Rebecca Usoro
Department of English
University of Uyo, Nigeria
E-mail: anniebeckyu@yahoo.com

Abstract
This paper attempts to explore the mythic representations of gender and sexuality in African writings as exemplified by Akachi Ezeigbo’s House of Symbols. Most African writings centre on the history of their societies, ranging from the pre-modern to the post-colonial. Whether in prose, poetry or drama, each writer strives to anchor his work on the issues that mirror, to a large extent, the society he situates his work. Since the work of art is mostly dialogical, characterization becomes an invaluable asset in the hands of writers. Even in non-human tales, it becomes imminent to find characters exhibiting human-defined traits. In reading human tales, one observes a direct gender defined characterization. Each gender enacts a role that the writer pre-assigns, which of course is his reflection of the society in question. Ezeigbo represents the history of her society, the Igbo, in the modern medium. She carefully assigns distinctive roles to each gender according to her perception of the pre-modern Igbo culture. Her work emphasizes a society devoid of male dominance, where the female is respected, encouraged, revered and honoured on her own merit. The concept of domination, subjugation and oppression of the female gender by the male which has resulted in tirades for “Feminism” as the solution to this age-long complexity is associated with post-colonialism, especially in sexist society. The paper concludes that sexist thoughts have not singularly provided the basis for human and social development, which is effectively enhanced by the efforts and energies of women. This oversight when corrected will raise the glory of African society above sub-development status in the 21st century.

Introduction
All literary writings aim at presenting a particular society to its audience. Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex presented the myth of the gods of the Greek society; Amos Tutuola’s The Palmwine Drinkard, Fagunwa’s A Forest of a Thousand Daemons and Ola Rotimi’s The Gods are not to Blame (which borrows from the Grecian myth), portray the Yoruba cosmology, and Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart reflects the Igbo society. Zaynab Alkali’s The Stillborn portrays the Hausa/Fulani culture. Ime Ikiddeh’s The Vulture’s Funeral and Reincarnation and Daniel Udo’s Season of Silences also reflect the Ibibio cosmology, Clark-Bekeredemo’s Ozidi Saga reflects the Ijaw culture, among others. Akachi Ezeigbo’s House of Symbols is a reflection of her ancient Igbo culture before the
invasion by the Whiteman. In this masterpiece, Ezeigbo analyzes some mythic representations of gender and sexuality that abound in African writings, using her society as a case study.

Mythic (mis)representation in this paper is the idealized conception of the tales of the ancient Igbo society which Ezeigbo represents. In the text, *House of Symbols*, Ezeigbo transmutes the history of her society through her recreation of her ancestors as she reflects on their routine before the uninvited intrusion of Kosiri (as the white invaders were called in one of Ezeigbo’s novels, *The Last of the Strong Ones*) “contaminates” (*The Last*, 2) the “interesting lives of women and men born into four generations of two remarkable families” ... (*House*, iii). Since most African writings centre on the history of their societies, ranging from pre-modern to post colonial, it becomes almost impossible to avoid the replication of societal myths and folklores in them. Each writer strives to anchor his work on the issues that mirror, to a large extent, the society he situates his work. Ezeigbo represents the history of her society, the Igbo, in the modern medium, the novel. She carefully assigns distinctive roles to each gender according to her perception of the pre-modern Igbo culture. Her work emphasizes a society devoid of male dominance, where the female is respected, encouraged, revered and honoured on her own merit.

The concept of domination, subjugation, suppression, relegation and oppression of the female gender by the male is patriarchal which is noted to have come with colonization. This has resulted in tirades for “Feminism” as the solution to this age-long complexity which post colonialism has left in its wake. Patriarchy thrives in a male hegemonic (sexist) society. A patriarchal society is exemplified by male power while women are reduced to “second class citizens”. This attribute of insecurity for the female sex informs the belief that a woman is only “secured” in the marriage institution irrespective of her “blessings”. This paper interrogates Ezeigbo’s representation of gender and sexuality in her Igbo society. It is broken into four parts: the introduction, gender and the society as its theoretical basis, Ezeigbo’s (Mis) Representations in *House of Symbols* and conclusion.

