

Who Do Men Say We Are?: Interrogating Patriarchal Interiority and Exteriority Literacy in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*

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Abstract

Within the Nigerian cultural space, patriarchal literacy assumes the character of hegemony in the way it conditions women to defer to subjugating cultural euphemisms that appear malleable, collective, and egalitarian. Existing studies on patriarchal cultures in Nigeria have largely examined women's struggles through the eye of sanctioned knowledge and collective social consciousness as external manifestations of patriarchal mind-set. This study interrogates this hegemonic mind-set by exposing its interiority and exteriority in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*, thereby emphasising the duplicities embedded in cultural intent, dispensation, and enforcement. Deploying qualitative textual analysis as a method, it undertakes a close reading of selected episodes, characters, and cultural practices in the novel using Rudiger Campe and Julia Weber's Interiority and Exteriority, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Feminism-lite as complementary theories. A core argument is that Adimora-Ezeigbo deploys patriarchal normativity as a euphemistic technique for exposing the hegemonic consciousness underlying patriarchal order. Another point is that the novel interrogates the repressive assumptions embedded in patriarchal heteronormativity in Nigeria and reveals how seemingly benevolent cultural practices function as mechanisms of gender control. The interiority of these practices therefore exposes the cultural prejudices and inequalities in Nigerian patriarchy. The patrilineal and androcentric culture of inheritance in Umuga kinship, which functions as a window through which patriarchy externalises its single story of who women are is foregrounded for criticism alongside the female characters' construction of counternarratives. The conclusion is that Adimora-Ezeigbo encourages gender equality in Nigeria with her projection of patriarchal subtexts of unequal cultural exchanges.

Keywords: Gender equality, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Children of the Eagle, feminism-lite, Rudiger Campe and Julia Weber's Interiority and Exteriority

Introduction

As is the situation elsewhere around the world, African identities and ways of being are fundamentally influenced by the core concepts of sex, gender and sexuality.

— Sylvia Tamale

Philosophically, the human capacity to interrogate the authority or legitimacy of norms and literacies constitutes a defining marker of intellectual freedom and agential consciousness (Oyewumi 1). In this study, literacy goes beyond the mere ability to read and write. It is a reference to culturally sanctioned systems of knowledge – the epistemic consciousness through which a society legitimises and reproduces its values, identities, and social relations. The question, “Who do men say we are?” functions as an agential identity teaser analogous to the biblical question posed by Jesus Christ to his disciples to determine his identity in the eyes of his contemporaries. Fundamentally, any question of identity is a question of essence – whether of the self or of the society. In this study, a question of this nature speaks to the problematics of gendered identity formation in *women-men* binary. While Jesus Christ sought to understand the perception his society had of him within the heteronormative patriarchal order of the time, this study interrogates the various ways Nigerian androcentric culture in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Children of the Eagle* constructs women by means of cultural externalities which outwardly appear protective, communal, harmonious, and humorous, while concealing unequal gender relations and structures of subordination (Okonkwo 5-7; Akpah 134)

Patriarchal conditioning continues to render many African women vulnerable to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as feminism-lite — “a hollow, appeasing and bankrupt idea” (3), a form of conditional inclusion that preserves patriarchal authority beneath the rhetoric of complementarity and benevolence. Nevertheless, writers like Adichie and Adimora-Ezeigbo remain committed to reconfiguring the ways African women negotiate patriarchal constructions of identity in contemporary society; they do this because “The human mind and writers are both purveyors of people’s culture and belief systems” (Akpah 3). Hence, recognising that patriarchy commonly operates through euphemistic cultural performances becomes the first step towards interrogating its internal contradictions. For instance, when patriarchal culture speaks of women using chivalric, celebratory or reverential language, many African feminists often interrogate the relationship between such symbolic representations and the social practices that accompany them. Hence, in contemporary times, women continue to construct counter-narratives that challenge patriarchal exclusions and asymmetries as patriarchal structures continually expose tensions between rhetorical reverence and lived inequality. This is even more so as patriarchal thinking “involves a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself as the sufferer” (Nussbaum 328). Patriarchy pretends to participate in and take some share of

the inconveniences created by its heteronormative legality but it is ultimately conscious of the fact “that one is not oneself as the sufferer”.

