. Adimora-Ezeigbo's Womanist Orientation

The continuously emerging alternative plans for expressing the social and cultural situation of women in Nigeria have resulted in a plethora of feminist theories which attempt to adequately interpret the situation while situating the social and cultural experiences of Nigerian women within the larger feminist theoretical debate. Adimora-Ezeigbo's voice is one of the newest in the debate which places the rights of Nigerian women into perspective through her Snail-sense feminism which shares several points with all the other feminist types which had emerged from Nigeria. The inclination

towards building on the indigenous is shared by all. Okonjo-Ogunyemi's womanism, Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism, Acholonu's Motherism, Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism and Snail-sense all explore the various means by which home-grown feminist strategies can be brought to bear on the womanist demands of present-day African women. Adimora-Ezeigbo would reiterate the existing indigenous and newly formed means of subverting women's subjugation and agree that 'there is a need to adopt a more democratic and pluralist approach to gender issues in Nigeria' (*Snail-sense*10). This shows a recognition of the divergence of traditional cultures of the Nigerian nation and the importance of considering this in theorizing for Nigerian women. Adimora-Ezeigbo defends her choice:

It is important to point out that there are specific qualities of the snail that triggered my endorsement of snail-sense feminism – doggedness and the ability to get around obstacles no matter how formidable by exercising effective skills and sensitive attitude. I describe this virtue as snail sensitivity. It has nothing to do with movement (37).

In Adimora-Ezeigbo's view, strength and resilience which can adequately stand against a long-standing structure as that of patriarchy might perhaps be needed by the Nigerian woman. The snail symbol refracts from notions of enduring strength but if a unifying womanist theory is yet to emerge within the Nigerian literary space, snail-sense, like its previous sisters, proves one of the sound bases to formulate an all-encompassing womanist/feminist theory. An avid children's literature writer, Adimora-Ezeigbo has extended the practicalities of the snail-sense to her children's literature.

The two texts, *The Buried Treasure* (1992) and *The Prize* (1994), examined here are from the repertoire of Adimora-Ezeigbo's children's literature. They are treated as a body of work representing Adimora-Ezeigbo's subtler presentation of her womanist agenda akin to how these are also perceived in her fictional works for adults. The texts show the dynamics of cultural notions of issues such as family ties and cohesion, motherhood, and women's power base that are present in the children's stories as similar in structure to some of the issues in Adimora-Ezeigbo's fictional narratives for adults. Adimora-Ezeigbo's deployment of the snail-sense feminist strategy in her works for children and the extent to which this extends her efforts at reclaiming a space of power for young female children in some of these works are placed within a historical perspective of Nigerian women writers as custodians of cultural womanist duties. Children's experiences in the society in ways which interrogate the changes that have occurred and how the changes have affected important aspects of traditional culture.

In her inaugural lecture on 13th February 2008, Adimora-Ezeigbo gave a clear hint of her project in writing for children. Delineating the shifts that had occurred over time in the social and cultural landscape of Nigeria and how much these have moved the engagements in both the issues and mode of storytelling to the younger Nigerian generations, Adimora-Ezeigbo reiterates the importance of stories in the socialization of children. She avers:

In the traditional past, children were entertained and instructed with folktales... Though this tradition still exists in Nigeria, the written culture seems to have taken over storytelling in the form of hundreds of books published for the young today. Some writers have written down and preserved the oral tradition in books which are marketed for children with the intention of instructing and entertaining them (9).

Her words outline what she has usually emphasized as her reasons for the number of children's works that she has written in her writing career; the continuance of the traditional duty of women as raconteurs and nurturers of children through stories which teach while entertaining them. Starting out as a writer of children's literature with *The Buried Treasure* in 1992, Adimora-Ezeigbo has produced twenty-three children's literary texts up until 2014. With the changes in social cultures, the defining traits of storytelling take newer forms. Many oral tales find their way into books for children with modifications which speak to newer cultural ambience.