**Gender and Society**

Gender, as Roger Webster defines it, is a “socially constructed difference which forms the basis of inequality, oppression and exploitation between the sexes ... (72). This means that the patterns to which the individuals are expected to conform are designed and determined from societal unwritten cultural laws for the purpose of apportioning different kinds of roles and responses to the two sexes. It is this sex differential role within the society that is referred to as gender. The drama of gender is scripted by the society; each society decides what the two sexes should do and how they should behave. The aspiration and yearning of people are influenced by the “expectations or constraints which the society designs for the two sexes” (Emenyi, 56).
African society in general is a patriarchal one which promotes gender structures. Every aspect of human life is determined along this sexist line. Patriarchy is a sexist system and it recognizes only the male as the authority in the family and society. Ownership of possessions is relegated to the male only while exercise of power is male-centred. Imoh Emenyi in her article, “Women as symbol of Patriarchal Capitalism in ‘Dark Goddess and True Confession’” asserts that:


From childhood to death, the African society has different traits that each sex must exhibit; otherwise names are tagged to their violations which are assumed as taboos.

Mary Kolawole upholds that the issue of “gender has become a major canon of modern scholarship … there is hardly any society, past or contemporary, that upholds absolute gender equality”. She adds that distinct gender differentiation often creates women marginalization in any society that it is celebrated (108). This statement confirms that most societies, especially in modern times, perpetuate these gender roles in different categories and the recipients of the negative effects of this gender distinction are usually the woman.

Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn opine that “inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor divine mandate, but a cultural construct” aimed at limiting the supposed weaker gender (cited in Ezeigbo’s Gender Issues, 3). Ezeigbo avers that “the activities of feminist and the women’s movement have given many women self-confidence and respect” as their potentials are justly articulated (Ezeigbo Gender Issues, 3). She adds:


In their research into sex role stereotypes, Paul Rosenkrantz et al reveal that the male is “readily accepted as being active, aggressive, ambitious, dominant and independent while the female is expected to be gentle, emotional, quiet or talkative, caring but insecure” (291). One at this juncture wonders if
Rosenkrantz et al’s raw materials contained inputs from African society as Africa’s patrilineal status readily accepts and promotes male dominance and female subjugation.

The gender dichotomy spans every aspect of life so much that some societies do not believe that a woman has sense enough to think about her situation. She is rather to “accept” her status without questioning, after all “a woman is only seen, not heard” (Things Fall Apart). Today’s Igbo society being a patrilineal one like most African societies, instruments this distinction effectively. It projects the invisibility status of the female sex where “power” to act must be obtained from the man of the house. Chinua Achebe further underscores this distinctive role of the female in Igbo society when the protagonist, Okonkwo, queries one of his wives, Nwoye’s mother: “when did you become the ndiche of Umuofia?” simply because the former dared to ask if the oracle has decided to kill Ikemefuna whom she was asked to have in custody (TFA, 11).

Emenyi remarks that “what each society prescribes as the appropriate role for the sexes becomes the cultural theory of gender and the female child in particular is expected to learn them from birth …” (38). In confirming the African position on male superiority, supremacy and dominance, Emenyi further asserts that

…the male and female children are socialized differently; the former is groomed to be a conqueror while the later is trained to meet his needs. The prominence given to male traits as attributes that are positively valued has culminated in the institutionalization of male dominance. The female is planted in domestic space as a wife and mother … (38).