Although gender inequalities existed in many precolonial African societies, several scholars argue that colonial administrative structures intensified patriarchal hierarchies using religion, education, legal codification, and indirect rule. Sylvia Tamale argues that “our colonial education systems largely delimited our thinking to Western theorisations of ourselves and our environments” (41). Similarly, Nwachukwu-Agbada contends that “the case often made of Igbo culture being rigidly male-centric is of recent origin” (88). Victor Uchendu buttresses this point in observing that the precolonial Igbo woman possessed considerable socio-economic agency, including the ability to leave oppressive marriages and independently manage economic resources (87). In his words:

The African woman regarded as a chattel of her husband, who has made a bridewealth payment on her account, is not an Igbo woman, who enjoys a high socioeconomic status. She can leave her husband at will, abandon him if he becomes a thief, and summon him to a tribunal, where she will get a fair hearing. She marries in her own right and manages her trading capital and her profits as she sees fit. (87)

These positions do not suggest the absence of patriarchy in precolonial Africa. They instead indicate that colonial modernity reinforced already existing gender asymmetries in significant ways. Indeed, African women – men inclusive – have lived with the consciousness of patriarchal constructions of female identity for centuries and continued to negotiate them in many African societies today. The inclusion of men in this asymmetry is not a reference to a victimhood equivalent to women’s experiences, but a reference to the social embeddedness of men in systems that reproduce restrictive gender expectations. Hence, the question of perception lies at the centre of gender identity formation in every society. Historically, the perception men have about women has in many ways conditioned what many women think of themselves. From the social conditioning of eighteenth-century English women who consumed male-authored journalistic fiction, to the gender camouflage of George Eliot, to the anti-colonial women’s movements like the Aba Women's Riot of 1929, men have always pushed women to the margin. According to Tamale Sylvia, women’s embeddedness in patriarchal systems has been both constraining and

enabling in ways that continually bring agential consciousness into dialogue with social reality (93). The attempts women make to interrogate and challenge how men define them have led to the emergence of multiple feminist traditions like Black feminism, African feminism, Womanism, and postcolonial feminism.

Existing studies on *Children of the Eagle* have extensively examined female resistance, daughteronomy, negotiation, and African feminist consciousness. For instance, while Nwachukwu-Agbada conceptualises “daughteronomy” to mean “Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's advocacy of an alternative proposal to the established rule of patriarchy (88)”, Azumurana's comparative analysis argues that, “Ezeigbo's and Agary's major female characters are propelled in their actions or inactions by their desire to be like the other, and that it is on the basis of this desire that they enter into and sustain their individual relationships” (151). His argument on the use of penis envy by the female characters to mean a coping mechanism signals the contrivances of feminism lite. Osita Ezenwanebe also reads the novel as a struggle against oppressive cultural conventions. He argues that, “...social conventions, cultural mores, and traditional practices that oppress and marginalise women, especially in the Eastern part of Nigeria” underline feminist “struggle for freedom and survival” (1-2). Women know the difference between what men say about them and what they do on the contrary. And because they know the cynicisms in patriarchal contrivances, they are willing to continue telling their own counter stories until the day of freedom (Okonkwo 1-7). Furthermore, Oyeronke Oyewumi evaluates the universalising assumptions of Western feminism in relation to African gender realities. This subterfuge character is the reason why, “African women and feminism are at odds” (Oyewumi 1). Hence, “despite the adjectives used to qualify feminism, it is Western feminism that inevitably dominates even when it is not explicitly the subject under consideration” (Oyewumi 1). For centuries, patriarchal perceptions of women constructed the identities women were socially conditioned to internalise about themselves.

This study therefore interrogates the patriarchal interiority and exteriority used in constructing female identity in the novel. Theory-wise, it draws primarily on Rudiger Campe and Julia Weber's concept of interiority and exteriority and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's notion of feminism-lite. Campe and Weber conceptualise interiority as the hidden domain of consciousness, intention, and subjective orientation, while exteriority refers to the outward manifestations that make interiority socially visible (Campe and Weber 2). In this study, patriarchal

interiority refers to the concealed assumptions, prejudices, and gender hierarchies embedded in patriarchal consciousness. On the other hand, exteriority refers to the cultural practices, rituals, and euphemistic performances used in enacting such social assumptions. Adichie's feminism-lite complements this framework in highlighting the conditional and performative forms of gender inclusion outwardly appearing egalitarian while preserving patriarchal authority beneath the surface. In terms of methodology, the study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach that is grounded in close textual analysis. It examines dialogue, symbolism, narrative voice, cultural rituals, and gendered performances in *Children of the Eagle* – elements that underscore how patriarchal consciousness is internally constituted and externally enacted. The analysis focuses primarily on inheritance practices, widowhood rituals, symbolic exclusions, patriarchal speech acts, and female counteractions – these are mediums through which patriarchal interiority externalises using euphemistic cultural practices.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does *Children of the Eagle* represent patriarchal interiority through cultural externalities?
2. In what ways do feminism-lites function as euphemistic mechanisms of patriarchal control in the novel?
3. How do the female characters resist patriarchal identity formation?

