

Centered Leadership: The Resilience and Power of the Female Spirit in T. Obinkaram Echewa's I Saw the Sky Catch Fire

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ABSTRACT

Although it is to the African female writers' credit that the lop-sided depiction of women in African novels has begun to be reversed, some African male authors have established an enduring legacy by focusing attention on women and elevating them as indomitable characters in their novels. One such author is T. Obinkaram Echewa. His book *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* extols womanhood and reaches to its depths to unearth the rich deposits of gold buried therein. This novel clearly challenges the popular stereotype that perceives women as marginalized and passive subordinates in a patriarchal culture. Echewa achieves this principally through the stories told by Nne-nne on the eve of her grandson's departure for studies in America – stories replete with wisdom, determination, resilience and the power of the female spirit. Echewa's novel has dared to endow the African woman with a strong affirmation of her worth that can repair her broken dignity and has captured the essence of the woman in all of its complexity. The novel further demonstrates that centered leadership emphasizes the role of positive emotions and draws on positive psychology. *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* gives hope to millions of African women and women everywhere who have long sought such validation.

INTRODUCTION

I Saw the Sky Catch Fire begins on the eve of Ajuzia's departure to America, where he would be pursuing further studies after winning a university scholarship. In this novel, Ajuzia poignantly recalls the events that led to his departure and his eventual return to his ancestral compound after a five-year sojourn in America. On his return, Ajuzia's grandmother, Nne-nne, is dying, and his wife Stella and the mother of his daughter, W'Orima, are pregnant by another man. Ajuzia's account of his brief love affair with Stella, their subsequent marriage, and his abandonment of her, appears laced with a sense of entitlement, until much later.

Ajuzia is the only surviving male in his family line and the reason his old grandmother feels compelled to pass along her story to him before he journeys abroad, leaving the world they both have shared behind. Nne-nne must have sensed that the occasion of Ajuzia's departure would be her last opportunity to tell him her story. Echewa positions Nne-nne as the point of coherence in the novel, enabling her to speak her valedictory before she dies, creating characters as she deems fit and expressing herself without inhibition. Nne-nne practically carries the whole burden of telling her story - a monumental repertoire of her personal as well as her community's oral history. These stories are deeply rooted in the affairs of Igbo women, their individual and collective grief, leadership, and the wars they perennially wage to forestall the forces that oppress them. Some of the book's chapters have titles suggestive of some of the

obvious and subtle wars that women continue to fight both in their homes and communities. As Ajuzia listens to his grandmother's rendition of her extraordinary story, he admits that his "strongest sense of that night was of something eerily fateful and transcendent, like a deathbed confession" (3). The occasion, perfect as it is, makes it possible for these stories to tumble out of Nne-nne's mouth quite effortlessly. She is evidently in an elevated state of consciousness on this fateful night as she sings, ejaculates, and uses "irreverent" language, freely uttering and relishing vulgar expressions that are ordinarily used euphemistically. At this stage in her life, Nne-nne is practically a free woman and is not bound by rules of protocol. Having helped herself to shot after shot of a very potent locally brewed gin throughout the day, the influence of alcohol may have helped her to loosen up and be in the right state to tell her story.

Meanwhile, Nne-nne continues to assure Ajuzia that she will look after both herself and their compound until his return, effervescently intoning: "I am a woman, yes, and I am old, yes, but I am also *awtu alighi-li!* No limp or half-erect penis will ever find its way into me!" (2-3). One might discern an uncommon brazenness, even defiance, in this statement, particularly as it is coming from a grandmother to a grandson, two of the most unlikely people to engage in this kind of banter, but Nne-nne is undaunted by any of that. This conversation between Nne-nne and Ajuzia, odd as it may seem, is perhaps possible because Nne-nne is not Ajuzia's immediate parent, but one parent removed from him. A direct parent might be more constrained and not have the freedom of expression that Nne-nne obviously has. Somehow one is not unaware of the urgency on the part of Nne-nne to use this story occasion to come to terms with or make a connection between her grandson's departure and her own approaching death.

On the one hand, the compulsion to tell her story may not have arisen had Ajuzia's departure not been imminent. On the other, Ajuzia's decision to leave his ancestral estate to travel to a foreign land is feasible because he is cocksure that as long as Nne-nne is alive, she will be committed to tending and keeping the compound open. But in spite of Nne-nne's relaxed demeanor and vehement assurances to Ajuzia that she will keep the compound maintained until his return, both Nne-nne and Ajuzia share a profound fear. For Nne-nne, it is the fear that she might lose Ajuzia to the magnetic influence of the "world," while, for Ajuzia, it is the fear that Nne-nne might die, and then he may never leave after all. Ajuzia's strong desire to pursue further studies overseas brings to the fore what one may call his 'sense of entitlement,' one that requires the two women in his life – his grandmother and his wife Stella – to literally dance to his whims and suppress their own aspirations and ambitions, and just

wait for him, even if indefinitely.