3. Womanist Ideology in Adimora-Ezeigbo's Urban-based Children's Literature

The gradual movement from a primarily oral culture to a culture of writing which necessarily prioritizes the socialization of its young through storytelling informs a major part of the social commitment which has been noticed in Adimora-Ezeigbo's children's literature. *The Buried Treasure* (1992), *My Cousin Sammy* (2007), *The Prize* (1994), *Alani the Troublemaker and Other Stories* (2006) and *Ako the Storyteller* (2006), are four of her children's stories in which Adimora-Ezeigbo explores the new ways in which the socialization of young children in Nigeria is entwined in the discourse of contemporary issues which speak to the important place of childhood experiences in national discourses. While Adimora-Ezeigbo maintains the general outlook found in majority of the literary works for children written before hers in *Alani the Troublemaker*, and *Ako the Storyteller*, *My Cousin Sammy* and especially *The Prize* express her authorial desire to place the agency which she creates for girl-children at the fore of the narrations in some of her children's stories. Adimora-Ezeigbo's first literary work, *The Buried Treasure* explores the devastating effects of war on children and women. The story is set in the mid-1970s of Nigeria when the country has just come out of a devastating civil war that lasted for three years. Part of the eastern section of the country, the Igbos (Biafrans) had attempted to secede from the rest of the nation and this had resulted in war. The Biafrans had lost. War and children might perhaps be two concepts which few novelists would be willing to engage in the same story. The reason being the kind of pictures that wars evoke in readers' imagination and the presumed innocence of children which the depiction of war situations is likely to violate. This notion has changed in the realities of post-independence Africa which has seen more civil wars, terrorism and violence with dire consequences on the living conditions of the populace. Some of these civil wars involved the use of children as untrained soldiers. Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Soza Boy* is an apt representation of this phenomenon in the Nigerian civil war. It is emblematic of these types of wars which recruit children. The immaturity of the unwilling fighters is summed up in the words of one of the child soldiers:

...true true I do not know why we are fighting the war. The Chief Commander General has not told us why we are fighting. The Soza Captain did not tell us why we must go inside the pit. I just carry gun, fight... (114)

From the child-soldier's innocent remark, a depth of issues involved in war situations emerge. In the first instance his remark shows a violation of the rights of those recruited in this way into the war. It points to mental and emotional confusion which is likely to reverberate into the future of the young soldiers if they survive the war. Uzodinma Iweala's 2005 book, *Beast of No Nation* also describes the horrors of the experiences of children as recruits in the wars generally. The African setting of the novel is not given a name but the narrative, as told by a child-soldier equally presents readers with the grim realities of the effects of war on children and women especially of three years (1967-1970). It was a historic period which could not be waved off without entering the narrative oeuvres of Nigerian literary writers. Julia Udofo (2015) observes that the grim experience of the war all over Africa changed the usual simplicity of stories told to and written for children on the continent in many ways. She avers:

In these early stages written children's literature in Africa was limited in scope with regard to the issues explored in protecting the child from the harsh realities of life. However, in recent times, children's literature in Africa has shifted away from this need to the depiction of a grittier realism, as its adult counterpart. This is no thanks to the grim realities of present-day Africa where violence, militancy, terrorism, and their attendant pain and suffering have become the order of the day (70).

Even though Udofo's argument to an extent reflect the state of matters in terms of the depiction of war and its consequences for children's well-being all over Africa, her sweeping conclusion that 'children's literature has moved from the need to shield the young from the harsh realities of life to the depiction of grittier realities like war, sex and crime' (79) might be a little over-exaggerated. The texts that she cited are not basically directed at children audience even though they use children as major characters. The language of Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Soza Boy* in particular is not meant for children audience as it is written in a mixture of pidgin English which is a non-standard English. But notwithstanding, Udofo gives a very useful insight into the issue of war and its effects on children in modern times in Africa. There were also many poems and prose narratives which explored diverse themes relating to the civil war. Its historical significance for the nation has made it a theme in a lot of literary works which are efforts at remarking on this phase of Nigerian national life. Chris Anyokwu observes that 'If there is any aspect of Nigeria's socio-political life that has mostly engaged the creative attention of Nigerian artists, it is unarguably the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War of 1967-1970' (3). The implications of the war for the nation and its people manifested in the different aspects of it that have been focused in literature. One of these is the representation of the many changes that have been noticed in people's living conditions in the immediate post-bellum years.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Buried Treasure* is the story of a family named Ogosi whose breadwinner has been killed in the Nigerian Civil War. MrsOgosi is left with four young children of school age, the eleven-year-old Ola who is the eldest and the only girl, and her three brothers, Afam, Ejike and Udo. The family has just returned to Enugu which they had years before left hurriedly when it was about to fall into the enemy's hands. The town was overrun and destroyed by the Nigerian army but was returned to the residents after the war came to an end. Many of the former residents return and rebuild their homes. The home to which MrsOgosi and the children return to has become decrepit. Under normal circumstances it is not a fitting place to live but they have no other option. MrsOgosi fries bean cakes which Ola hawks around in order to get the family some pittance to live on. The children cannot attend school like many children around them because MrsOgosi cannot afford the money for school. No help is forthcoming, but the United Nations has provided succor in form of food and other materials for the war victims of Biafra. The man in charge, Mr. Ibeako has appropriated the materials for his own use. Instead of the fair distribution which the United Nations expects from him, he sells the materials and lives in affluence with his family. He offers to buy the Ogosis house but MrsOgosi does not sell the house to him. Help eventually comes to the Ogosis in a mysterious manner. Ola dreams of her late father. In the dream he shows her where he had buried some substantial money and MrsOgosi's valuable trinkets. The family digs up the spot shown to Ola in her dreams and they found the treasure. About the same time, the atrocities perpetuated by Mr. Ibeako is discovered. He is arrested and taken away.

