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Abstract

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*, published in 2002, is a narrative whose multiple avian metaphors produce and are paradigmatic of symbolically significant cultural referents in Igbo traditional life. In patriarchal Igbo society in South-eastern Nigeria where the phallocentric order assumes absolute hegemony over the matriarchal principle and is inscribed within the matrices of socio-cultural institutions, econo-political patterns of societal engineering and juridical matters, it is epistemologically and ideologically important that this novel negotiates the matriarchal condition through the deployment of avian metaphors.

JAMES TAR TSAAIOR

The Significance of Avian Metaphors in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*, published in 2002, is a narrative whose multiple avian metaphors produce and are paradigmatic of symbolically significant cultural referents in Igbo traditional life. In patriarchal Igbo society in South-eastern Nigeria where the phallogocentric order assumes absolute hegemony over the matriarchal principle and is inscribed within the matrices of socio-cultural institutions, economic-political patterns of societal engineering and juridical matters, it is epistemologically and ideologically important that this novel negotiates the matriarchal condition through the deployment of avian metaphors.

Eagle-woman is the name of the eponymous female character who shapes and reshapes, defines and redefines the narrative kinesis and perspective trajectory of the novel. This female protagonist is an Eagle of a woman and her five children are made in her mould. They include: Ogonna Okwara-Nduka, a secondary school teacher in Lagoon City married with four children; Nnenna Okwara-Okoli, an academic at the University of the South, also in Lagoon City and married with a son and daughter; Obioma Okwara-Ebo, a pastor and evangelist, married with four children. There are also Chiaku Okwara-Kwesi, a divorced medical doctor who practices in London and Amara Okwara, a journalist who is single but on the threshold of getting married. The only male member of the family, Nkemdirim is Eaglewoman's grand-child born by Obioma outside of wedlock.

As the narrative begins, Eaglewoman and four of her daughters (except Chiaku) are at the graveside of the family patriarch, Pa Josiah Obidiegwu Okwara, in a pensive mood preparatory to the commemoration of his passage to the ancestral world. As the omniscient narrator informs the reader:

They are Eaglewoman's children. They form the centre of her life. She wakes up every morning with thoughts of them flooding her mind. Thinking of them means praying for them.... They are the joy of her life since the loss of Osai, her husband.... Each morning, without any conscious effort on her part, the thought of her children animates her body, waxes it to stir, to rise with the sun (17).

Appropriating the avian metaphor of the eagle, the novel foregrounds the potential power of women in Igbo society as Eaglewoman and her daughters engage with and confront patriarchal practices and resist the behaviour and rules ascribed by male constructed social institutions. These include land inheritance rights which

privilege men but exclude women and the subjection of women to a regime of silence and invisibility. Eaglewoman and her daughters are, therefore, involved in the politics of resistance against a phallogocentric order that denies women their veritable share of inheritance in landed property, monetary bequest and other valuables. As eagles, the women succeed in taming male power by deploying their power to reverse and revise social institutions and practices thereby re-constituting and redirecting the power inherent in the eagle as a metaphor for maleness.

The eagle is a predatory bird endowed with unique features for hunting prey. It has a sharp, forked beak for tearing the flesh of prey and powerful talons for catching prey. Its feathers are made up of primaries, secondaries and quills that are called into service for soaring to the heights. According to Webb, Wallwork and Elgood, 'Many of the larger birds, notably eagles ... use thermals to soar on nearly motionless wings, and can remain airborne for hours with a minimum energy expenditure' (137–38). Eagles have keen, powerful and penetrating vision. They also have strong jaws, muscular tibias and tarsuses, and possess a flamboyant colouration around the nape and mantle.

Eaglewoman has the strength and courage of the eagle that enables her to confront the retrogressive, oppressive and repressive traditional practices of male-dominated Umuga society that are exploitative and discriminatory against women. She stands up against the phallogocentric order and its associated traditions, vehemently resisting Uncle Reuben's attempted appropriation of her land. As Ogonna, one of her daughters reminisces, Umuga tradition discriminates against ownership of property by women simply because of patriarchal inheritance rights:

Mama had more than her share of provocation, oppression from cruel and envious relations.... I remember clearly an incident that took place in the year 1967, few months to the outbreak of the civil war. My Uncle, Reuben, visited us in Port City and asked Papa to sell to him four plots of land we have in Enymba City. To Uncle Reuben's disappointment, Papa rejected his request. He blamed mama for this.... It was after the incident that my sisters and I realised that women were not expected or permitted to own land in our culture even when they pay for it with their own money. If land is bought with a woman's wealth, the real owner of the land is her husband, if she is married. (94–95)

This exclusionary politics of land inheritance marginalises women — placing them on the periphery of cultural discourse and debate; but Eaglewoman contests this order. Her physical constitution and endowments make her beautiful and attractive even as she ages gracefully. But beyond her pulchritude, Eaglewoman possesses the resilience and inner strength to run the family and provide for its diverse needs even with the departure of Osai, her husband. As a visionary, she not only invests in land with her husband but also owns a bakery enterprise from which the family derives its sustenance. Eaglewoman demonstrates the qualities of the eagle through her capacity to transcend these prohibitive restrictions. She refuses to be intimidated and cowed into submission during the challenges she faces when her in-laws contest her right to hold the title of the family land.