This article therefore argues that *Children of the Eagle* underlines patriarchal domination as a mind-set – one that operates by means of coercion and legalised norms. While this form of hegemony outwardly appear communal, moralising, and protective, it is internally reproducing gender inequality. The verbal and non-verbal resistance of Adimora-Ezeigbo's female characters constructs narrative spaces that challenge patriarchal identity formation in African culture. What this study contributes to African feminist literary criticism, therefore, is a clearer articulation of the various ways patriarchal consciousness operates using cultural performance to produce and sustain gendered social meanings.

Of the Interiority and Exteriority of a Single Story: Feminist Resistance Efforts

African feminists like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Grace Okot, Gorett Kyomuhendo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, Molara Ogundipe and others have been forthright in redefining the distorted identity of women in Africa through their works. Women have since the last century been consistent in

challenging oppressive patriarchal narratives. While some of them take the more radical routes, others feel a sense of caution in their protest. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo belongs to the latter group that deploys a more conciliatory approach in challenging oppressive tendencies in African culture. Her feminism, which is operationalised in her Snail-Sense Feminist Theory, is captured in the Eaglewoman's position that, "all that is wholesome in our culture should be protected and preserved" (*Children of the Eagle* 319). This non-combatant position does not necessarily signal fear or weakness. If anything, it speaks to the particular consideration that feminists like Adimora-Ezeigbo give to the ideation of cultural exclusivity and affiliation. It also speaks to the matter of non-finality of disagreement – the fact that they do not condemn the entirety of African patriarchal heteronormativity stems from a particular attitude towards decoloniality. This ennui that flows from the radical colourations of women's struggles by the solipsism of Western feminism – not regarding cultural peculiarities especially those affecting African women – is what Oyewumi expatiates in saying that the:

...very tradition of African self-determination – personal, cultural, and political – has been truncated by a series of successive global historical processes most notably the Atlantic Slave Trade and European colonization. Over the past five centuries, these developments have made Africa politically, economically, and culturally dependent on Western Europe and North America. As a result, Africa has become the recipient of ideas and goods of dubious and often harmful value. (2)

Oyewumi further argues that, "the fact that in many African societies the category-woman cannot be isolated raises the question of the relevance and value of Western feminism" (2). Hence, against the dominance of Western feminist epistemology and African male writers in the early and mid-twentieth century, "African women themselves are beginning to tell their own stories" (Davies 10). They use their unique stories to rewrite wrong narratives written about them by patriarchy and Western feminism. Ezeigbo's interest in deploying and using an indigenous narrative framework does not necessarily dissociate from the collectiveness and universalism of women's struggle against gender inequality but from the "mainstream feminist writings" (Okome 67) which "tend to portray African women as" (Okome 67) people who are

“confused, powerless, and unable to determine for themselves both the changes needed in their lives and the means to construct these changes” (Okome 67). She seems not to agree with the Eurocentric overreach and coloniality of Western feminism that reinforce what Okome calls, “reformist feminist evangelism” (67). This is a reality because, “African feminisms have always stood between the hard-rock of Western influence and domination and African relativism and disparagement” (Tamale 40). Hence, the counter narratives that are written by Ezeigbo and her ilk are intrinsically local, non-sensationalised, and mentally challenging. She speaks to the argument that feminist literature is, “about challenging the representations of women and arguing for better condition for them” (Quayson 586).

Of the Interiority of Intention and the Exteriority of Feminism-Lite

Feminism lite as a term or framework has been used by various scholars like Bullock and Fernald, Bütünwieser, Ratna, and Adichie to underscore the non-totalising attitudes of patriarchy towards the full dignity of women. By non-totalising, I refer to the way patriarchy circumscribes women’s cultural expression by permitting only limited, regulated forms of agency, while restricting the full articulation of their autonomy and dignity. In *Feminism Lite? Feminist Identification, Speaker Appearance, and Perceptions of Feminist and Antifeminist Messengers*, Bullock and Fernald illustrate how normative gaslights define the nature of feminism lite. According to them:

We found it ironic and contradictory to the most basic tenets of feminism that our credibility with students appeared to depend on physical appearance and adherence to traditionally feminine self-presentation. Eventually we came to refer to this phenomenon as “feminism lite”—the idea that feminism is more palatable when the messenger’s physical appearance does not directly challenge traditional standards of femininity. (290-291)

Bullock and Fernald’s observation speaks to the nostalgia that greets conservative consciousness – the dilemma of coming to terms with a new social order in a changing society. The dilemma comes from an interiority of preconceived cultural notions on gender mapping which manifest exteriorly as self-insecurities and hegemony. This notional difference is what Campe and