NNE-NNE'S LEGENDARY REPERTOIRE

Nne-nne makes it clear from the beginning that her testimony was not about herself, but about “*Oha Ndom*, the Solidarity of Women” (3). And drawing from her own personal experiences and her knowledge of life, Nne-nne uses a compelling anecdote to teach Ajuzia a great life lesson about the fundamental differences between men and women, one that he would do well always to remember. It is a grand lesson on the Golden Rule, reminding Ajuzia to always use right judgment. Nne-nne discloses to Ajuzia that whereas “A woman is the hen of this world” (3), a man, on the other hand, is “the cock of this world” (4). She then proceeds to give her grandson an unforgettable lesson:

Men and women are like their organs. A woman's is mostly private, tucked away like a secret purse between her legs, with little to give away how big or deep it is. A man's, on the other hand, hangs loosely and swings freely about for all to see. At the sight of a woman, it swells with pride and longing and waves mightily about. But once inside a woman, it thumps a few times, loses its seed, and soon collapses. A few years into old age, men have to offer sacrifices and pour libations for their erections. Their prides no longer swell as strongly or rise as loftily, and if they manage to find their way into a woman, they are quickly humbled and soon withdraw. A woman endures. A man is like the froth on top of the soup, the foam on top of the pot of palm wine. A woman, though, is the soup, the *ugara* wine that lies coiled up like a snake at the bottom of the pot. Like palm wine, a woman gets stronger with age. The woman in a woman comes out as she gets older. So, my son, do not worry about me. Whatever has not got the best of me up till this point has no chance at all of getting me now. (4-5)

Nne-nne posits that “A woman suffers patiently, privately, and long” (4), and while some of her stories detail the gross injustices that have been meted out to women, Nne-nne maintains that “A woman is everything! If a man is high like a tower, a woman is deep like a well! If a man is a mountain, a woman is an ocean! A woman is like a god!” (11). She draws liberally from her profound understanding of life to teach her grandson an important life lesson and to sensitize him to the plight of women in a patriarchal culture.

Nne-nne proceeds to tell Ajuzia the story of Ufo-Aku, a widow, who has been inherited by her husband's brother. Unable to control her, Ufo-Aku's financial independence and toughness seriously threaten his manhood. Then on the day of her ceremony during which she is to parade through the market and customarily receive gifts from friends and well-wishers, her husband's brother, now her husband, decides to humiliate her by paying rainmakers to unleash rain on her and ruin her event. But a woman rainmaker, W'Obiara, hearing of the plot, decides to come to Ufo-Aku's rescue. Touched by the gang-up by Ufo-Aku's husband and the men of the community to put Ufo-Aku in her place, W'Obiara works tirelessly to hold off the

rain. Aware that the male rainmakers are working against her efforts, she wisely uses her femininity to fan the egos of these powerful male rainmakers and actually manages to get them to hold the rain until after Ufo-Aku's ceremony. W'Obiara's display of solidarity toward a fellow woman saves the day. Ufo-Aku's so-called husband takes revenge by beating her mercilessly that night, and from then on, begins to look for something, anything, to accuse her of, including thievery. At last, the men conspire to accuse Ufo-Aku of witchery, then waylaying her at night as she returns from another village, heaping false accusations on her and eventually killing her.

Further on, Nne-nne tells Ajuzia the story of Ahunze, dubbed the impossible wife. What makes her impossible, one might ask? Well, she appears impossible by the standards of the men in her community and must be cut down to size. Although gentle, Ahunze is tough-spirited, hardworking and prosperous in her own right, a woman that "stung fiercely when squeezed" (116). Ahunze has been dead by the time of the women's war, but Nne-nne believes that if any one woman could be said to have started the war, that woman was Ahunze. Prosperous and independent, Ahunze was a childless widow who refused to be inherited by her husband's brother, Ozurumba, who was already married to Akpa-Ego. She was neither interested in Ozurumba nor in any other man in the village for that matter. Stung by her rejection, the men again conspire to take away Ahunze's possessions by spreading rumors in the village that she had poisoned her husband. They could entertain this plot because culturally, an Igbo woman, particularly a childless widow, has no claim to anything.

Meanwhile, Ahunze continued to prosper, and the village men continued to woo her, not out of admiration for her entrepreneurial skills, but purely out of resentment and their need for control. The men felt that the scramble for Ahunze's wealth was pure game. They were resentful that a woman, and a stubborn widow at that, could achieve such a high level of material success. While the men were scheming to cheat Ahunze out of her wealth, the old man Aja-Egbu, a member of her extended family, wasted no time to approach her. In a fierce bid to replace the tax money that he and his friends had misused, Aja-Egbu went to Ahunze's house one night and began to woo her, but she would not budge. He forced himself on her, and they struggled for a while, eventually resorting to hurling insults at each other, and finally becoming exhausted. Meanwhile, Aja-Egbu had lost his erection. In his embarrassment, he admonished Ahunze for his failure before urging her to sing for him, basically imploring her to co-operate, but Ahunze was not one to be manipulated or intimidated. She was clearly savoring Aja-Egbu's embarrassment. Thoroughly humiliated, and realizing the futility of continuing to try, the old

man got up and hurried out. The details of that encounter are as hilarious as they are embarrassing for Aja-Egbu. Nne-nne, the storyteller, told this part with remarkable relish, basking in what one might call the obvious biological superiority of the female. Perhaps, Nne-nne thought about that moment of Aja-Egbu's erectile dysfunction as a woman's finest hour, a woman's hour of victory.

Meanwhile, Ozurumba, Ahunze's rejected brother-in-law, angrily waited outside her hut, machete in hand, thinking that another man was being intimate with Ahunze. He was waiting to take his revenge on her for taking his pregnant wife Akpa-Ego to the women at the market after he had cruelly beaten her, and allegedly inciting them to stage a collective protest and 'sit on him.' At the end of it all, Ahunze died as Ozurumba went in and hacked her to pieces, afterward setting her house ablaze, and then hanging himself. Even though Ahunze did not see the Women's War, she did not die in vain, for the women of her community, in an ultimate show of solidarity, fought the War in her name and sang songs dedicated to her. It is worthy of note that Akpa-Ego, Ozurumba's first wife, was delivered of a stillborn baby on the day the War started, prompting some to believe that the baby was a reincarnation of Ahunze.