The Buried Treasure foregrounds Adimora-Ezeigbo's literary representations of the issues of the welfare of women and children in terms of social conditions that violate their fundamental rights in post-war periods. The Nigerian Civil War especially has been one of the important centre-pieces of her earliest critical academic endeavours and creative enterprise. Starting with her PhD thesis titled 'Fact and Fiction in the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War' (1986), where she explores the various literary and critical accounts of the Nigerian Civil War, she goes on to create literary narratives of the war period. Her PhD thesis got published in 1991 with the title unchanged. This is followed by *The Buried Treasure* in 1992. Even though the goriness of the war situation is toned down in the text, the living conditions of people shortly after the war is represented in the picture that we encounter in the lives of the Ogosis. It is obvious from the outset that the writer focuses on issues of rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors of the war which had claimed the lives of millions of the Igbo people during this historic period of the Nigerian nation. That Adimora-Ezeigbo intentionally focuses the female child can be gathered from the first description of the living quarters of the Ogosis. Opening *The Buried Treasure* with the description of where the Ogosis live makes many points at once. First, the reader is confronted with the devastation caused by the Nigerian Civil War through the description of the living quarters of the poor widow and her children. Second, the significance and centrality of Enugu city and its position as the headquarters of the Biafran nation during antebellum and the war period presents the stark reality of the aftermath of the war thereby raising its implications for those who survived. Also, the social significance of the economic situation of the family and the reason for it immediately confront the reader. 'Ola lives in Enugu with her mother and three brothers. Her house was the ugliest in

Udi Street' (1). The focus on Ola goes on into the description of 'Her house' (1) creating the first impression that the experiences of the eleven-year-old is the focus of the story. The description of their home as 'the ugliest in Udi Street' (1) also reinforces the abject poverty that would be depicted later and what bearing this has on the welfare of the young girl. That the house 'had deep holes in the walls' (1) and is among the 'many houses' that 'were damaged by bullets' (1) presents the picture of an aftermath of the war, a ruin that calls for attention showing the helplessness of the family. That Ola cannot join her mates in school also amplifies the poverty of the family. 'My child, I don't have money to send you and your brothers to school' (2). This aspect of the resultant effects of the war period foregrounds the further plight of Ola who has to hawk bean cakes for her mother as her contribution to the upkeep of the family. The backlash of the decisions of adults who decided to go into war shows in the truncated future of the children population. Girl children are especially shown in *The Buried Treasure* as fellow burden bearers with women. That none of the neighbours, relatives and friends of the Ogosishelp them suggests that a newer kind of social relationship had developed after the war. Communitality has given way to individualism. In response to Ola's question 'Is there anyone who can help us?' MrsOgosi answers, 'No one. We have no friends now. Even the people your father helped before the war do not talk to me' (15). Apart from toughening the people, the new social and economic tensions occasioned by the war seems to have shaken the cultural structure of filial affections. Friends and families have been torn apart and the brutal experiences of the war have taught them new philosophies of existence different from what they used to know, that of 'each person for himself'. This runs contrary to the traditional ways of life before the war. ChimalumNwankwo argues that many of the present tragedy befalling African nations have their roots in the many wars in which the nations have ever engaged. His words:

War is Africa's muted index, but mutes as it is, one could read beyond simply trying to capture the regular zeitgeist which good national literatures capture. The index could guide the insightful reader towards the foundations of Africa's numerous perennials or still unfolding tragedies. Clearly, the most quotidian of Africa's problems, ranging from human rights to various cultural, political and socio-economic issues appear either related or traceable to a long and turbulent history of wars and their unsavoury aftermath (13).