Weber mean in stating that interiority, “emerges from a process of distinctions” (2) which creates “inside and outside” (2) binary. This quandary of consciousness and personhood is also what Munck and Manoharan (2019) also identify as the, “ongoing conscious and unconscious dialogue that one has with oneself” (507). Hence, the cultural proselytization of consciousness necessarily makes the interior reflect the exterior which then pictures the, “larger patterns within the culture it is a member of” (Munck and Manoharan 507). This exteriority of the internal perception – the patriarchal to be specific – is perhaps more specifically positioned in Adichie’s epistolary feminist hypothesis entitled, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. Adichie speaks to the exteriority of the interiority of patriarchal hegemony in warning Ijeawele to:

Beware the danger of what I call Feminism Lite. It is the idea of conditional female equality. Reject this entirely. It is a hollow, appeasing and bankrupt idea. Being a feminist is like being pregnant. You either are or you are not. You either believe in the full equality of men and women, or you do not. (Dear Ijeawele 3)

In marshalling these instructions, Adichie operationalises her consciousness of the historical trauma in patriarchal hegemony. She goes on to cite some examples of gender inequalities to buttress her point:

A woman should be ambitious, but not too much. A woman can be successful but she should also do her domestic duties and cook for her husband. A woman should have her own but she should not forget her true role as home keeper. Of-course a woman should have a job but the man is still head of the family. Feminism Lite uses inane analogies like ‘he is the head and you are the neck.’ Or ‘he is driving but you are in the front seat.’ More troubling is the idea, in Feminism Lite, that men are naturally superior but should be expected to ‘treat women well.’ No. No. No. There must be more than male benevolence as the basis for a woman’s wellbeing. (Dear Ijeawele 3)

Many African cultures have an interior essence that is diametrically opposed to what is shown on the outside. Problematising patriarchal attitude towards

women in Africa necessarily calls for a better understanding of how men see women. Do African men openly accept that they demean and oppress women through their actions which are backed by patriarchal laws and customs? Do African women accept what African men say about their personhood and dignity? These are very important questions that could help us to understand the significance of Adichie's *Feminism* lite and Rudiger Campe and Julia Weber's *Interiority and Exteriority* in this study. To start with, the question "Who do men say we are?" is not likely to get the same essential answer from men and women. African men when asked this question are not likely to say women are the weaker sex, the pseudo-child, the widow-murderer, the invisible gender, the sexual butt, and so on because those define the interiority consciousness of what they think about women. However, because they know that their "internal space of subjectivity" is "moulded by external factors (Munck and Manoharan 507)", they are likely to project their pretended notions about women, notions that reek of feminism lite – warped innuendos wrapped as euphemisms. In this sense, what men truly think about women is spoken through their actions and attitudes, not words. An African man can say a woman is his African queen but deep down in his heart, he is merely seeing a sex object. He says those sweet words to her presumably as answers to the question of identity but acts in the direct opposite of his words. He can even project pretended chivalry, all for an ulterior motive that derives legitimacy from patriarchal cultural expectations. The interiority of patriarchy is governed by the strong belief that, "the male intellect rules over the female psyche and the distinction of their sexes, which for them (males), signifies that a woman is different from a man" (Børresen 171). The chameleonic interiority underpins, "... the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterise a system whereby women are kept as subordinates in a number of ways" (Bhasin 3). Hence, many African women of today, especially the feminists, who already know that men speak their heart and mind through actions – actions that pretend to love but innately act in the opposite – wage a serious war against both patriarchy's interior hegemony and feminism lites. This war that they wage is the counternarrative that comes from the place of epistemic consciousness.

Externalising Interior Intentions: *Children of the Eagle* and the Dynamics of the Subsisting Conflict

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is a renowned Nigerian scholar and prolific writer who has widely authored novels, poetry, short stories, children fiction, academic essays, and journalistic articles. She has won many literary prizes especially the highly coveted NLNG prize for literature. *Children of the Eagle* is her

significant addition to the corpus of African feminist fiction. Just like Chinua Achebe's trilogy – *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* – Nwachukwu-Agbada notes that *Children of the Eagle* is the third leg of Adimora-Ezeigbo's trilogy. He notes that the novel is “the last of Adimora-Ezeigbo's trilogy of fictions centred on the generations of Umuga women spanning over a hundred years. Preceding this novel are *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) and *House of Symbols* (2001)” (87). He states further that, “The three novels are interrelated, featuring major characters, largely females, who belong to the same genealogy but who represent different prongs of the battle against patriarchy. Thus, it is the same 'war of the sexes' running over generations, each generation faced with its challenges” (87). The topical consistency in the trilogy conjures a sense of autobiographical espionage perhaps meant to monitor the progress of the ongoing women's liberation struggles in Nigeria. Hence, Nwachukwu-Agbada concludes by saying that, “it is 'herstory' told in three eras of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial settings” (87).

