

GENDER, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE GLOBAL FUTURE IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *ROSES AND BULLETS*

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Abstract

*The issue of gender and human rights is one of the most commonly talked about issues in the modern world, and the literary field in particular. In literature, there has always been literary discourse surrounding this issue with the use of several literary texts. However, there has been none to discuss gender, human rights, and the global future using Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* as a reference point. In this paper, there'll be an exploration of the matter of gender, human rights, and the global future, especially on the African continent, using *Roses and Bullets* as a reference point. The situation of these issues in Africa would be represented, and also the way they can be explored. In *Roses and Bullets*, the tragic events of the Nigerian Civil War are chronicled, and we witness the lives of characters who go through several levels of human rights abuses and gender-based violence. At the end, there'll be full and well-done research on the subject matter of this paper, and proper study and analysis of the text.*

Keywords: Gender, Human Rights, Gender Inequality, Gender-based Violence, Global Future

Introduction

Basic human rights and freedom is fact which has dominated the modern human environment and world. There is a constant connection or reminder to the governments of the world to uphold human rights. A major part or parcel of the human rights struggle is the struggle and push for gender equality. Another part is the struggle to end all forms of gender abuse, violence, imbalance, and maltreatment.

United Nations, in a paper and study, states that "the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948, and aimed to establish political structures that would prevent the kind of atrocities that had been recently committed by Nazi Germany" (3). Thus, the world, recently surviving a deadly world war where lots of atrocities and human rights violations were committed, decided to enact a law and charter protecting human rights across the world. The 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is the foremost document guiding governments in upholding human rights. These human rights are basic rights to life, basic rights to secure humans, and ensure they live well. It ensures that the average human in the world has the freedom he or

she desires in a comfortable environment. There are several forms of these rights ranging from rights to life, rights to education, rights to speech and fair hearing, and even rights to equal treatment and benefits.

In 1948, when the declaration was made, there were lots of imbalances, discrimination, and human rights violations across the world. There were several levels of discrimination ranging from discrimination according to one's skin colour to discrimination according to one's gender. The discrimination according to gender is prominent, because it cuts across all cultures. Humans of the female gender are not treated or given the same benefits as the male; with the social and cultural system in place, the females suffer discrimination, abuse, and denial of basic rights. The United Nations puts it into perspective when it writes that:

There are global patterns of inequality between women and men. For example, women tend to suffer violence at the hands of their intimate partners more often than men; women's political participation and their representation in decision-making structures lag behind men's; women and men have different economic opportunities; women are over-represented among the poor; and women and girls make up the majority of people trafficked and involved in the sex trade. (1).

There are many obstacles and limitations against women. The women are also expected to be high achievers notwithstanding these obstacles. This is one of the reasons there is the agitation for gender equality where no gender is underrepresented or marginalized. In a world where all genders are equal, there is better productivity and growth. For a better global future, gender equality must be thoroughly discussed and enacted.

Gender and human rights have always found their way, as burning and cogent issues, into literary works of art and literary studies. They are evergreen subject matters which continue to find their way into literary discourses. This issue serves as the subject matter and the theoretical framework in the analysis of AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*. *Roses and Bullets* presents the different levels of gender and human rights abuses during the Nigerian Civil War.

Human Rights

Human rights are different levels or forms of rights and freedom enabling a human to live comfortably without fear, terror, or limitations. On the eve of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), they stated that the declaration was necessary and was made for the preservation, respect, and promotion of human rights and freedom (1). The freedom of humans is necessary for a better standard of living for everyone or the improvement of the economic conditions of the world over.

As stated earlier, the declaration is a result of the carnage witnessed during World War II, and was declared at the beginning of the Cold War between the USSR and the

USA. Mary Glendon recounts that the hostility between these two superpowers meant that a "wedge was driven through the heart of the Declaration, severing its firm link between freedom and solidarity" (214). The conflict between these countries hampered the effective implementation of the declaration.

The irony of the declaration is that different countries and people do not obey or keep to the declaration. The permanent members and world leaders also do not keep to the human rights declaration, especially during the Cold War period. There were accusations of several human rights violations within and outside their respective borders. Of course, this incapacitated the United Nations, and they could hardly enforce or sanction countries that went against the declaration.