The character and courage of the eagle which Eaglewoman possesses is also shared by her daughters — they are the authentic children of the eagle. Though four of them operate within the confines of marriage as housewives, they still assert their independence within a restricted familial institutional space that interpellates women as mere appendages of men. The women are educated and expect to be respected and accorded human dignity. Demonstrating the inner strength of the eagle, these daughters travel alone from Lagoon City without their husbands, driving in turns, until they arrive safely at their destination. The following conversation reveals their courage and strength:

‘Though we travelled home in Obioma’s car ... we just yapped, joked and laughed, as we usually do, all the way from Lagoon City to Umuga

‘Well, yes, but with our spouses’ reluctant consent, remember? ... Afam was worried about the idea of us travelling without a driver. Thank God we made it in one piece. That will show these guys that we are not as weak as they think’.

‘We did it in spite of their doubts and fears’. (123)

The same daughters demonstrate the uncommon courage of the eagle by rebelliously protesting attempts by the Umeaku family to appropriate the family land on the death of their father. They resolve to write a letter to the Ogunana Ezeala, the village association, to lodge a complaint and the dispute is resolved in the family’s favour. They also denounce the refusal of tradition to honour deserving female ancestral figures with posthumous chieftaincy titles in the annual Obuofo Day. Through their intervention, this traditional practice is rendered obsolete. Liberated by virtue of their education, these women shift the consciousness of the village women, and thereby inaugurate an alternative trajectory for the definition and redefinition of womanhood in Umuga society. These women are, indeed, children of the eagle and against this backdrop, Amara, one of them announces exultantly: ‘Hey, we are children of *the eagle* ... aren’t you proud of it? I am’ ‘And like the eagle, we will soar into the sky’, Obioma says (191).

The alliance of the eagle and woman in this novel is a particularly effective literary strategy because the eagle occupies a central position in the cultural subconscious and ritual practices of the Umuga society. It is a central motif in the Ulaga masquerade that entertains the people during the festive period, executing magnificent dance steps and intricate footwork. After the Ulaga masquerade, Nnenna asks:

‘Did you notice that the bird on the head of the Ulaga is an eagle? ... I’m struck by the proliferation of the eagle motif in different aspects of Umuga culture. Have you thought about it? The eagle is the only bird of distinction accorded symbolic value in our culture’. (190–91)

The Ulaga masquerade with its iconic eagle head represents and underscores the artistic accomplishments of Umuga society. But transcendent to this, its appearance during the festive season carries a cultural symbolism that underscores

the importance of seasonal change. The literary use of this symbolic change in the seasons, headed by the figure of the eagle, prefigures the reconstitution of Umuga social life — a life achieved by women's assertion of their humanity and strategic significance.

The significance of the eagle and its metaphoric power within Umuga culture is evident in the society's naming process. The canon of names in this society glorify, celebrate and idealise the eagle. The eagle iconology here achieves the cultural symbolism of individual and communal greatness, swiftness and agility, vision, courage and dignity. In the novel, the eagle iconology writes woman into prominence within social structures and appropriates the agency of the eagle which is exclusively associated with men, by pointing to the use of eagle nomenclature applied (traditionally) to both women and men. The Igbo word for eagle is 'Ugo' and this is used as either a prefix or suffix in Igbo names. As Nnenna informs the reader:

Take the cast of names, for instance, babies are often given names beginning or ending with the bird's name *Ugo*. Whether as a prefix or suffix, such names proliferate. Ugonma, Ugochi, Ugonwayi (our mother's name), Ugochiye, Ugochiye, Ugonma, Ugochukwu, Ugonna, Mbugo, Adaugo, Ojiugo and Nwugo. (191)

Names are particularly significant to individuals because they confer on them distinct identities. This is why in answer to the question, 'What's in a name?', Linda Lindsay states that 'a simple one word answer to this question is "identity"... a name symbolically links us to our past and provides us with a sense of self-definition' (78). A name, according to Vincent Ovuakporie, 'has a divine significance', since 'the philosophy that guides a man's life, his success and failure, his actions and reactions are to a large extent encapsulated in the mystery surrounding his name' (44). Similarly, Abd-Rushin argues that 'Every person on earth bears precisely that name which he earned for himself. Therefore, his name is not only what it is, he is not only called by this name, but he is the name. Man is what his name is' (139). Within Umuga culture, a name spells the life of the individual and weaves a rich tapestry of existence for the bearer. A person's life trajectory is predetermined at birth by the name she is given even though an individual can sometimes mediate this through name change. To be named Eaglewoman, as such, confers female dignity, courage and greatness within a patriarchal system.