In *Children of the Eagle*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo continues her mission of exposing the hypocrisies in the cultural practices that oppress and marginalise Nigerian women. The fictional town of Umuga which is a prototype of the typical Nigerian semi-rustic is intrinsically and extrinsically patriarchal in ways that are pretentious. Its cultural positions on patrilineal inheritance, widowhood rites, subordination, women's achievements, and sexual offences reek of feminism lite. Mr. Josiah Obidiegwu Okwara, also known as Osai, dies leaving behind a strong-willed wife, Eaglewoman, and her five egalitarian female children. As Nwachukwu-Agbada notes, the egalitarian struggles of the Eaglewoman and her female children started in *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), spiralled into *House of Symbols* (2001) and have continued in *Children of the Eagle* (2002). Ugonwanyi (Eaglewoman), the last of the four strong ones, is described in *House of Symbols* as “a solid rock that gathers moss. Around her, green and yellow moss blossoms in a thick furry mass at all seasons...People obey her and dance to her tune” (*House of Symbols* 99). In *Children of the Eagle*, she is not as visible as she is in *House of Symbols*. She now allows the symbols – freedom, justice, equality, determination, advocacy, and agency – that her daughters embody to be amplified through their interrogation of the inequalities in their culture. For instance, the patrilineal culture tells them that they are human beings with dignity. However, they have no cultural right to inherit land and perpetuate the name of their late father, Josiah Obidiegwu Okwara. The culture claims that it is an abomination for a woman who will get married in the

future to another man to inherit her father's land and take same to her husband's house. On the surface, this looks blameless but intrinsically, it appeals to false reason. Feminism-lite is usually built on the faulty logic which serves no significant purpose other than the justification of the injustice in the interiority of its intention. This is what Woiwode means when he says that "interiority cannot exist without its counterpart, exteriority" (83). Unfortunately, the interiorities which manifest as feminism-lites are nothing but fallacies because they do not resonate or correlate with impartial reason.

Feminism-lite represents narcissism and the sense of entitlement which embolden and push its enforcers into bullish behaviour. Just as it is in many Nigerian cultures of today, Umeaku's so-called "battalion of sons" (75) declares war on the late Mr. Osai Okwara's family over the parcel of land that he buys from their father. In reporting the incident to her children, the Eaglewoman says, "they stalked this piece of land like beasts of prey, killed and uprooted all the markers. Their shouts of abuse filled the air, some of it directed at me personally, the rest at my departed husband" (71). The bullish boys do not have to talk or argue what they think about the late Okwara's female family, they simply acted it. This kind of behaviour is similar to the class struggles, impunity, and political oppression that pervade the socio-political landscape of Nigeria. Against the argument that "empathy plays a critical interpersonal and societal role, enabling sharing of experiences, needs, and desires between individuals and providing an emotional bridge that promotes pro-social behaviour (Riess 74)", the behaviour of the Umeakus is bereft of empathy and underpins disdain for the progress of women. Many Nigerian women of today feel the vulnerability that Eaglewoman feels in saying "What could I do? I have no husband or grown son to fight for me?" (71). While she euphemises the seriousness of the gender discrimination implied by the patriarchal literacy she has capitulated to, her strong-willed daughters are not taking the gaslights. Her words break them and force them to protest and react, "Nnenna bites her lips in an effort to suppress her rising anger" (72), Ogonna, "clenches her hand as if preparing to punch someone" (72), Obioma jiggles "her head in disgust at the sight before them, wondering how anyone could commit such a senseless act" (72), and Amara exclaimed, "Hey" "in utter disbelief" (72). Their reactions signal the fact that "there is a long history of women mobilizing in creative ways to resist patriarchal and political domination, asserting their personal and collective rights" (Tamale 40). Through their action, Eaglewoman and her children express the clear difference between what the men of their society say about them and what they do conversely. Empathy is missing in patriarchal

interiority. It is this lack of empathy that underscores the behaviour of the bullish boys. In the words of Riess, “empathy plays a critical interpersonal and societal role, enabling sharing of experiences, needs, and desires between individuals and providing an emotional bridge that promotes pro-social behaviour” (74). In an egalitarian society, men and women treat each other with respect and empathy.