AnthoniaYakubu supports Nwankwo's earlier assertion. She expresses the devastating implications of the war on children and women in ways that show that it had been a traumatizing experience for the Igbo people in general. In her examination of how Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* represents the post-traumatic effects of war through the characters in the adult war novel, she observes that 'With cautious hope, the Igbo started the gradual process of walking free again, without the fears of rockets and bombs. But it was not as easy as that. Many of the survivors – civilians and soldiers- were shell-shocked and many carried terrible traumas that needed psychiatric attention' (311). This 'terrible traumas' reflect in the good interpersonal and communal interactions which have become strained as seen in the nonchalance of people to the plight of the Ogosis. 'There were many holes in the roof. All their things were ruined' (11). But the family has no help. In answer to Ola's question about getting help, Mrs. Ibeako laments 'No one. We have no friends now. Even the people your father helped before the war do not talk to me' (15). The situation keeps her awake at night and she cries constantly. Ola usually joins her and consoles her mother.

In several parts of the short narrative, Adimora-Ezeigbo's reinterprets the post-war years from a womanist lens. The non-confrontational stance that she recommends as a working tool of snail-sense feminism reflects in the helpless stance displayed by Mrs. Ibeako. Ola's round of hawking takes her to the front of the Ibeako's house and she stops to talk to the Ibeako's little daughter, Ebele, who is on her way to school. They used to be classmates before the war. The two girls are juxtaposed here in terms of poverty and affluence of the two families. Ola is out of school while Ebele could go to school amid her family's affluence. Instead of the sympathy one would have expected of a man who has Ola's age mate as a daughter, Mr. Ibeako verbally assaults little Ola who becomes visibly shaken. 'Ebele's mother, MrsIbeako, came out and saw the two girls. Ebele, you'll be late for school.' She scolded'. She asked after Ola's mother but Mr. Ibeako comes forward to say, 'Your mother is very stubborn.' (6). MrsIbeako's brief and weak remonstrations with her husband should not have stopped at her first attempt if she is in a position of the same authority with him. But what follows points to Mrs. Ibeako's position. 'Don't say that, Papa Ebele.' MrsIbeako said sadly' (6). Mr. Ibeako ignores her and continues to assault little Ola. 'She's very stubborn,' Mr. Ibeako said again, ignoring his wife. 'She refused to sell her house to me. It needs repairs. I would have fixed it by now' (7). Ignoring his wife shows that Mrs. Ibeako's voice lacks enough strength to match Mr. Ibeako's utterances. She remains mute after this. Ola puts up an attempt to correct the wrong notion about her mother that Mr. Ibeako creates. 'Please, sir, leave my mother alone. She's done nothing wrong... My mother has worked hard since my father died.' Ola was crying now' (8). Mr. Ibeako does not stop at this. He describes the late Mr. Ogosi as foolish for having fought in the war which claimed his life. 'Your father was foolish. He got himself killed in the war fighting for Biafra,' Mr. Ibeako laughed' (8). This mockery of the selfless sacrifice of the slain soldiers in the war disregards the heroic nature of the part played by those who fought in the war. It equally demonstrates that the individual sacrifice critical to the survival of the proposed Biafran nation is not mutually shared by all. The Biafran struggle which is meant to be a communal sacrifice becomes a means of personal gains for some. Mr. Ibeako's actions show the greed and avarice of the profiteers in the Nigerian civil war. 'MrIbeako was in charge of the United Nations Aid Programme in Enugu. He gave food, clothing and blankets to the war victims' (6). This position gives him the opportunity to hoard what he is supposed to distribute to the victims of war. While many who believed in the cause of the war went to war and died, people like Mr. Ibeako make undue fortunes from the war in several ways, having dodged being conscripted into the war like many of their colleagues. This character's attitude reflects Sophia Ogwude's opinion about the political and human rights dimensions of war and war periods. She argues that 'The Nigerian civil war soon proved to be more economic than political and there were two main beneficiaries namely, a profit-motivated mafia and an arrogant, raping, murdering, terrorizing soldiery.' (78). Thus, asides

being battered by the devastating natural consequences of the war, the victims also suffered in other ways from their fellow citizens and soldiers. Onyerionwu paints a graphic picture of the postbellum trauma suffered by the Biafrans:

The Nigerian civil war may have secured a notoriety as one of the deadliest and bloodiest civil war in the history of mankind, but the post-war struggle for survival among the defeated people was a huge calamity of its own... There was the case of soldiers' indiscipline which, despite the diligence of the Nigerian military, abounded in some alarming degree in certain quarters of the region. There were also many reported cases of looting by Nigerian soldiers. The Biafrans, weary from suffering, were heartlessly stripped of their last pieces of belonging, cars, goats, chicken, anything at all... the suffering was much and there were all kinds of strange illnesses which kept killing people; corpses at different stages of decomposition littered the roads and footpaths and the whole environment lacked form and shape (84-85).