THE CAUSES OF THE WOMEN'S WAR

The Women's War started because the women felt united in a way the men could not, and rallied together to wage war against the colonial administration. In her repertoire, Nne-nne recalls how the women of Uzemba watched in dismay as events that were hitherto unknown in their community became regular happenings in their lives. The women watched in utter disbelief as their men folk were methodically emasculated, yielding readily to the endless demands of the colonial administration. They could not comprehend the men's inability to defend their women from the menacing forces that interfered with everything in their traditional milieu, including meddling with women's traditional roles. Worst of all, the women watched helplessly as their fellow women shamelessly turned to prostitution and other vices. All these developments gradually caused the women not only to lose faith in their men but to attempt to take their destiny into their own hands.

RESCUING OYOYO LOVE FROM PROSTITUTION

Nne-nne began her repertoire with the story of Oyoyo Love or Nwanyi-Nma, a young married woman with two little children, who abandoned her husband and children to move to the city to become a prostitute. Physically, Oyoyo was over-endowed by nature, but her insatiable sexual appetite caused some to believe that her "mild-mannered" husband was "over-married"

in her and could not possibly satisfy her sexually: “He could not contain her in body or spirit, nor could he fend off all the men that craved her” (44). Oyoyo Love reveled in being a prostitute, boasting about her worth, even offering to pay back her bride price. She was a disgrace to her family, womanhood, and community. Her mother and mother-in-law appealed to the women of Uzemba for help in tracking and bringing her back to the village. The women did finally track her down and, despite her resistance, brought her home. Her mother and mother-in-law insisted that she be re-circumcised, but she soon disappeared again. Rescuing Oyoyo from the house of prostitution was a wonderful show of collective solidarity by the women that should have forewarned the British administrators about what was soon to come.

In a nutshell, women went to war to fight for their rights of existence and possibly save their men from further emasculation. The colonial administration had already imposed direct taxation on the men partly as a way of making them absorb some of the cost of colonization. The administration collected taxes from men quite easily, even though the taxation brought serious financial hardships on households. With tensions already high in the camp of the colonized, rumor rapidly spread that there would be a tax increase on the men and women would be taxed as well, and there would be a census. There was a general hardship as a result of falling prices of palm oil and kernels on which the people solely depended. The colonial administration assured the warrant chiefs that it had no intention of increasing taxes on the men or taxing women. The women nevertheless interpreted the administration’s decision to count them and their property as proof that they too would be taxed. Women were outraged.

The Women’s War began when Samel, a church catechist, approached Akpa-Ego Ozurumba, (a young, pregnant widow with a peculiar history), as she was “kneeling over a large vat of palm mash, kneading and pressing out the oil” (37). With an exaggerated sense of importance, Samel demanded to know her name, how many children she had, how many goats or sheep she owned, and so on. Infuriated by this intrusion into her privacy, Akpa-Ego shot back, “Has your mother been counted?” (37). Samel took offense at her angry retort, her boldness and her apparent lack of respect for the ‘British Crown.’ After trading more insults, the frustrated woman flung a handful of palm mash at Samel. Angered, Samel slapped her and a fight ensued during which the pregnant Akpa-Ego was knocked to the ground.

As the news of the incident spread, women rallied together and sent word to women in the surrounding villages and towns to denounce this abomination committed against one of them, and a pregnant one for that matter. Who in his right senses ever touches a pregnant woman? The women rallied around Akpa-Ego in solidarity, mindful of her delicate condition,

and took on her grievance as their collective grievance, her fight as their collective fight, all vowing to tear Samel and every other oppressor to shreds.

Throngs of women began gathering to find out more about Akpa-Ego's condition, ignoring the men who were also gathering and observing them from the fringes of the compound where Akpa-Ego was being tended to. These developments caused the women to conclude that the administration's reason for counting them, together with their goats and chickens, was to tax them. However, somehow the women extended their concerns about the impending taxation and census to other current disasters that had taken hold of their society. They articulated these disasters as child mortality, poor harvests due to infertile soils, soaring inflation, and so on.

Akpa-Ego, however, was eventually delivered of a stillborn baby by a woman named Ugbala whose expertise in midwifery was exceptional. When a warrant chief appeared with Samel and some court messengers talking about making an arrest, the women went wild and began shouting, "Kick her in the belly and cause her to lose her baby. Then arrest her?" (158). In their raucous voices, they created a scene, calling on all the women to suspend whatever they were doing and prepare for a major upheaval. In no time, women in their thousands had gathered, all determined to avenge what had been done to Akpa-Ego and to get rid of the entire native administration and the colonial government. They embarked on a destruction spree, attacking Samel and the court messengers, seizing the chief, torching the mission house, and destroying bicycles belonging to the court messengers and the chief.