Names are also communal property. As such, they celebrate a society's history, culture, values, mores and existential strivings. This is why every name espouses two mutually exclusive and irreconcilable ideological ends: domination and liberation. As David Goldberg informs us, 'Power is exercised epistemologically in the dual process of naming and evaluating' and in 'naming or refusing to name things in the order of thought, existence is recognized or refused, significance is assigned or ignored, beings elevated or rendered invisible' (150). The ideological significance or political persuasion of a name may be associated with gender, race, ethnicity or creed. As Ousseynou Traore observes, names are 'rooted in

ontological matrices and have their own narratives of origination and mythopoetics' with 'gender ideals and conflicts' (41).

In the narrative, the names celebrate the eagle as a bird but also have metaphoric resonance — being representative of the cultural configuration of Igbo traditional society. As a valued creature, the eagle signifies royalty, majesty, dignity, beauty, honour and courage. As such, Eaglewoman and her children are paradigms not only of courageous womanhood but also of positive and creative mobilization of individual energies and the channeling of these towards the emancipation of those enslaved under the cumbersome yoke of phallic tradition.

A radical contrast to the metaphor of the eagle in the narrative is that of *Udele*, the vulture. This image is refracted through a poem that Nnenna recalls was used during her school days to encourage children to eat well so as to be healthy:

The vulture eats between meals
 And that's the reason why
 He rarely feels
 As well as you or I
 His head is bald, his eyes are dull
 His neck is growing thinner
 Oh, what a lesson for us all
 To always eat our dinner. (110)

Within the context of the novel, this poem, acts to juxtapose the qualities of the eagle and the vulture. Though both are predatory birds, the vulture is delineated as a wretched, emaciated, dull and physically unattractive bird principally because of its dietary habits. While the eagle feeds on live, nutritious preys, the vulture prefers decomposing carcasses as its culinary delight. Its physical repulsion is also radically at variance with that of the eagle, which has fine, patterned feathers and a beautifully shaped and coloured bill. On the other hand, the vulture is bald, with a thin neck and uninspiring dull eyes. This binary opposition between the eagle and the vulture has symbolic cultural significance: it reveals that within Umuga and, indeed Igbo society generally, the regal bearing of the eagle finds greater appeal among the people than the funereal aspect of the vulture. J.H. Elgood describes vultures which belong to the class *Aegyptiidae* corroboratively as 'large repulsive birds with much of the head, sometimes also the neck, devoid of feathers. They have powerful hooked bills and strong claws' and that they 'are scavengers, rapidly assembling at a carcass' (2). The common or hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) is seen around villages and towns, and because vultures survive on carrion, they are seen as metaphoric representations of human cannibals who 'feed' on human beings by exploiting, oppressing, repressing and dominating them unjustly. From an existential perspective, the vulture is an avian metaphor of a doomed humanity condemned to a menial existence of privation in an uncaring world. In the novel, the author gives an ideological pattern to these avian metaphors by assigning the eagle metaphor to women and consigning the vulture to men.

Birds are also associated with the Umuga (Igbo) corpus of proverbs. Proverbs that employ avian metaphors in the narrative yield significant messages. One of the proverbs, for example, talks about a ‘chicken quarreling with the pot cooking it, rather than the knife that severed its head’ (94). This proverb is a stinging indictment of Uncle Reuben who wants to dispossess Osai of his land. The former is utterly disappointed with the refusal of Osai but instead of confronting Osai vents his anger on Eaglewoman, Osai’s wife. Thus, instead of taking on Osai, who refused his request, Uncle Reuben chooses to attack the innocent woman just as the chicken quarrels with the cooking pot, ignoring the knife that killed it in the first place. Culturally the signification of the proverb is that women are blamed and castigated in a patriarchal society for anything men find as threatening or undermining of that tradition even when they are not responsible for it. In the novel, the discriminatory and exclusionary practices of this patriarchy are resisted, challenged and revised by Eaglewoman and her daughters.