The institutionalization of the male thus impact negatively on the absence of a male child in family. In African society, a man without a male child is seen as one that has no child at all. In this instance, it is the woman that bears the brunt of the insufficiency. For instance, Emecheta’s Nnu Ego and Adaku are harassed in marriage because Adaku has only two female children and Nnu Ego has one only in her second marriage. On the tenets of patriarchy, a male child who does not possess the desired or expected aggressive fearless and bold traits is seen as effeminate, a disgrace, a defeat and a failure. Achebe reflected this when he echoes through his protagonist, Okonkwo: “I will not have a son who cannot hold his head in the gathering of the clan …” (24). He states further: “I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yam can throw him in a wrestling match….Where is the young sucker that will grow when the old banana tree dies? … (46).

Even within the patrilineal set up, high class distinction is maintained as powers are conceded to the strong, mighty and the royalty in the society. In Igbo land, ofu and ozo titles mark out the elite who administer power in the
society. The *obuofu* is the highest judicial body reserved for the highly achieved and mighty of the land. In this light, patriarchy victimizes the weak male as it does to women (a weak man is viewed as effeminate). The patrilineal African society expects a woman to be gentle, meek, submissive, receptive, and they are not expected to display emotions. That is why Zaynab Alkali’s Li is disregarded in the society for daring to flout the tradition of her people, the Hausa.

The extent to which masculinity is cherished in patriarchy is exhibited by Achebe’s Okonkwo when he regrets Ezinma’s femaleness and wishes she were a man because she possesses those qualities that Nwoye, his first son does not (*TFA*, 45). These gender differential roles assigned to the sexes in each patriarchal culture are expressed clearly in the literary culture, whether written or oral. Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* is however a negation of the male hegemonic spirit as she presents her ancient society in its purity.

Hess et al observe that the culture that we live in helps us to “become gendered person living in a gendered world, thinking gendered thoughts …” (193). The efforts of women at breaking the barrier of the male literary monopoly in writing are not taken lightly by the authoritative society. Even in contemporary civilization, such moves at a conscious exposition of the female literary capabilities are branded as “feminism” and most men are bitter at this awareness that female writers have brought to the experiences of female oppression. Feminism in its extreme, although dangerous and most often misunderstood especially in a patrilineal set up, is a direct reaction to the level of male subjugation, oppression and relegation of the female species. Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* is, however, not a feministic degradation of the male hegemony as she presents her ancient society in its original, undiluted state.

**Ezeigbo’s (Mis)Representations in *House of Symbols***

Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* presents inter/intra societal conflict in Africa. However, it is noticed that these inter/intra conflicts are humane in nature; they are not caused by role distinctions of the characters but are generated by human jealousies and hatred. In accordance with the tradition of patriarchy and in the African patriarchal system, representation should uphold the male gender. Zulu Sofola tends to sympathize with the loss of centrality for the African woman. She says that in African society, the conceptualization of the psyche reflects genderlessness. Her assertion implies that the traditional African society conditions the male and female to be complementary to each other. She further says that it is the English language that appends “fe” to male or “wo” to man to form “female and woman” (52). These distinctions discriminate between the sexes thereby reflecting specified role function which conditions the male to be the leader while the female is the underdog.
In patriarchy, only the success of the male gender and its prowess would be lauded. All sexist writers enjoy the mortification of the female gender by succinctly magnifying the suppressed, battered and subjugated female. In Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* however, the reverse is the case. To laud the female gender will amount to misrepresentation in a patriarchal society such as ours but this is exactly what Akachi Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* sets out to achieve. This writer infers that the author is however not confrontational to the status quo but rather represents her pre-modern society ante-status quo which seems to emphasize the female.

Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* rather mirrors the author’s mythic reflection of ancient African life where patriarchy had not held sway. She cautiously highlights the pre-modern Igbo society which reflects the opposite of the modern patriarchal hegemony. Gender roles are meticulously evaluated in this pre-literate culture. The male and female genders are extolled for their level of achievements. The highlight shows that women were given free hand to belong to the society, not as appendages of the male, but in their own right. Her language reveals that the women were the mouthpiece of the gods and goddesses. As priestesses and prophetesses, their authorities were not questioned neither were they undermined in any way. Powers and authorities flowed from them without the least feeling of variance. For instance, in the statement, “Ezenwayi wishes to see you, your husband and the child you are nursing”, misrepresentation is implied in the patriarchal provisions (4). The fact that the husband is the head of the family is not the question here. He is not addressed directly neither is he the first to be mentioned in the deliverance of the message. This in the pre-modern society does not undermine the husband neither does it diminish his authority as the head of the family, but the emphasis of the message is on the woman, the wife.

Similarly, Ezeigbo represents the female gender as an epitome of purity whom the gods speak through. Ezenwayi is the prophetess of Umuga. There are many males in the society who would have been used as the mouthpiece of the gods, but the gods chose her. She ministers to male and female alike, from far and from within without any hard feelings of usurpation of power as would have been the case in today’s patriarchal society.

In representing the female role in this ancient society, Okwudibia, is the (rememberer) of the society. The history of the clan rests in her good memory capacity as she recalls the history and genealogy of the tribe beyond four generations. Ejimnaka, the lioness (also the grandmother of the Eaglewoman), is also a woman that Ezeigbo recalls as she represents cherishable values in the ancient Umuga society. Ejimnaka’s prowess is the centre story of *The Last of the Strong Ones* which the present novel follows.

Eaglewoman (Ugonwayi), one of the major characters in the novel, is equally a woman represented as an epitome of success, good nature and perfection. The Umulobia people (the village they have lived in and made impact for
many years) and the entire Atagu community refer to her as “the tree that grows money” (121). Although Osai (Obidiegwu), is equally noted as the best husband, good natured to all and a very successful civil servant (the first black man to be made Assistant District Officer (ADO) in the whole of Atagu county community), his is not the emphasis of the author. Even Ezeogu, the seer (one of the twelve carried away by the invaders, who saw ahead of time and warned that the coming of the strangers would upturn our world and rend the fabric of Umuga tradition ...) is a revered son of the land who is merely mentioned, not emphasized (2-3).

Eaglewoman’s success in business and domestic sphere occupies the author’s concern in the novel. It is to her that families bring their children for training in both job opportunities and morals. Many desperate people look up to her for succour and are never disappointed: “‘They say you are a wizard of medicine and a godfather to the poor’ ... the sick man said ‘you can see I have a disease that needs cure and I have come to you receive it!’” (248). The eulogy given to Eaglewoman tends to diminish the virtues of Osai and Ezeogu. This is Ezeigbo’s conscious effort at misrepresentation.

Nnenne, the baby is another representation of the female gender copiously portrayed by the author. Nnenne is the baby (Mmirimma – Spring of Beauty) of the house, Eaglewoman’s and Osai’s second daughter and the protagonist of the novel. She is claimed to be the reincarnated Ejimnaka, the lioness of Umuga, who, with Okwudibia, Chieme, Onyekozuru and Ezenwayi, were the Oluada (the representative voice of women) of Umuga in The Last of the Strong Ones. Nnenne, the reincarnated Ejimnaka is acknowledged as “one who left in anger in a period of transition and returned in peace in the time of transformation” (152-3). In Okwudibia’s words, her reincarnation is confirmed:

What news do you bring me from the ancestors? ....
Ezeukwu’s daughter, welcome to my house. You who return on purpose to weave a new destiny. You come to speed me on my way, to send me to the place where I should have gone before now. Ndewo! (90).

Her past virtues such as pride, self confidence, firmness and resolute spirit are recalled. Even in her reincarnated life, she is unique; her pride makes her defy Joseph’s seeming authority over okosa game’s victory. She taunts and challenges him to do his worse rather than beg for mercy “Did I beg you to stop? ... I did not beg you as you wanted me to” (179). Her enigmatic character is observed by her mother, Eaglewoman: “What shall we do with a child like Nnenne? ... She is too precocious, too intense. Too passionate” (199). The entire novel revolves around her present and past life.