There were widespread violations of human rights and freedom by different countries. It made writers and activists capture the situations, and to also revolt or kick against them. For writers in particular, the anomaly of human rights violations opposed the concept of freedom which literary art stood for, and thus the terrible situation was aptly captured.

Bhabha captures this situation perfectly when he states that the freedom of writers is pertinent as it represents a fundamental human right, and the right of freedom of speech for the people. There will be no such freedom in an autocratic or totalitarian society. In such societies, the people and writers have no right to state their views or be creative in any way (180). Bhabha goes on to state that a country or state that lacks political freedom and the freedom to narrate situations and stories as they are cannot be classified as a proper state. Lawless and ruthless states are usually the ones where there are no political freedoms. Citizens must be given the freedom to express the situation as it is and to represent the ills of the society the way they find it. Among all forms of human rights, the equality of gender and the fair distribution of rights and resources to all genders is important. This is the reason why Gula argues that gender equality is a part and parcel of basic human right (15). Gender equality is as important as other basic human rights.

Gender, Gender Inequality, and Gender Equality

Gender is a "social construction" to differentiate the male and female. According to Raheem and Garuba, "gender is a socially constructed definition of women and men which is determined by the conception of tasks, functions, and roles attributed to women and men in the society the private life" (50). It is relevant that "social construction" is brought up to the front as gender is a man-made or society-made classification differentiating men from women. Gender is biologically believed in the past. **It is in the same line of thought that the** World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender as "... the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed" (2). The WHO believes that humans of different genders are assigned different roles, norms, and modes of

look by society and people. Men and women appear the way they are, act the way they are, and do what they do because of what society expects of them. This social construction creates a binary feel or outlook whereby there are two groups on the opposite sides--the men or the women. Thus, if a human isn't a man, she is a woman, and of course, this is the conservative form. The two sides of this binary are presented with their different varying roles, complementing each other at times, and making the human world whole.

Oluwole and Sofoluwe state it that gender cannot be considered to be timeless or universal, and it is not a fixed process that applies to all cultures in the same way. Rather, it is a concept which varies from culture to culture, and each culture builds a gender philosophy that suits its need. However, all gender understanding in different cultures are related in the binary nature of the differences between man and woman, an opposition stance. This binary and opposition nature of gender does not translate to abuse and discrimination (22).

Oluwole and Sofoluwe go on to make note of this situation as that there are slight differences in culture about the concept of gender. There are also the different roles and functions given to the two different genders, and what is expected of them. However, the differences in their roles and functions do not mean that there is an oppression and subjugation of a particular gender. The opposing sides' understanding and representation of gender and the binary system leads to a tussle and struggle for resources by members of the different genders. The struggle for resources and the different levels of relations between these genders is what IFAD terms "gender relations." IFAD goes on to explain it as "a complex system of personal and social relations of domination and power through which women and men are socially created and maintained and through which they gain access to power and material resources or are allocated status within society" (4). The hustle for the few available resources leads to a power struggle between the two genders. In this struggle, the male gender usually comes out stronger with better resources, sidelining the female gender. It is even worse that the men are mostly the ones in charge of several institutions and cultures, enacting laws and policies shortchanging the women, keeping them in control. Thus, it can be written that the struggle for resources is no longer equal as the men have the upper hand.

Dibie writes that this issue and inequality have become an enormous challenge, and "this challenge has led to the establishment of many international organizations working with women to ensure and foster their effective participation in development" (25). The issue of gender inequality is so severe that it cannot be necessarily ignored as such.

To showcase the severity of the situation, several scholars have brought up scenarios, cases, and meanings of gender inequality, painting its perfect picture. Raheem and Garuba present a perfect case of the effects of gender equality where they argue that it leads to violence and several forms of gender-based abuse. They

opine that gender inequality leads to several forms of violence, especially domestic violence. There are also other severe forms of violence noticed like rape, a common occurrence in contemporary society, often leading to the vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS (157).

In Nigeria's case, gender inequality is systematic and institutionalized in such a way that the female gender does not have the same levels of privileges, rights, and opportunities in these male countries terms of opportunities, the females have fewer opportunities available to their male counterparts. There is also an institutionalized process to keep the female gender below the male. Nigeria's

The Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics gives a perfect statistic of this dire situation as that the women in Nigeria are totally underrepresented and subdued in terms of economic possession and wealth. For instance, in the industrial sector, women participation in the sector is 11% compared to the men's 30%. Meanwhile in the informal service sector, women make up about 87% of the sector, meaning that women are more engaged in the informal sector than the formal sector where they would have been paid better.