Another proverb, ‘An early bird ... catches a worm’, (190) encourages the habit of punctuality. The proverb is rendered in relation to the *Ulaga* masquerade. It is women who wake up early in Igbo society to fetch water, firewood, cook, feed the family and tend the crops and as such the novel claims that women deserve the reward of commendation and appreciation for their industry as custodians of fire, water and the land. The *Ulaga* masquerade here has the head of an eagle, which becomes a metaphoric representation of industrious and affirmative womanhood. Yet another proverbial flourish concerns the hen laying its eggs and incubating them in secret (242). This alludes to the need to keep the real parentage of Nkemdirim secret, for Nkemdirim is the result of the pregnancy of Obioma, the third daughter of Eaglewoman, and Osai, conceived outside of marriage. Eaglewoman creatively hatches a plan that she will feign pregnancy while Obioma will be taken far away from Umuga until she delivers the child. She will then assume responsibility for the child as though she were the real mother; a plan that is successful. In this regard, it is important to note that ‘traditional’ proverbs are deployed in the novel in ways that are subversive of patriarchy and supportive of the undermining tactics of the women; thus underscoring the capacity of proverbs to transcend prescribed meanings.

In Umuga and the entire Igbo society, birds are also useful for their feathers. The feathers of eagles, for instance, are used as cultural markers of titled men and as status symbols. Eagle feathers are used to adorn the caps of the *Igwe* or *Obi* (chief) and other men of prestige as marks of achievement and accomplishment. The feathers are also necessary for ritual performances (in which the men participate) without which certain rites would be rendered ineffective. In the novel the significance of bird feathers (and claws) is underscored by Obioma when she observes: ‘Everything about the eagle is valued in this town including its feathers and claws’. Then Nnenna responds ‘Eagle feathers are considered priceless in certain rites. Titled men wear them in their caps and sometimes carry

fans decorated with them. I have wondered why the eagle is honoured above other birds such as the parrot, hawk, ostrich and owl' (191). Through this interrogation of male appropriation of the eagle metaphor, especially the feathers as a marker of male achievement and chieftaincy, Nnenne interrogates male institutions and patriarchal power structures. She thereby questions the exclusive arrogation of the eagle to maleness, and, by implication of her eagle nature and inheritance through her mother, associates it with accomplished womanhood.

Honours and titles are also bestowed on men using birds and their names. Among the Igbo, the titles of men and their achievements are often reflected and given legitimacy by the eagle. For, instance, the celebrated Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, who is a native Igbo, has the title of 'The eagle on the tall *iroko* tree'. The eagle is preferred because it is symbolic of grandeur, strength, ferocity, intelligence and vision. As Obioma observes in the narrative:

I think it's because the eagle is the most intelligent bird in the world.... It's an amazing bird and can soar higher than any other winged creature. Eagles are said to see three times better than human beings. (191)

If the principal character in this novel is a woman called Eaglewoman, it signifies that women too possess penetrating vision and have the capacity to order Igbo society along the path of meaningful growth and development. As the novel demonstrates, women are better visionaries and, armed with traditional wisdom and modern education, they can mobilize their energies and train their vision for the benefit of the society.

Other birds used in the narrative are the dove in a song by Obot's school children on page 81 and the kite on page 254. While the dove is epistemologically associated with peace, love, meekness, grace, temperance, innocence and virtue, attributes that define the theology and doctrine of the Holy Spirit and, by extension, children who are innocent, the kite is predatory bird that is directly opposed to the dove. The kite preys on its victims by swooping on them when they least expect and uses its sharp talons to catch them. In some cultures in Africa especially in the West Coast, the kite is a metaphor for death. Its predatory instincts can be regarded as blows of death on innocent humanity, just as the kite preys on the innocent, unsuspecting chick. Through the oppositional binaries of these avian metaphors, women are associated with the dove and men with kites. Within a larger postcolonial Nigeria, the author's political commentary suggests that, like kites, men have preyed on the Nigerian nation, evidenced in the widespread corruption, the country's arrested development and failure of leadership. As such, the novel claims that moment for female leadership has arrived.

Through the instrumentality of the avian metaphor of the eagle, the novel inscribes women into positions of strategic prominence and significance within the contours of patriarchal Igbo society. *Children of the Eagle* is a revisionist project that testifies against patriarchy as an exploitative, oppressive and retrogressive ideology whose politics has succeeded for too long in undermining

the agency and subjectivity of womanhood in Igbo and Nigerian society. The novel, therefore, achieves the authorial intent of appropriating the essentially phallic avian metaphor of the eagle in Igbo society and assigning it to women. This strategy affirms female energy, re-constitutes gender patterns of relations in favour of women and negates the exclusive male appropriation of the avian metaphor of the eagle as representative of Igbo and Nigerian national life.

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