Feminism lite also gives the false pretence that men are the head who should take decision on societal matters while women are to just receive and work with men’s decision without their own inputs. This is akin to the idea of submission – the feminism lite that has validity in the Christian scripture – albeit with a gender balance in its love context. The latter however does not change the cultural ambiguity that the text carries in its gender representations. While feminism lites fan the ember of narcissism in patriarchy, they provoke anger and protest from enlightened women like Eaglewoman and her children. Through their lives, we see Ezeigbo educating gullible women who are comfortable with feminism lites to unlearn them. Eaglewoman tells her daughters who are visibly determined and angry with what Umeaku’s sons have done to their father’s land, “women are not permitted to approach Ogunano Ezeala directly or address the council” (74). She is at this point operationalising Ezeigbo’s idea of Snail-Sense Feminism, willing to observe, engage, and negotiate diplomatically with the power structures of her society. However, her daughters are not taking it – an attitude they see as capitulation to the feminism lites in the culture. Amara protests, “At this time and age women are not allowed to approach a group set up to keep peace in the town?” (74). Corroborating her protest, Nnenna swears, “we must direct our grievance straight to these men” (74). They also refuse the counsel that Pa Joel made to be their mouth piece in Ogunano meeting. Amara is very firm with her disapproval, “Here is my mother – as old, if not older than Pa Joel and here are my big sisters and I, yet you want us to wait until my kid brother returns home or until we send for our cousins before you erect the boundary markers on the disputed land. It doesn't make much sense to me” (316). This feminism lite shows the mind-set of the men in this society – it shows that the androcentric society interiorly rejects gender equality. The daughters of Eaglewoman are not taking it – in line with Adichie’s admonition for women to “...reject this entirely. It is a hollow, appeasing and bankrupt idea” (3). They resolve to construct a counternarrative to “...communicate with them directly as well as have a record of our petition and our demand for justice in case we need to go beyond the council to seek justice at a later date” (74). And to show that they are really not willing to take what

the culture is saying about them, Nnenna assures others, “I assure you that if justice fails to materialize at this level, we’ll take the case to court” (74). With this resolve and the firm actions that follow it – all contrived as a counternarrative – they are able to permanently resolve their land dispute with the Umeakus. It is resolved that permanent indicators be erected to border the two pieces of land. “Speak out”, the operational phrase in feminist advocacy, has always been an effective weapon against the snarls of hegemonic patriarchy.

Furthermore, feminism lite embodies chauvinism and misogyny. The latter are not verbal expressions but interiority traits that manifest only in actions. When it is time to erect the permanent indicator pillars which will resolve the land impasse between the Okwaras and the Umeakus, the emissary representing the Ogunano council insists that a male heir, the son of the family, must be around. Nkemdirim is the only son of Obioma, one of Eaglewoman’s daughters. Eaglewoman informs the emissary, “my son has not returned home yet,” (315). However, the representative is not taking the excuse. He is representing the reprehensive culture which will never utter the word ‘repressive’ in relation to women but will perform a thousand and one repressive actions. He pretentiously insists, “He should be here while the markers are being erected” (315). His irrational obstinacy is not going down well with the ladies. Nnenna intervenes on their behalf by arguing that, “he’s only a child and there are five of us present to represent the family” (315). The emissary at this point divulges the hidden male chauvinism which is driving his feminism lite, “Your brother may be a child but he is a male. The land in question belongs to him: it is his inheritance. Whoever hears that land issues are settled in the presence of women in Umuga?” (315). With this, he is representing the gender sentiments in Umuga – sentiments that he believes in. At this point, Pa Joel comes up with a save face subterfuge:

Ogunano Ezeala knows and you too know that there is no difference between the Okwara family and my own family. I have been like a father to all his children since Okwara rejoined the ancestors. I represent them in everything and have often spoken for them in the meetings of Ogunano Ezeala, especially as the only son of the family is still a minor. (315).

Interestingly, the emissary listens to Pa Joel’s argument and surrenders. The fact that he is able to only pay attention to Pa Joel’s opinion says something bad

about the interiority of patriarchy which pits itself against women's interests. Ironically, Pa Joel himself is not making a seasoned argument for the voices of the Okwaras to be heard directly and individually. He is rather making a tailored argument that amplifies his capacity as a representative of the Okwaras. He euphemises the hegemonic interiority of the patriarchal order he represents through his pretentious social externalities. Little wonder when he leaves, Amara wonders, "How can one have respect for a tradition that denies women the right to be treated decently as human beings?" (317). For the Okwaras, this psychological conflict represents an agential awareness that drives their counternarrative.

In addition, feminism lite is manipulative in a way that replaces reason with phobia. The later happens to women who have not heeded or come to terms with Adichie's "Reject..." (p.3), advice. The consistent emphasis on male child superiority manipulates women psychologically and places the married under intense pressure to have male children. For example, with the news of Nkemdirim's involvement in a car accident, "Eaglewoman slumps sideways: her head falls against the arm of the chair" (373). Her relapse is more of a response to the male-child superiority trauma coming from the manipulative feminism lite in her patriarchal culture than a response to the possibility of fatalism in the accident. Ironically, Nkemdirim is not even her biological child. He is adopted as it were to save the face of the family. In addition, despite the fact that all her female children are doing very well, the manipulative feminism lites Eaglewoman has come to embrace ingenuously make her find meaning only in the wellbeing of Nkemdirim. When she gets the news that he is still alive, she hurriedly visits Osai's tomb – her late husband's – and exclaims, "Osai, our son is alive and well" (397). The latter is coming from the gender superiority literacy she has come to imbibe – reacting to its pretentious euphemistic externality. This psychological manipulation is also evident in the way she positions the female child in talking about her marital experience, "people who would never have blinked their eyes at me when Osai was alive now confront me and show me their backsides. I am a prey to every roaming hyena because I do not have a husband anymore. Because I have no grown sons to speak for me" (26). She operationalises her dilemma of social trauma. However, within her lamentation lies her hidden agency to break free. We see this manipulative nature of feminism lite in the ways that it constructs history to be hi(s)tory without recourse to her(s)tory compromise. While the interior and ulterior motive of constructing history this way is to perpetuate patriarchal hegemony, feminism lites front a false exterior appearance of the common good.