Furthermore, reiterating, Nigerian women are more in the informal sector where the income and means of living are lower compared to the more formal and industrialized sector. Of course, this means the men have access to more funds than the women. In a similar scenario, for workers in the Nigerian Federal Civil Service, especially those at management level, "76% of civil servants are men whereas 24% are women and women hold less than 14% of total management level positions. In the medical field, men represent 82.5% of those employed while women represent 17.5%" (Otive-Igbuzor, 5).

Aside from paid employment and the Federal Civil Service, there is also discrimination and inequality when it comes to doing business in Nigeria. With this, it is a proven case that gender inequality in Nigeria is institutionalized and holistically enacted. Reiterating this gender inequality and lack of equal opportunities for all genders in Nigeria, especially in the area of business, Ayodeji and Adeibijola argue that "women are underrepresented in power, decision-making roles, and business. Women-owned enterprises are economically disadvantaged and lack equal opportunity to compete for business opportunities. Women also face legal and other barriers that affect their opportunities at work and as entrepreneurs" (140).

All of these and more of what several institutions and cultures do in Nigeria to limit the female gender have contributed greatly to keeping them economically, politically, and culturally disadvantaged. Makama observes that this has brought great disadvantage and inequality of rights to the women from the higher part of the society down to the family (17). Some are not well-represented at all in the strata of society. These unjust experiences and situations make it difficult for women to live a comfortable life with a good standard of living. In a situation where they are denied

opportunities and rights that are supposed to go to them, there is bound to be inequality between them and the males. It is the reason they struggle for gender equality, and gender equality is an important issue in the present century. Gender equality is part of human rights as no one should be denied any opportunity or treated unjustly. Sotunsa defines gender equality as a "state or condition that affords women and men equal enjoyment of human rights, opportunities, and resources. It allows both sexes the same opportunities and potential to contribute to, and benefit from, all spheres of society" (22). It is a situation where humans are accorded the same rights and opportunities regardless of their gender. Gender equality is very necessary and can be achieved. Even though the process of achieving gender equality can be a long, limiting, and strenuous one, it can be achieved. United Nations, on this, states that "achieving greater equality between women and men will require changes at many levels, including changes in attitudes and relationships, changes in institutions and legal frameworks, changes in economic institutions, and changes in political decision-making structures" (1). It will be a long battle with institutionalized gender inequality if it can be defeated. International bodies and the governments of different countries have been doing their best to fight or stop gender inequality. A battle, which UNDP, considers not achieved. After all conferences, declarations, and the impact of international and national bodies, women are still highly disadvantaged and poorly represented in various ways across most cultures and locations in the world (9).

In Nigeria, at the moment, there are still very noticeable traces of gender inequality. This is a human rights violation in Nigeria alongside other human rights violations happening in the country. In the next section of this paper, we'll be examining some of these human rights violations, especially during the Nigerian Civil War, the peak of the existence of these violations, as represented in AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*.

Gender, Human Rights, and the Global Future in AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*

There are several forms of human rights violations in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*. Set during the Nigerian Civil War, it showcases one of Nigeria's worst times in history as the country witnessed several human rights violations, especially gender-based violence and abuse. *Roses and Bullets* is the story of Ginika and Eloka with other members of their families and friends as they navigate through the tragedies and atrocities of the Nigerian Civil War. Since it is a war, and an unjust war as such with lots of hatred and negativity, there are bound to be extreme violations of human rights.

The most obvious or glaring of these violations are the abuses and gender-based violence suffered by the female characters in the text, especially Ginika. Even though men and women are victims of war, there are some atrocities meted out to the female gender because they are women. Women are also so disadvantaged that they are left at the mercy of the men and become willing tools to be abused and

devoured. The main character's ordeal as a woman starts at the very beginning of the war. Ginika is not at peace with her father because her father checks out her virginity constantly, and he suspects her. Ginika detests this, and she believes it is a violation of her own body. The hatred of her father's actions is showcased in one case where he carries out a virginity test on her after attends a party: "she whispered several times, I hate you! She was never sure she would ever forgive him. She would remember this ugly incident all her life, this violation of her body" (149).