UGBALA'S ARREST

The colonial administration dispatched armed policemen to arrest Ugbala in her home and put her in handcuffs. As news of her arrest spread, the women surmised that if the authorities could get a woman of Ugbala's stature, they could get any of them. The administration, seeing the scale of the women's uprising, thought that if it could arrest the women's leaders, it might bring the situation under control. Ugbala was the personification of a leader, and so they targeted her. She was highly esteemed in her community. Her skills were exceptional: she was a herbalist, a midwife of great note, a woman whose word was heeded, and one with an imposing stature and a lordly presence. Her sense of humor was both wicked and legendary. In Ugbala nature was prodigal of her favors:

Physically, Ugbala was a tower of a woman, a rare combination of grace and strength. Men said of her that she had a personality originally intended for a man, but which somehow had found its way into a woman. Regardless of what anyone said, Ugbala

was very much a woman. In fact, all aspects of womanhood were exaggerated in her – in her heavy breasts; her long, black hair; her laughing, teasing eyes, which invited flirtation or easy familiarity; and in her tendency to tell bawdy jokes, which sometimes gave false hopes of seduction to men who had no chance of bedding her in a thousand reincarnations [She was] the proverbial *okpolu*, a specimen marked by its uniqueness and singularity and produced by nature to illustrate the ultimate possibilities of which a species is capable. (84)

Elizabeth Ashby-Jones, the White woman anthropologist, spent much time at her house and described her as a woman of distinction and influence, detailing in her journal Ugbala's exceptional physical endowments and carriage. Ashby-Jones noted that she was "consciously groomed and adorned - loamy complexion, as if hewn from a deeper, redder layer of subsoil than the others . . ." (99), adding that Ugbala "was entirely self-possessed and unimpressed" by her presence (100).

With Ugbala's detention, her four married daughters and the other women disseminated the message to fellow women in all the surrounding villages that "Ndom Amapu is at war with the government" (160). Finally, Ugbala outsmarted the young warder guarding her and had her handcuffs removed. Before the handcuffs had fully come off, Ugbala grabbed the keys from the young warder and flung them to the other women prisoners who used them to release themselves from their cells. She and the other prisoners overpowered the guards and went about releasing all the prisoners they could find and attacking and subduing the guards, stripping them naked, and sitting on them.

THE ABDUCTION OF ELIZABETH ASHBY-JONES

The women abducted Elizabeth Ashby-Jones, a British anthropologist doing field work, who had visited their community some weeks before. Ashby-Jones interviewed them on such varied subjects as how they spent their time, how they cooked and farmed, and how they took turns sleeping with their husbands. She asked questions about practically everything and recorded the women's responses in her notebook. The women, therefore, concluded she was a spy and must have had a hand in Ugbala's arrest, and so they held her as a ransom to the colonial administration. They painted her face with indigo, just as they did theirs, to draw her into a higher level of womanhood. Their questions were intended to find out what she knew about womanhood. They were puzzled by her, and at some point somebody even suggested that they kill her, but others refused, contending it was not justified to kill a helpless woman. Ugbala was opposed to the idea of killing the White woman by mere virtue of her womanhood. She, however, noted that were Ashby-Jones not a woman, she would elect to kill him. The women eventually decided to release her but not before making her drink to their joint womanhood.

They brought a gourd of palm wine, soaked their menstrual rags in the bowl of wine with Ugbala reciting the oath, and they all drank from the gourd. This symbolic act was to bind Elizabeth Ashby-Jones to the sacredness of what they were doing and to initiate her as a blood sister. Nne-nne and the other women guarding Ashby-Jones decided to take some locks from her hair, some pieces from her dress, and pages from her notes as mementos of their encounter.

CENTERED LEADERSHIP AND THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE SOLIDARITY

The trooping out of women in their thousands signaled the start of the women's War or "*Ogu Ndom*." The women declared from the very beginning that *Ndom* had no leaders and that by virtue of their collective womanhood they were equal. They reiterated this as often as they deemed it necessary: "They were all equal women, with no one more of a woman than the others. They were all "cut" the same way, all squatted to urinate and to have their babies" (88). Every woman was in the war simply by virtue of being a woman; all bound together by a common grief - what Nne-nne called "Woman's Grief":

One by one and all together, they seemed to have known about this grief from the time they were little girl infants suckling milk from their mothers' breasts. They knew about it from the lullabies their older sisters sang to quiet them and rock them to sleep on hot, lonely afternoons while their mothers were at the farms [...]. Daughters learned of Woman's Grief from their mothers. Married women confirmed it for one another as they toiled together on the farms, stooping to hoe cassava ridges or to pull tubers from the ground, or when they knelt and then bent low with hanging breasts to blow their tired breaths at a fire that refused to catch on wet wood, or trudged from the river with a heavy water pot on their heads and a sick baby on their backs. They were conscious of Grief as they pounded fufu for their husbands' suppers or kneaded their testicles to arouse reluctant passions. They knew of it as they squatted to deliver their babies. They knew of it in themselves, and they recognized it in one another. *A woman knows what every woman knows!* That was the meaning of *Nwanyi Ibem*, My Fellow Woman, by which they addressed one another during the War. (35-36)

These women abandoned everything to be part of this critical war against the entire colonial administration, causing not just a simple disruption but a total upheaval. The war went on in many places at the same time; wherever women were, war was happening there. To boost morale and sustain their momentum, the women continued to reaffirm their solidarity to one another, stating thus, "The White man wants to count us, but there is only one of us. *Ndom* is one, uncountable upon uncountable, but still one. Undivided" (165). Moreover, to ensure that everyone was on board, the women took the following oath of solidarity:

With one voice, with one heart, with one birth canal through which everyone enters this world, with two breasts that suckle the whole world, squatting as we do when we deliver our babies, by the cord that binds us to our unborn infants, by the afterbirth through which we dedicate them to the Land, we swear, if ever we should back-track, or double-

deal, or double-cross, or double-talk on the rest of Ndom, if we should in any way breach the solidarity of Ndom, may we be strangled to death by the umbilical cords of the babies we are birthing – in this incarnation, and in all our future reincarnations. And what we swear, we swear for ourselves, our mothers, our sisters, and for all our female relatives. (166)

The wording of this oath, so powerful and binding, is a testament to the women's determination and commitment to fighting, even dying, and getting rid of the colonial administration and its allied forces.