This gory picture of destitution in the immediate post-war years though mellowed down in *The Buried Treasure* because of the audience for whom it is written is evident in the penury in which the Ogosis are living. Mrs. Ogosi's, plight for instance shows the trauma of women whose husbands had died in the war. The Biafran nation has just been reabsorbed into Nigeria. There had been terrible devastation which had left survivors in penury and lack. Within this scenario, Mrs. Ogosi makes efforts to cater for her children. These efforts are not enough. The children, especially the eleven-year-old Ola, suffer. As a post-war child, Ola lost her childhood and enters into the realm of adults. With no hope of a secured future that could be made possible through formal education, she becomes proactive in order to survive. Not only does she have to contribute to the family's economic upkeep through hawking, she also becomes her mother's confidant and adviser. The tragic events of war and its consequences thus rudely catapults the innocence of Ola's childhood into the stark reality of the world of adults. She is confused and asks her mother pertinent questions of survival. She could not grasp the greed that drives the character of adults like Mr. Ibeako so she asks her mother. 'You said he was Papa's friend! Why won't he help us? Where would we live if he bought the house?' (14). In the night she lays awake. 'Ola could not sleep. She lay thinking about her father. Her mother said he was a good man. He worked hard for the family and he helped people if he could. He had died fighting for Biafra in the battle of Enugu' (16).

Ruminating on what could have been if her father was alive represents a process of entering a mental calculation of the kind of truncated hopes that could arise in situations of war. 'She remembers some things about her father. He had told Ola that he wanted her and her brothers to get good education' (16). Ola doubts her father's choice to be patriotic to the Biafran state. His death justifies the choices of people like Mr. Ibeako who is alive and enjoying his ill-gotten wealth while majority of the population still reels under the suffering occasioned by the war. Ola considers Mr. Ibeako's earlier words and ruminates upon them. 'That evening Ola went outside. She sat under the orange tree at the back of the house. She remembered Mr. Ibeako's cruel words. 'Your father was foolish...' Was her father foolish to fight in the war? Ebele's father had not fought in the war. Maybe her father should have stayed back at home too' (9). The questions of the senselessness of fighting wars are further put into perspective here. But at the same time the issue of patriotism is also raised by the writer. Exploring the symbolic inference of the situations that allude covertly or overtly to insanity in some war stories from Nigeria, IniobongUko (2008) sums up the events that led to the war and those of the war time as conditions of madness and blind ambition on the part of the leaders of the two warring parties. According to him:

The tragedy of the war was built on Ojukwu's [Biafran leader] inflexibility and the consequent inability to effect compromise on the political side. He fueled the disaster with his ambition, desire and inability to control the situation in Biafra. The Nigeria -Biafra war was a camouflage designed by the oppressive leadership on both sides to shield from detection their excesses and crime against the common man (58).

Seen this way, Mr. Ibeako's decision not to join the army could be read as a form of self-preservation from the madness started by the leadership of Biafra, but his undue profiteering from the materials meant to bring relief to the victims of a war in which he refused to fight raises the question of war-induced corruption and social irresponsibility. Denying others their rights call his decision to question. While things become tougher for Ola and her family, 'Each day Ola passed Ebele's house. She saw lots of people going in and out. Some carried expensive briefcases. Others came out with big cartons and sacks. They put them in cars and drive away' (19). Mr. Ibeako had been selling the relief material meant for war survivors. 'Ola and her family had become poorer and poorer. Mr. Ibeako had a new car and Ebele had lots of new clothes. MrsOgosi cried all the time now' (20). In Adimora-Ezeigbo's soft interpretation of the aftermaths of the war for women and children in the old nation of Biafra, they are shown to be victims of the exploitative tendencies of those at the helms of affairs of the nation. She represents their plights in terms of social welfare and loss of communal brotherliness which had hitherto characterized the people's lives before the war.