This means from the age she started witnessing changes in her body and began developing properly as a woman, her father began to suspect her and violate her body. Claiming to be careful, her father does not know that what he is doing is a serious violation of his daughter. This is not the same experience his son witnesses as men are not followed thoroughly or violated this way in the name of checking their virginity. Thus, it can be seen that even when Ginika's mind is free and clear from sexual immoralities, her father still checks her.

Ginika's father takes this drastic step because of the violations of his sister leading to an unforgettable trauma for him. Judging by his own experience and the tragedy of his sister, he goes on to constantly check his daughter's virginity, ignorant of the mental damage he is heaping on his sister. Ginika's father recounts the experience in the text "But my youngest and only sister was still quite small and I dreamed about how I would send her to a good secondary school and to the university after that. I came home after my studies to discover that my sister had been impregnated by her teacher in primary five and had died as he tried to assist her in aborting the pregnancy" (106). With the above, it is evident that what Ginika suffers during her teenage years is a result of the trauma of her father caused by gender-based violence. It seems like continuous suffering across generations because Ginika gets to suffer from the same issues during the war. During the war, Ginika and other females suffered a lot, from the usual atrocities committed by the Nigerian and Biafran forces, and then some gender-based violence.

The war leads Ginika to move to the rural area to stay with her parents where the boredom and loneliness alongside the unpredictability of the war push her to marry Eloka. Of course, the marriage is not done out of freedom, it is something Ginika must do to leave her father's house and the abuse there. From there, she moves into another level of abuse where her mother-in-law pressurizes her for a baby even when Eloka does not want a baby. Eloka loves her and can do anything for her, but he is not ready for marriage and parenthood. He takes care of her, and a scenario is described as "Eloka does part of the house chores to assist his wife." Mermaid, I have swept our room and tidied it. You'll like it when you see it "Mama will have a fit if she hears you swept your room," Ozioma said (196). Even though Eloka loves Ginika, his ideas about their marriage and not being ready to have children at that moment pitches him against his mother. His mother, on the other hand, transfers the blame to Ginika. From the excerpt quoted above, it can be deduced that Eloka's mother is a

traditional woman who wants a wife to be in her place and bear plenty of children. For this, she disturbs Ginika, especially on the issue of childbearing. Eloka's mother makes her mind known in a scenario presented below:

'I want you to know that I'm displeased with you. I know Eloka is partly to blame, but a wife must make sure her husband plays his role properly, especially in the matter of getting her pregnant.' ... 'Why do people get married.' Is it not to have children.' Ginika, answer me now. So you married Eloka without intending to have children! So you want to move by about empty!' (223).

The ridiculous nature of the gender-based abuse in the scenario above shows that sometimes women are enablers of it. In addition to that, wives are blamed for what they do not cause. It isn't Ginika's fault that Eloka has refused to give birth to a child, yet she is blamed for it. The horrors and suffering brought upon the characters by the war exacerbated the situation.

The senselessness of the war increased all forms of abuse on the women, and even on the men. The narrator of the novel presents a perfectly frustrating war scenario as "the explosions rocked the ground, assaulted the air again and again. Ginika saw two jets turning directly overhead □ she saw one of them release some objects she could not identify" (211). The war made the use of guns, bombs, and other means of violence against women and children common. There is no recourse to the world stipulations and guidelines on the use of weapons, type of weapons, and levels of engagement in a war.

This caused intensive carnage and destruction. This was due to the reckless bombing, shooting, and widespread violence present in the war. Women, in the war, who ought to remain unharmed, are mostly targets of bombing and attacks. The level of carnage done is shown through the lens of Ginika as she recounts: "The dead and the wounded littered the ground. Many had died instantly and might not have suffered any pain □ as Ginika passed, one woman moaned, □Please, help me, it□s my leg. □Ginika looked and saw a bloodied leg, looking pulpy like a sponge" (212).