Ezeigbo does not end her positive representations of the female gender on her major characters alone. For instance, “the messenger, a sturdy, healthy-
looking and attractive young woman” (5) is Ezenwayi’s mouthpiece to the Osai family. Although Ezenwayi has male attendants, it is a woman that she uses at this crucial moment, having sent a similar message twice in the last nine months. The male attendants serve to guard the female in the face of danger. Another woman, Anuli, is a prophetess in Umukwulu, another stretch of villages away from Umuga. She used her female attendants in delivering her messages even when she had male attendants too. Men were however recognized as the ones “to give protection” whenever necessary (26).

Her representation also favours some male characters that are minor in the action of the novel. Chiedoche and Nnamdi, Aziagba’s twins, are represented as reincarnated strong men of Umuga – Okoroji the war commander, the father of the twins and Obiatu, Aziagba’s father who was one of the respected obuofu of Umuga in *The Last of the Strong Ones*.

In her representation of the pre-modern Igbo culture, Ezeigbo highlights some aspects of the Igbo culture too which impact the overall life pattern of the society. Her representation of the way in which the myth of idegbe serves as a vital ingredient in the construction of the pre-modern Africa is accentuated too. Idegbe is a system whereby an only child of the family, a female, legally perpetuates the family name in the Igbo culture. Aziagba, Eaglewoman’s mother, is an idegbe. Her society “socially constructs” that the family name be perpetuated in cases such as hers where there is no other child for her parents. In the modern society, multiple marriage or adoption would have been the solution to the absence of a male child or another child where it is desired. Even the most conspicuous object of the author’s imagination is feminized:

> Painted conspicuously on the front wall of the building is a life-size image of a female, full-bodied, with the wings of an Angel...this is the first time she has ever seen an Angel imaged in the form of a woman ... 21.

Ezeigbo reflects a society that thrives on healthy competition. The citizens are not out to flex their muscles on why the “weaker” sex should she be the mouthpiece of the gods at all times. There is no feeling of conflict, contention or competition rather each person is respected on his or her merit. The author does not cite arrogance as a characteristic of these women in recognized positions.

Her opinion corroborates Zulu Sofola’s claims that the African society should see the human society as organic, holistic reality whose existence and survival can be achieved through a positive harmonious social organisation in which all the members are relevant (53). This claim does not encourage contention, conflict or competition rather it promotes peaceful coexistence among all contending factions. Ini Uko adds that women are endowed with strength and potential and that many of the negative, derogatory portrayals of women have
been guided by prejudice, ignorance and or sexism, which characterize patriarchy (191). In all, these negative portraiture and representations of the female gender in literary works which exemplify real life do not provide the basis for human and social development that we earnestly desire. The efforts and energies of women in the development of human and social progress in African society over the centuries cannot be enumerated on a few pages of writing. Yet, male chauvinism, patriarchal hegemony and prejudice rob patriarchal societies of clear-mindedness to the truth of human fallibility wherefore the female is constantly adjudged.

**Conclusion**

Most African writings centre on the history of their societies, ranging from pre-modern to post colonial. Whether in prose, poetry or drama, each writer strives to anchor his work on the issues that mirror, to a large extent, the society he situates his work. Since the work of art is mostly dialogical, characterization becomes vital resources for writers. Moreso, since literature comprises both human and non-human tales, it becomes imminent to find characters exhibiting human defined traits. In reading a human tales, one observes a direct gender defined characterization. Ezeigbo painstakingly select her characters to buttress her imaginative prowess. Her text, *House of Symbols*, is ensconced in the middle of her conceived trilogy. It continues the saga that began in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. The Umuga genealogy is assiduously scrutinized and the virtues of these remarkable characters are reflected as a measure to inculcate positive assets among posterity. Each gender in this novel enacts a role that the writer pre-assigns, which of course is her reflection of her society as she seeks to epitomize.