The psychological effects of the verbal assault from Mr. Ibeako and the struggle to survive bring Ola and her mother closer. This is a womanist move on Adimora-Ezeigbo's part to create an agency in the eleven-year-old Ola. She builds in Ola a high sense of responsibility for getting a solution to the family's state of poverty. This nurturing instinct keeps her constantly suggesting solutions to the family's condition to her mother while consoling her. 'Ola got up from her mat. Her brothers were fast asleep. She tip-toed to the next room. Her mother sat on her bed. She was crying softly' (18).

Even though her young mind could not conceive of an immediate practical solution, she shows the kind of feminist supportive roles that appear in subsequent works of Adimora-Ezeigbo for children. For instance, both of Asa in *Asa and the Little Stream* and Ene in *My Cousin Sammy* also exhibit this nurturing trait. Apart from supporting the material upkeep of the family through her hawking, she becomes a psychological support for the home. She teaches her younger siblings to read and supports the mother. 'Don't cry, Mama,' she said. 'Something will happen. Someone will help us.' (18). Ola is shown to be the type of womanist support that her mother could not get elsewhere.

The surrealist dimension which Adimora-Ezeigbo comes to fully employ in many of her subsequent children's literature begins with *The Buried Treasure*. Ola has a dream where her late father shows her where he hid MrsOgosi's jewelry shortly after he sent his family away from the heat of the war. The discovery takes the family out of their penury. The family digs up the place that was shown to Ola in the dream and they found lots of money and Mrs. Ogosi's jewelry. Ola's first utterance after the box is dug up and its contents revealed further pushes her sense of responsibility to the fore. 'We can go to school now, Ola shouted. We can repair the house' (31). The simultaneous occurrence of Mr. Ibeako's arrest signals the efforts of government at restructuring the social and judicial process of the postwar period. 'They carried the box into the house. Ola turned on the radio on the table. 'Here's the news. Mr. Ibeako, head of the United Nations Aids Programme, was arrested this morning. The police said he had been selling the food and clothing meant for victims of the civil war' (27). Ending the story with social justice restores hope in the government. Unlike Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* which represents the Nigerian civil war in all its stark reality, *The Buried Treasure* mellows the details of the war down to the level of children audience for whom the text is meant. Like she did two years later in *The Prize*, Adimora-Ezeigbo expresses her conviction about the importance of Western education in the emancipation of women. The emphasis on this at different points in *The Buried Treasure* points to this fact. Even though she only laid this out more clearly twelve years later in her snail-sense feminist model, these earlier works for children point to her focus on the importance of education for women. Thus, she ties women's ability to gain agency to formal education. The next two stories follow Adimora-Ezeigbo's efforts at creating this child-centred perusal of feminist issues.

In *The Prize*, Adimora-Ezeigbo makes deliberate statements on the importance of agency for girls. *The Prize* narrates the struggles of Onyema, a thirteen-year-old twin girl, against a subduing traditional culture which essentializes its female members. Mr. Agu, Onyema's father, is not interested in sending her to secondary school like her twin brother even though Onyema is a promising and brilliant girl. He decides to marry her off to old Onyia, while her twin brother goes on to secondary school. Onyema triumphs with determination and the assistance of her mother whose efforts to help Onyema despite the circumstances eventually prove fruitful.

The Prize sets out what Adimora-Ezeigbo lays claim to in many of her children's books. The place of early socialization of children towards sexual roles and thoughts is very important for a robust egalitarian gender culture. Centralizing female children in these two texts posits the authorial effort at expressing the imperatives of the womanist issues which Adimora-Ezeigbo considers as important in any Nigerian woman writer's career (*Gender Issues in Nigeria*. 80). The examination of the Nigerian patriarchal society in her earlier children's texts thus finds a fuller expression in her later adult literature. The changing face of social culture in Nigeria and the importance of foregrounding the female experience in order to carve a place for women and growing girls within it make the *The Prize* and *The Buried Treasure* two useful texts to argue Adimora-Ezeigbo's feminist efforts in the children's genre.