The women's declaration that they had no leaders may not altogether come as a surprise to many since the Igbo have been known to be averse to any form of central leadership. The adage, "Igbo enwe eze" (The Igbo have no kings or rulers), says a lot about Igbo people and their perception of central leadership. In a nutshell, the Igbo are a democratic people, their most noticeable character traits being their independent, individualistic and self-reliant nature. The Igbo person considers himself or herself as good as anyone else, knowing that in Igbo culture, at least in pre-colonial times, one's status was measured strictly by achievement and service to the community. In those days, the Igbo organized themselves into age groups and village governments and met periodically to make decisions on matters of mutual interest in their villages and communities. These village gatherings were open to all, and everyone was at liberty to contribute to the discussion at hand. Nobody was considered above the law or accorded any special privilege – so colonialism took the Igbo by surprise.

Even though the women were stomping and chanting war songs, they were not armed. They "wielded sticks, kitchen knives, pounding pestles," and to indicate that they were ready for action they re-tied their cloths in "the war-readiness *isi- ngidingi*" (201). They sang about seeing the sky catch fire. To mask their individual identities, they blackened their faces with indigo; this gesture further unified them, making them indistinguishable. Unarmed and unfazed by colonial guns, and in spite of the terrible blood-letting on the part of the soldiers, the women continued their protest against the colonial administration and the government. They taunted the native soldiers to shoot their mothers, a way of reminding them that they were indeed their mothers. But when a British officer gave a command that the soldiers shoot and kill their 'mothers,' they did. This obedience confirms the extent of colonial emasculation of African manhood.

Later the District Officer appeared with his men desperate to stop the women but realized he could not because of their large numbers. Addressing a section of the women, still not knowing the whereabouts of Elizabeth Ashby-Jones, he appealed to them to release her and

promised to look into their grievances. But the women denied knowing the whereabouts of the White woman. Instead, they seized the opportunity to ask the District Officer to release Ugbala, unaware that Ugbala had already released herself from prison and had joined the rest of the women in the war. Ugbala's release was important to them because they had resolved that, "Rather that shame one of us, kill all of us!" (51). They then proceeded to present a litany of grievances to the District Officer thus: they did not want to be counted; they did not want to be taxed; they wanted better prices for their palm oil and kernels and lower prices for imported goods; they wanted the native courts abolished and the chiefs sacked, and so on.

The women proved unstoppable: "They were clubbed but kept coming, were whipped but kept coming, were dispersed but regrouped and kept coming, knocked down, but climbed over their fallen comrades and kept coming" (199). In a desperate effort to sustain their momentum, they raided the markets, and finding a handful of women, asked them, "What are you doing here? Trading while Ndom is at war? Have you not heard that the earth is heaving? Or are you not women?" (200). On the day Nne-nne was recruited, she had been returning from the farm when a legion of women accosted her, putting such questions to her as: "Are you not a woman? Do you not have a monthly cycle? Have you never endured the aches of pregnancy and the pangs of labor and childbirth?" (34-35). The raids helped to strengthen their resolve and enabled them to draw power and strength from one another, making them a formidable force. Women were everywhere, torching government buildings, courthouses, post offices, setting prisoners free, taking down telegraph posts, and causing mayhem.

Women consciously caused an upheaval because they believed it was necessary to bring about a new social order. Their decisions and actions emanated from the core of their being because they believed in the sacredness of their cause. Centered leadership emphasizes the role of positive emotions and draws on positive psychology. The women went to war to save their men from colonial subjugation and save themselves and their children, and indeed their society, from further exploitation. They practiced collective, authentic leadership; authentic leaders are confident, resilient and hopeful. The women led from their most resourceful selves and unleashed the potential of all the others. Bound by their common grief, they were unwavering in their resolve to set the sky on fire, and at the end, caused such an upheaval that the colonial administration was forced to make important changes.

In their book, Falola and Paddock maintain that "(t)he common Eurocentric stereotype that Africans were backward is clearly out of place given the high level of organization and effectiveness the women displayed. The system of justice administered by the women indicates

a fair and consistent practice despite the lack of written legal records (19). The colonial administration was stunned by the magnitude of what had happened in its watch. Prior to the women's war, it had not occurred to the British administrators that they knew so little about their subjects. So the women's War compelled them to reorganize the native administration and set up a Commission of Enquiry into the causes of the women's uprising, paying particular attention to the varying roles of women in their communities. The administration made a decision to direct some funds toward anthropological studies of their subjects in hopes of finding ways to better manage them. All these measures by the colonial administration may have helped in promoting Igbo studies, enabling researchers, and feminists in particular, to have access to more detailed information on the women's War.