In the heroism corpus of Umuga, the one popularly called “Okoroigwe”, heroes who make great exploits are celebrated with the total exclusion of heroines who play various roles in engendering social harmony. We learn about this injustice from the legendary tales told by Aziagba, Eaglewoman’s daughter’s grandmother. The enthusiasm with which she tells tales of how Western colonialists “waged” war “against Umuga people” (328) and the “...exploits of our ancestors, Obiatu and Okoroji, the War Commander of Umuga” leaves much impact on the ladies especially Nnenna who vows to do more research on the legend. This tale itself is a feminism lite designed to maintain control over women. The glee with which their grandmother narrates the exploits of Okorigwe, also Okoroji – the rhapsody that he is “the legendary figure in Umuga tradition whose story makes the head swell with wonder and admiration” makes Nnenna ask, “Was there no female Okorigwe?” (329). Nnenna’s question is introspective for her grandmother who answers innocuously that she does not “remember any female Okorigwe” (330). While grandma is following her understanding of who men say women are in the story, Nnenna is seeing loopholes in the perceptions in the story – loopholes which make her wonder if the Igbo traditional culture has changed, the fact that usually, “things in the universe stand in pairs... if something stands, another like it stands next to it to complement it” (330). For her, everything in the story is antithetical to the fact that, “a woman who wishes to live a fulfilled life expends her time fighting many battles: winning some, losing some” (330) and after all her struggles, she is not celebrated on the same red carpet with her male counterparts. The fear trait in feminism lites is shrouded with superstitions. For instance, many cultures in Nigeria make women believe that it is wrong for a woman to see a masquerade. Whereas it is just a superstition functioning as a control mechanism. In the same way, the Okwaras narrate the story of their supposed haunted home, “nobody in this house knows what it is; we only hear its cry. We are too frightened to try to find out what it is” (162). Even a bull is said to possess Osai’s spirt whenever it’s on charge. However, as part of her agential expression, Nnenna vows to put the female Okorigwe in the same hall of fame where her male counterparts are and, “if indeed she did not exist, then I would invent her – create her in my stories, in my writing” (329). Her resolve is partly gratified on Obuofo Day when the Eze confers “posthumous chieftaincy titles on both male and female Obuofo who led Umuga with wisdom more than half a century ago. They died in the service of their fatherland” (302). The Okwaras’ counternarratives, just like the gains of the many years of feminism advocacy, are yielding gradual results.

Feminism lite engenders self-deprecation in ways that make women doubt their dignity, self-esteem, and right to individual freedom. The feminism lites that patriarchy creates for women are meant to be a “prison of low self-esteem, which blights their psyche” (101). The chauvinistic custodians of this system of repression make sure that through their actions, women “abhor individual action or self-determination” (101) and get “submerged by culture” (101). They make sure “...women inevitably become self-effacing, lacking self-confidence” (101). They also make women feel less deserving of pleasure and satisfaction during sex. These are all forms of euphemistic externalities of the interiority of patriarchal subjugation which gaslight women into low self-esteem. To reject this bait, Nnenna admonishes Umuga women to know that “the pleasure is not all his. You have a right to some of it. You should ensure that you get it, or there should be no business at all” (113). To buttress the significance of her counsel, a woman in the audience narrates her sex experience with her husband, “my spirit stands aside to watch... like the ghost of a newly dead person... watching the funeral rites” (113). To also erase the self-deprecation that goes with economic dependency on men, the Okwaras “urge each one of you to find something to do to generate income for yourself so that you can take care of yourself and your children...” (118). It is ironic that the same men who enforce women’s subordination within patriarchal socio-cultural systems also engage in practices that belittle and gaslight them, especially in contexts of economic dependency.