While Onyema's predicament raises issues of the rights and importance of girls in Nigerian society, the story also examines gender equality by foregrounding the equal birth status of the twins. Onyema is a girl while her twin, Ogonnaya, is a boy. Adimora-Ezeigbo imbues Onyema with intellectual qualities which push her to the fore even while the societal ascription and ordering positions her behind her twin brother. Her teacher Nwiboko says, 'But Onyema is very clever...In fact she's the best pupil in mathematics in the class' (3). Onyema wants to study to be an engineer. But the age-old cultural perception of her value as only of a biological importance within the society cuts short any status or relevance that her intellectual ability might have. In the opening paragraph, Adimora-Ezeigbo describes the domestic space where the thirteen-year-old Onyema is engaged in a house chore. 'Onyema sat on a mat in front of her house. She was opening melon seeds for the evening meal', while her twin brother, 'Ogonnaya ... had gone to play football with his friends' (1). This scenario pointedly expresses role ascription within the traditional setting of the text, and the patriarchal condition which limits Onyema's existence to the private space while her twin occupies the free outside. Her worth within a patriarchal domain which her suitor's brother later reinforces in the text does not extend beyond the kitchen as reflected in the preparation of the family meal. Her supposed worth is also summed up in her father's response to Mr. Nwobiko, whose recognition of the intellectual potentials of the young girl prompts him to appeal to the father, Mr. Agu, to pay for the scholarship form for Onyema. Her father says 'I don't believe in educating girls beyond primary school. It's just a waste of time and money'(3). Onyema's plight is like that of other girls in her village who must learn early in life to take after the kind of roles which their mothers perform daily. These are the roles to which their gender assigns them. They remain in the condition of obedient daughters and later mute wives (like Onyema's mother) who must remain only relevant within the domestic sphere. The girls cannot join the special preparation classes which Mr. Nwobiko organizes for the sixth form pupils. 'All the boys stayed for extra lessons, but only a few of the girls could stay. Most of them went home to help their mothers working in the house or selling things in the market' (8). When Onyema is not helping her mother, 'MrAgu often told Onyema to do things for him after school. But Ogonnaya was free to stay for extra lessons. It was always Onyema who fetched water and gathered firewood and cooked the evening meals' (9). Adimora-Ezeigbo argues that against the background of a measure of gender complementarity that was in place in precolonial Nigeria, colonialism and the two prominent but imported religions in Nigeria collude to restrict the rights of female children. This, according to her reflects in curtailing the rights of girl children to education like their male counterparts (80). This scenario is framed in Onyema's case.

In Nigeria as well as many other developing nations, depriving girls of quality formal education has been a major theme in women's writings. TsitsiDangarembga, a Zimbabwean woman writer explores this theme in *Nervous Conditions*. Her major protagonist, SisiThambu only gets a chance at formal education after the untimely and unfortunate death of her elder brother, Nhamo. BuchiEmacheta's *The Slave Girl* also examines this theme in the post-independent Nigeria of the 1960s. Adimora-Ezeigbo's infusion of this theme into children's literature decades after her predecessors shows a social

problem which persists despite the passage of time. She argues that 'Good education is the key to open the doors of opportunities for Nigerian women, for when a woman is educated, the family in particular and the country in general are educated and empowered.' (*Snail-Sense*. 29). Rose Sackeyfio notes that child marriage is one of the unproductive cultural practices that constitutes a major obstacle to women's progress in Nigeria. In many cases a girl is taken out of school in order to get married. Sackeyfio argues that 'In order for any society to develop and make genuine progress, the talents and skills of both females and males are mandatory in the socialization of children in contemporary society.' (13). Formal education helps in developing these skills in young children. The lack of it accounts for the perpetuation of poverty among women. Onyema's mother's helplessness in this situation is reflected in the covert way she attempts to assist her daughter. She pays for Onyema's scholarship form without her husband's knowledge and she is quick to lie to Mr. Agu that she was the one who sent Onyema on errands after school because Onyema had stayed back to attend the extra lessons in preparation for the scholarship examination (22). 'Sometimes Onyema was able to stay for extra lessons. Her mother would come home early to do the work in the house. Her father didn't know about this. He would be angry if he finds out' (9). The lack of courage to confront her husband, that readers can easily perceive in the character of Mrs. Agu measures how much female disempowerment reflects in this type of situation. This scene foregrounds the indirectness and non-confrontational style of Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense. Mrs. Agu does not attempt a headlong move against the patriarchal structure which is keeping her daughter's progress in check. She understands her daughter's plight because she too had been a child-wife, married at age thirteen (11). Even though she wants to help her daughter, the subjugating formation of the social power stratification prevents any overt attempt from her.