AJUZIA AND STELLA'S WAR

Before Ajuzia left for further studies in America, he unwittingly created some complications for himself by impregnating Stella whom he was hired to tutor. Stella was the daughter of an influential assistant superintendent of police (a man with a reputation for brutality). Somehow Echewa found a way to contain the complication by creating a context in which Ajuzia had developed a romantic relationship with Stella and duly married her before his departure. Stella, in a moment of doubt and despair, worrying about how the long separation would affect their marriage, said to Ajuzia:

“I just want you to promise that you won't forget me when those American Negresses come flocking to your room. Or even the White girls. I have heard that they are all smiles from the very first time they see you, and even at the airport, if you simply say hello to them, they will be ready to follow you to your room and do anything you want” (244).

Ajuzia firmly made a commitment to her that he would send for her as soon as he had settled down in America. However, before he realized it, five whole years had elapsed, with Stella still waiting back in Nigeria, together with W'Orima, the daughter she had borne him. Initially, Ajuzia's letters were frequent, but gradually they became less so, and eventually ceased altogether.

Ajuzia was brought back to the moment by a telegram sent by Stella's mother containing the message that Nne-nne was deathly ill. The message jolted Ajuzia from a deep slumber and forced him to book hurriedly a flight and return to his ancestral village. Upon his arrival, he discovered to his chagrin that his grandmother was indeed dying, and his wife Stella was pregnant by another man, and immediately considered divorcing her. Ajuzia was deeply puzzled by these developments and seemed not to comprehend fully the implication of his five-

year absence and the toll it may have taken a young wife. All he could think about was that Stella should have waited for him, no matter how long the wait. He obviously wore his sense of entitlement like a badge of honor. Nne-nne was worried about Ajuzia and Stella and the future of their marriage, realizing that she was finally dying and time was of the essence. So without much ado, she broached the subject with Ajuzia so as to establish where she stood on the matter of Stella's pregnancy.

NNE-NNE'S PREVAILING LEADERSHIP

Nne-nne is the consummate leader, embodying all the qualities of centered leadership, traits apparent in her absolute devotion to her family. It is remarkable that immediately after expressing her joy at Ajuzia's return, Nne-nne asks him why he has not asked his wife to spend the night with him, knowing full well that Stella is pregnant by another man. When Ajuzia grunts and complains about Stella's pregnancy, Nne-nne promptly chides him for not being more dutiful to his wife saying, "But you were away, Ajuziogu, for five years. A very long time for a young woman, beautiful and full of the juices of young womanhood, to be left unattended" (263). She reminds Ajuzia that Stella has done well to wait that long and that alone is indicative of her love for him. Nne-nne, the eternal arbiter, in this vein continues to save her grandson's marriage, and by implication, her family line. She then proceeds to make a strong case for Stella by stating, "The fact that she is pregnant with another man does not make her a bad woman, just a woman who went astray once. Once. You should forgive her. You left your soil fallow for too long, and someone else planted on it. It happens that way all the time" (267). Lastly, in an ultimate show of solidarity with Stella, Nne-nne makes her last big request of Ajuzia and proceeds to divulge a secret she has never shared with anyone, living or dead.

Nne-nne, however, acknowledges her embarrassment at resurrecting this unflattering, well-kept secret which, if not told now, will go down with her to her grave. As if making Ajuzia the confessor, Nne-nne proceeds to make her confession: "Yes, Ajuziogu, even your dear grandmother once breached faith with her absent husband. I crossed legs with another man while your grandfather was in prison. How and why it happened, I cannot now tell you, but it happened" (268). Nne-nne's confession is a great life lesson intended to help Ajuzia realize that nothing is new under the sun. She, too, had "fallen" in a moment of vulnerability, encouraging him to forgive his wife and look to the future. Despite her confession, Ajuzia and his grandmother still argue back and forth about Stella's pregnancy. Sensing Ajuzia's emotional pain and fatigue, Nne-nne finally suggests that he take a rest after such a long, tiring journey. However, before letting him off to bed, she attempts to humor Ajuzia by asking him for a

“hearty embrace,” and wishing him God’s guidance and protection. Tired to the bones, Ajuzia flops onto his bed, still angry at Stella for ruining everything, and finally falls asleep. But by the time he wakes up well into the next day, Nne-nne has already died.

After Nne-nne’s death, Stella’s mother or Mama-Stella, as she is called, takes charge and speaks up for Stella, making it a point to tell Ajuzia a few home truths about his marriage, and blaming him for abandoning and neglecting his wife for so long. Evidently, something special is taking place here with three generations of women in solidarity, just as in the women’s war. Stella’s mother, like Nne-nne before her, is fighting to salvage the honor of her daughter and a fellow woman who has been subjected to a woman’s grief. Stella’s current predicament confirms Nne-nne’s assertion that the “snuffbox of grief” belongs to the woman since it is the woman who gets pregnant, not the man (245).

The turn of events mortifies Stella. In an attempt to end it all, she takes an overdose of medication, causing her unborn baby to be miscarried and making her so sick that she is left to fight for her life. After a period of hospitalization, she eventually recovers. When she finally sincerely apologizes to Ajuzia and takes full responsibility for her pregnancy, he does not immediately accept the apology, insisting instead on finding out more about the other man. Deciding not to oblige him, she poignantly reminds him about the disparity in the cultural expectations of women as opposed to none of men. Stella further points out that, “A woman who has been unfaithful to her husband carries the mark of her infidelity. I was a virgin when we first got together. You were not. Even if you had said you were, I had no way of proving you right or wrong. Besides, it was not expected of you, while it was expected of me” (291).