Thus the modern Igbo patrilineal society, unlike the pre-modern Igbo, does not bequeath equal opportunities to women and men. In the pre-modern era, women were wealthy and famous. Quite a number of the hardworking women owned landed properties that did not interfere with the functionality of the society. However, today’s society has robbed the woman of her God-given potentials as she “has been stripped bare” of her central relevance in the traditional society due to years of psychological, intellectual, material and cultural subversion by foreign powers. To this Sofola tends to sympathize as the loss of centrality for the African woman has appended the woman to the male in such a way that her relevance is subsumed under the shadow of the male (52). For this she rejects the Western concept of feminism, which refuses any association to the male and the double standard syndrome. Sofola tends to rather join forces with the likes of Buchi Emecheta, Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems who prefer to call their gender projection Womanism. They argue that Womanism does not present a “man-hating ideology but upholds respect for the family unit (Kolawole, 109). The sensitivity in gender discourse has polarized attitudes to its discussions because in most cases, the discussion “involves a war of the sexes …” (109).
However, some female writers refuse to be apologetic in their expression of the female situation. Flora Nwapa is one of such who elicits an overt unapologetic concern for the sex differential in patriarchal society. Her works attest to the celebration of female excellence and recommends a total rejection of unhealthy male dominance and subjugation in marriage for the female sex which the men so much enjoy. In recent times, however, male writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe and Femi Osofisan have also joined to project women in more role-fulfilling positions. Still in projecting womanhood against feminism, Zulu Sofola’s assertion that “the African perception of gender question is thus healthier, positive and allows for a wholesome development of the human society” is only practicable in few matrilineal cultures of Africa like Ghana (especially in Akan), Efiks and some parts of Delta State in Nigeria.

Even in the concept of reincarnation which African society is well known for, Aziagba’s twins, Nnamdi and Chiedoche are said to be Obiatu and Okoroji (Aziagba’s father and the father of the twins who lost their lives in the transition period of old Umuga society). The Igbo modern society, like her other patrilineal counterparts in Africa, signifies gender relations in all human endeavours. There are specified things that men must do and others for women. Some days are set aside in which women are not allowed free movement like the male, some crops are left for the women to plant and own while ownership of some are for the men. In polygamous families, there are days for “husband” allotted to each woman. In the gathering of the clan for example, there are issues that women are not expected to be a part of, the classified male-exclusive issues. In the novel under review, Ezeigbo projects the true undiluted Igbo society where the female gender was given free access to flutter her wings. In the understudied society, patriarchy which seems to relegate the women to the background was unknown as everyone had a free space to display his or her potentials.

Ezeigbo copiously presents the pre-modern gender structure of that society in its true light. The points of success for the male are indicated as well as the areas of strength for the female gender. Virtues are highlighted for their true value. The issue of patriarchal appropriation of power was not too pronounced in the pre-modern Africa.

In spite of modern civilization which is supposed to broaden the minds of the people, men in patriarchal societies today still demonstrate a fit of pique at the notion of a woman excelling in a presumed male exclusive domain such as medicine, academics, political arena, to mention a few. Some men cannot imagine a woman who is sensible enough to break barriers honourably without a taint of immorality, whereas research and observation have proved these insinuations wrong. To such minds, therefore, Ezeigbo’s representations in the novel, *House of Symbols*, would certainly be misrepresentations. Her representations infer that women are honourable and
brilliant enough to excel in all aspects of life. They contribute immensely to the progress of the society and will always be willing to do more if patriarchy will give them the chance. Ezeigbo’s deployment of oral tradition embed in her imaginary prowess which she captures in the historical artefact, anchors her texts within an appropriate African community. This in essence has allowed her (and other writers) to negotiate their places within a nascent African modernity.

**Works Cited**