Onyema's several attempts to gain some agencies are depicted in her hard work at school, and how she stands up to Nwokolo whose brother she is expected to marry in March. She responds to Nwokolo's rude remark that 'Girls can't be engineers.' (14). And when Onyema insists, Nwokolo responds 'Then you'll be an engineer in my brother's kitchen'. (16). She is emphatic, and retorts 'Your brother is wasting his time. I'll never be his wife. I'm going to be a real engineer'. (16). The kitchen represents an enclosure which forecloses any aspiration that a female can lay claim to. That the teacher Mr. Nwiboko, and Ogbonnaya, Onyema's twin brother, both support Onyema in their different ways further strengthens the sort of cooperation and assistance between men and women which Adimora-Ezeigbo appeals to in her snail-sense feminism. She counterpoises more forward-looking and supportive male characters to the traditional Mr. Agu. The support from the duo of Mr. Nwiboko and Ogbonnaya gives Onyema the strength to stand up to her father and say 'Papa... I've told you; I won't be Onyia's wife! I'm going to be an engineer' (19). The strength in this statement does not show any consequence until Onyema passes her examination and proves to her father that she is more than an intellectual match of her male sibling and that she is worth more than ending up in old Onyia's kitchen. Having to prove herself shows the extra efforts required of women within a patriarchal setting which does not ordinarily grant them a chance for self-expansion. This pivotal point that is usually raised in Adimora-Ezeigbo's works constructs female power within a newer social setting where women still struggle to attain a measure of power within the Nigerian society. It also highlights the importance that she places on formal education in womanist liberation strategies.

Adimora-Ezeigbo in her children's literature pays greater attention to the development of children within the prevailing social realities of Nigeria. Through several incidents in the stories, she creates a significant position for young children in a social milieu which thinks little of the importance of little happenings in the lives of the young ones. She discusses the different ways in which the peculiarities of the Nigerian cultural, social and political conditions, for instance, are important for defining the lives of Nigeria's children. Issues of social, psychological and cultural well-being that could be both limiting and empowering for children are explored in ways which revisit the cultural work of women as teachers and, consider children as important members of the society. She usually focuses on the psychological barriers that could be threatening to children's development. Adimora-Ezeigbo illustrates the strong tie of familial relationship in an extended African family as a prerequisite for an all-round development for children. Thus, Adimora-Ezeigbo here reiterates the importance of the place of family bonds and conducive familial environment as important parts of the cultural structure of good upbringing for young children.

Adimora-Ezeigbo introduces an important traditional element of a culturally located belief system in *The Prize*. The belief of majority of African traditional settings in a cyclic movement in human's existence is an important one for invoking a continuous relationship and interaction between the dead and the living. The interaction between dead ancestors and living relatives which she treats extensively in *House of Symbols* is briefly introduced in *The Prize*. These are important aspects of Adimora-Ezeigbo's womanist concerns. She contends that major attitudes that define people take shape within the family setting and are transferred to the larger society. Also, of importance are Adimora-Ezeigbo's comments on good and bad parenting as important factors in children's upbringing. Thus, the socialization of the young ones is embedded within the core values of the society in which they are growing.

4. Conclusion

Adimora-Ezeigbo continues her advocacy for the position of good nurturance as an important part of children's upbringing in her other texts for young children. Her major preoccupation of defining children's roles within the social contexts of Nigeria places *The Prize* within the matrix of Nigeria's social and political location. Subtly examining existential issues of living in poverty which puts into perspective governmental responsibility in the present-day postcolonial Nigeria, *The Prize* pays attention to children's struggles within an unfavourable social system and parental ignorance of their obligations towards their children. Adimora-Ezeigbo's treatment of the interplay of poverty, social well-being, and children's upbringing with the issue of responsibility and obligations towards children, in governance gives the story a political flavor. Family cohesion in the face of unfavourable social circumstances is foregrounded as a determinant of

success. Like in the previous texts, Adimora-Ezeigbo treats family support as a prerequisite for successful living within Nigeria's social world. The story reinforces Adimora-Ezeigbo's arguments on the importance of the mother figure as a nurturer and support for the family as well as the responsibility of the government in assisting disadvantaged citizens. Adimora-Ezeigbo reiterates the importance of the home and the social welfare put in place within the Nigerian nation as important aspects of the wellbeing of Nigeria's younger generation. It is recommended that more research should focus on womanist ideology in children's literature and that women writers should embed womanist ideology in their literary works for children so as to inculcate issues of gender equality in children from early in life.

5. References

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