Despite Ajuzia’s resentment toward Stella because of the pregnancy, he does not jump at it when Stella gives him the option of a divorce. Instead, as Stella tearfully apologizes, Ajuzia promptly pulls her up and lovingly hugs her, an indication that tempers may be cooling and their relationship may finally be on the mend. Later, at Stella’s suggestion, they both return to Ajuzia’s ancestral compound. There they begin to sort and organize Nne-nne’s belongings, as well as those of the other deceased family members of his family. To their surprise, they discover that Nne-nne had already carefully arranged those belongings, including laying out the clothes in which she wanted to be buried.

While they were sorting and arranging things, Ajuzia recognizes the mementos from Nne-nne’s grotesque encounter with Elizabeth Ashby-Jones during the women’s war. He also appears to experience a profound revelation that the five years of Stella’s apprenticeship under

Nne-nne have been providential and have borne rich fruit, like a hand-over of an efficient administration. Ajuzia knows it in his heart that Nne-nne found Stella dependable, bonded with her and has handed the family's mantle of leadership over to her, instilling in the young woman the importance of keeping the compound open. It is Stella who now tells Ajuzia that his grandmother had asked that the mementos from the war be given to him. At the end of the day, common sense prevails as Ajuzia listens to the voice of reason, and Nne-nne's dying wish that he and Stella remain married and function as a unit come to fruition. In her wisdom, Nne-nne, the visionary, masterminds the construction of a formidable fortress that would ensure the continuity and longevity of her family line. This is her enduring legacy; it is a victory for the depth and grandeur of womanhood.

WOMAN'S TRIUMPH

I Saw the Sky Catch Fire celebrates the triumph of women at both the individual and the collective levels. Nne-nne's repertoire pervades the novel, reminding Ajuzia at every turn of the life lessons she had inculcated in him. Ajuzia's conversation with Stella's mother often brings to mind Nne-nne's stories on the eve of his departure, some of which are about jealous and controlling husbands who resent their wives' financial success. Ajuzia is gradually beginning to realize that the men's resentment stems from a need to control their women. In the novel, Echewa captures the reason for that unfortunate attitude of the men in the song below:

Nluta nwanyi, zuoro ya igwe
Ya akara m agba
Gbajia ya ukwu, gbajia ya aka
Kpolara ya nne ya!

The song roughly translates thus:

If I marry a wife and buy a bicycle for her
And she dares to become a better rider than I am
I'll break her arm and break her leg
And send her back to her mother (298)

This short piece shows that a woman's financial success can pose a threat to her husband since it may compromise his control over her. Stella's mother confides in Ajuzia about her own husband's quiet resentment of her success in her cloth business. She has achieved her success through hard work, determination, and resilience. Her achievement appears to embarrass her husband and threaten his masculine ego. Stella's mother relished her new-found financial

independence and gushes to Ajuzia that after twenty-eight years of marriage, she has earned the right to extricate herself from any hold and deserves to be free to explore life to the fullest. She revels in the small car she has bought by herself, not in the family's big Mercedes Benz bought by her husband, and which she is at liberty to use. Her pride in achievement is evident in the following: "When I go beep! beep! on this little red car and raise a little dust as I pass people, people still call me Mrs. Kamanu, but they know my face. I am in the driver's seat, controlling the steering wheel, not sitting in the back like some decorated and fat Mami-Wota doll" (299). It is no mean feat that Echewa consciously maintains this steady pattern of putting women in the driver's seat throughout the novel.

Ajuzia continues to recall and savor these unforgettable stories told by his grandmother on the night of his departure. He marvels as he recollects Nne-nne's assertion that a woman has three ages: "At first she was her father's daughter, then her husband's wife, and then finally – if she was lucky – her own person, either as a widow or as an emancipated wife living outside her husband's shadow [...]. A woman becomes her own man after her monthly bleeding stops" (299). This truly convinces Ajuzia that not only did Nne-nne complete her own cycle before she passed on, but Stella's mother has also indeed completed hers and has become her own 'man' in her marriage, and is now secure in the driver's seat. This is yet another victory for womanhood. Echewa subtly brings up the question of jealousies and resentments between men and women, showing that they are not always limited to the living, but sometimes extended even to the dead. At Nne-nne's funeral, for example, the men murmur their disapproval at the elaborate and befitting funeral that is being accorded her. They compare her funeral to her husband's and complain that Nne-nne's is by far more impressive. A close family friend corners Ajuzia to warn him that everyone must be careful not to cause jealousy and discord in the spirit world.

Somehow a woman's attainment of the third age, despite the freedom it confers on her, comes with a huge responsibility. The woman invariably becomes a sort of leader in her family. Igbo women particularly, tend to wear their family on their sleeves, keeping it close to their hearts and making it the center of their gravity. In this regard, Nne-nne has no peer. Both Nne-nne and Stella's mother did attain the third age, and from all indications Stella is getting there even faster, not to mention W'Orima, who is coming up in a fast changing world and whose course might be shorter. The five years of Ajuzia's absence has given Stella ample opportunity to tap from Nne-nne's storehouse of wisdom.

Ajuzia's long absence may have helped Stella to mature much faster and establish her

identity as a woman with strong convictions. The maturity is evident in Stella's reaction when Ajuzia insists that she sing to him as they make love, and she adamantly refuses. Stella's refusal to sing seems to threaten the control that Ajuzia has always thought he had, forcing him to reappraise his earlier sense of entitlement. He thinks aloud thus: "The reason it had not been important to me before that Stella sing to me was that I had never before felt a need for her submission, her loyalty, her admiration, or her love. I had always felt that I had those without a need to ask for them" (306).