Finally, feminism-lite is designed to oppress women both physically and psychologically. For instance, when a man dies, his wife becomes the first suspect. Eaglewoman is equally caught in this web. She is asked, ‘to perform the three-day ritual lament at cockcrow, after the burial’ (161). In a most humiliating way, she is supposed to wail, “like a hyena for three days” (161). While she sits uncomfortably at the middle of the conundrum, her daughters play the role of a devil’s advocate. They wonder “why on earth” (161) Umuga will “want to sustain such a horrible custom” (161). The burial rite is sensationalised to look communal – the euphemistic camouflage – but interiorly imbued with subjugation. Ironically, it is designed to manipulate women psychologically against their kind, pit them against each other. This is what we see in the way Umuada (women married outside Umuga) execute the rituals to the detriment of their fellow women. They force the “horrible custom” (161) on Eaglewoman, and do not mince words or actions in “eating and drinking in my house at my expense, without giving a thought to my agony or depression” (161). These Umuada “...complained that the food given them was not big

enough. Sometimes they rejected the food, threatening to desert the funeral rites and rituals” (161). The physical impact of the trauma on the Eaglewoman is that, “the one-year mourning period I was confined at home aggravated the pain in my knees. See where it has left me” (161). As Ruether argues, patriarchy forces on a woman, “...the subjugation of access to her body...” (219). What patriarchy does with feminism lite is akin to what the British colonialists did with the indirect rule system in southern Nigeria – the so-called divide and rule system. The experiences of Eaglewoman and her daughters in Umuga are best captured in Caruth’s trauma polemics, the fact that, “[T]he traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Hence, Nussbaum claims that trauma is only better understood by its victims (328). Eaglewoman and her daughters are victims of trauma who have decided to do something drastic about their persisting condition. The social consciousness that Adimora-Ezeigbo creates in the novel underpins the argument that, “The African writer is a fated social activist” (Okonkwo 198).

Conclusion

My goal in this study is to interrogate the representations of patriarchal interiority and exteriority in *Children of the Eagle*, how Adimora-Ezeigbo deploys both elements as cultural techniques used in concealing and enacting patriarchal oppression. The study draws attention to the epistemic tensions in patriarchal perception and female self-definition by foregrounding the question, “Who do men say we are?” This intellectual focus enabled a critical re-reading of gender identity formation in Nigeria – a process configured by overt structures of domination, and the subtle, euphemistic cultural performances that normalise inequality while projecting harmony. From the analysis, it is clear that patriarchal interiority – comprising entrenched assumptions, prejudices, and hierarchies – finds expression through exterior cultural practices like inheritance laws, widowhood rites, symbolic exclusions, and gendered speech acts. These practices, which are usually framed as communal, protective, or morally grounded, signpost what Adichie calls feminism-lite – a performative and conditional inclusion that preserves male authority beneath the veneer of benevolence. The study further reveals that these exteriorities are not benign. They rather produce material and psychological consequences, which include self-deprecation, economic dependency, and internalised subordination among women. The study also shows that Adimora-Ezeigbo in this novel constructs resistance as an epistemic and performative act. From the actions of Eaglewoman and her daughters, she highlights the fact that counternarratives

emerge from an awareness of the disjunction between what patriarchy says and what it does. Their verbal protests, legal consciousness, and symbolic defiance collectively disrupt the coherence of patriarchal constructs, thereby exposing its contradictions. In this sense, resistance becomes both oppositional and reconstructive as it generates alternative meanings of identity, agency, and belonging in the same cultural space. Theory-wise, the study extends the applicability of Rudiger Campe and Julia Weber's interiority and exteriority by situating both in gender studies, showing how internalised ideologies are externalised by means of cultural performance. It also deepens the analytical utility of Adichie's feminism-lite by revealing its embeddedness in everyday socio-cultural practices, instead of treating it as a purely rhetorical construct. Hence, the frameworks used in this study provide a more nuanced understanding of patriarchy as a system sustained by affect, symbolism, habituated belief systems, coercion and law. This encourages literary scholars and cultural participants to interrogate the legitimacy of inherited norms. It also highlights the importance of economic agency, narrative self-representation, and legal awareness as tools used by women in negotiating and resisting systemic subordination in contemporary African societies. In addition, the study is not without limitations. Its primary focus on a single literary text restricts the generalisability of its conclusions across diverse Nigerian cultures. In addition, while it foregrounds the ideological dimensions of patriarchy, it does not fully engage with empirical sociological data that might further substantiate the lived experiences reflected in the novel. Future research may therefore expand this inquiry using comparative method to analyse multiple literary texts or by integrating interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary criticism with gender studies, sociology, and legal theory.

In conclusion, the study reaffirms that patriarchal domination in *Children of the Eagle* operates less as an overt imposition and more as a deeply embedded consciousness that sustains itself by means of cultural performance and euphemistic legitimisation. Adimora-Ezeigbo challenges this hegemonic mindset that defines women negatively and empowers her female characters to redefine themselves from within. It is therefore within this dialogic space – imposed identity and asserted selfhood – that the transformative potential of feminist counternarratives ultimately resides.

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