People are murdered with reckless abandon, including people who are average citizens. The conflict started with the act of the Nigerian military officers killing some politicians but then it grew wider and affected innocent citizens on the street, especially women and children. The narrator in the text presents the situation as "They said many officers from the East have been slaughtered like cattle and the coup plotter did not stop there; they have started killing people who are not soldiers □ People who managed to escape are returning to the East. Most of the people they are killing are Igbo" (151). The crisis the soldiers had within their barracks, spread to other areas and locations in the country.

In the ensuing crisis and wanton violence, the women and children are mostly affected. Ginika, a character representing other female characters in the text, experiences different levels of abuse and torture, from physical to psychological. One, she is emotionally tortured by the bloody events she witnesses, just like other characters in the text. This torture is represented in the text "Ginika sobbed uncontrollably, as if crying could obliterate the images she saw at the market and blot out the memory of the nightmare. Involuntarily, she remembered the railway station in Port-Harcourt and mangled bodies she had seen in the carriage and the decapitated torso of the unidentifiable man" (213).

The emotional torture she undergoes is more severe on her because she is a woman. It constantly affects her reasoning and interaction with other people during the war as she is not familiar with this form of violence before. Aside from the emotional torture, there is also the gender-based violence of rape and sexual molestation. Ginika is molested multiple times in the novel.

The first sexual molestation occurs when she is drugged and sexually abused by a friend of the Biafran military officer, Lieutenant Kanu Ofodile (Trainer of Special Constables), whose duty is to protect her. Ginika is ignorant of the act, only to wake up to see her body violated. The officer who carried out these atrocities is not afraid of the consequences because there are no consequences. Ginika lives with the guilt and loses her marriage in the process since she gets pregnant.

In another case of rape that befalls Ginika in the text, she is raped by Sergeant Sule Ibrahim's friends. They falsely accuse her of their friend's death as they arrest her illegally and rape her countless times. Their rape of her is motivated by the fact that there are no consequences. In the war, women are willing and weak tools in the hands of soldiers who exact negative acts on them without consequences. The ugly and painful scenario in the text is recounted as:

She struggled to free herself but they held her and pushed her to the ground. She screamed and one of them clamped a rough hand on her mouth. Divesting himself of his clothes, the Sergeant grabbed his legs and prized them open 'I go fuck you, Ashawo, you kill Sule. He is a better man pass all your rebel brothers. That thing you no give Sule I go take am today. Ashawo! ... Make you do your own,' he said, pointing to one of the soldiers. (495).

In a previous act of inhumanity, the soldiers rape her continuously until she is rescued. In the end, Ginika has little dignity left in her as she has been violated severally, beginning from her father to Lieutenant Kanu Ofodile's friend to Sergeant Ibrahim's friend. Then, when the consequences of the men's actions were to her, she was rejected and abandoned by her in-laws and her father. There is no one to stand in for her.

This is the same case for several women in the novel. They suffer from a general-

form of violence, and then gender-based violence. During the war, women are prized assets, valued, and then due to the high level of immorality obtained during the war, they are violated. It is noticeable throughout the book, especially when Ginika looks for a lift with her aunt. Men only agree to give her a lift, and not with her aunt. The scenario is presented thus:

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

Several girls and women suffer different levels of abuse in the text. Generally, during this bloody war, there is no respect for human rights as well. The Nigerian society, especially those in the war-torn area of the East, lacked all forms of civility. A lot of lives were lost, and anarchy descended on the country. This is because, in a country where there are constant violations of human rights, there is bound to be anarchy.

To showcase the gravity of this dire situation well, the narrator presents the scenario as a grieving man talking to Ginika about her resemblance to his daughter, and his missing family: "You remind me of a daughter I had before this terrible war. I don't know where she, her two brothers and my wife are now. We ran in different directions when the enemy entered our town" (300). The war and all the negativities that comes with it causes a lot of sorrow. If the right and legal methods of war were followed in the text, there wouldn't have been human rights violations, especially relating to gender-based violence.

Conclusion

The discourse on gender inequality, equality, and the global future is an important topic in this modern time due to several legislations all around the world pushing for it. It is a burning issue that has occupied the minds of most governments in the world right now. To achieve a better world with proper respect for human rights, gender equality, and rights have to be upheld. Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* showcases just how tragic human rights violations can be, and even how chaotic gender-based violence can be. A lot can be done to prevent human rights and gender-based abuses for a prosperous and more comfortable global future.

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