As Ajuzia and Stella prepare to return together to the United States, Stella gives Ajuzia the shock of his life by announcing that she will not be returning with him after all. Confused, Ajuzia demands to know the reason for her decision, and Stella tells him about her promise to Nne-nne that they will not both leave at the same time, abandoning Ajuzia's ancestral compound and subjecting it to decay. Stella's revelation compels Ajuzia to think deeply about the matter. After exhaustive deliberations with Stella, Ajuzia finally concurs with her that yes, the United States can wait, and defers his return to America indefinitely. This comes after Ajuzia has done some soul searching and has discovered that Stella is truly the one for him. All the drama playing out in his life since his return has opened his eyes to a new reality, compelling him to realize that if Stella is going to remain his wife, he has to be prepared to be attentive to her needs, both emotional and material, because, as he later stated, his wife Stella "would take a lot of marrying!" Following his heart, Ajuzia now admits to himself that:

Stella aroused in me a kind of craving and hunger that could not be accounted for by a mere surge of sexual hormones, and that when I had her in my embrace, I felt a sense of satiation, completion, and wholeness that only she could give me. In five years, I had almost forgotten, but the sensations now returned to me. If love existed, then I loved Stella. I met her and had a union or communion with her in an alcove deep in my heart to which no other woman had ever found entrance (not Melva nor anyone else). She was my perfect other half, the silent echo of my spirit returning to embrace me, thereby creating an explosive resonance in me because everything between us was in phase. (276)

Stella's promise to Nne-nne forces Ajuzia to listen to his inner voice and do right by his women - his wife, grandmother, and daughter. Nne-nne had told Ajuzia in one of her letters that W'Orima was probably a reincarnation of his mother, meaning that they were "doubly related," and he immediately realized that Stella had been like that to him from the very first time he set his eyes on her (310). All of these thoughts appear to fulfill him and keep him grounded.

At the end of the novel, Stella emerges a clear winner, and Ajuzia basks on the extent

of Nne-nne's influence on her. One quickly realizes that everything Nne-nne and Stella and Stella's mother have done has been in the interests of self-affirmation and the propagation of the family. Stella's ability to command relevance and earn Ajuzia's respect and her eventual emergence as a leader in her family is a victory not only for herself but for all women.

CONCLUSION

I Saw the Sky Catch Fire is a testament to the resilience and power of the female spirit. Igbo women are powerful, more so in collectivity, as is demonstrated in the women's war. Numerous reviews, books and articles have been published on that war that has continued to intrigue and fascinate generations of scholars across the globe. Commenting on the no-nonsense attitude of the women, Agozino asserts that in the 20th Century, "British colonial officials were able to impose taxes on Igbo and Ibibio men, but when they attempted to extend the taxation to women, the women declared war on colonialism and its native collaborators" (282). In a patriarchal society like Igbo, much emphasis is placed on men's dominant role in the areas of social organizations, politics, leadership, ritual lore, and so on. The man comes first in all things while the woman is seen as a follower that does not have much of a voice. But documented evidence has shown that Igbo women are not nearly as voiceless and marginalized as they are being portrayed, particularly when they perform in collectivity. Agbasiere concurs by explaining that, "Women as a group continue to act as 'watchdogs' of morality, challenging any form of leadership that lacks commitment and accountability. This challenge also is extended to any 'higher authority' – religious or political - that exhibits some measure of indifference to such lack" (163). The historical narrative of Igbo peoples would be deemed incomplete without mention of the activities of Igbo women in significant political and cultural contexts. One such context is the Aba Women's War on which Echewa's novel is based. Phoebe Ottenberg recalls this unprecedented uprising thus:

In the history of the British administration of Nigeria, Ibo women have constituted a unique and unforgettable human force. When they changed almost overnight from apparently peaceable, home-loving villagers into a frenzied mob of thousands who in December 1929, attacked administration authorities while their men stood passively by, they brought about a sudden interest in the previously little known Ibo-speaking peoples. (205)

In his turn, Oriji contends that "The achievements of the Aba women's revolt and the legacies it left are noteworthy. The revolt helped women to mobilize themselves, and change the existing political order during colonialism" (8). Furthermore, Francis Cardinal Arinze posits that "Igbo women have more power than was generally recognized by earlier authors.

They can hold their own not only by means of public demonstrations, group strikes, ridicule, and refusal to cook for their husbands but also by their inherent vitality, courage, self-reliance and uncommon organizational ability. In this connection, the Aba riots of 1929 were an eye-opener” (4). Sylvia Leith-Ross, also, lends credence to the notion that Igbo women have more power than is acknowledged when she observes that “Ibo women do play an influential part, not only by native custom but because of their . . . independence of views, courage, self-confidence, desire for gain and worldly standing. More than the men, they seem to be able to co-operate, to stand by each other even in difficulties, and to follow a common aim” (22). The women’s war ranks as one of the most outstanding resistance movements in Nigerian history during which women demonstrated the power of collective solidarity and leadership.

In *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, Echewa was at his artistic summit. The wonder of that novel lies in Echewa’s construction of a story in which he quite consciously puts women in the driver’s seat, making all the major action revolve around them. Throughout the novel, he effectively challenged the popular stereotype that views women as marginalized and passive subordinates to men in a patriarchal culture. Echewa sings the glory of all women by demonstrating the scope of their power and influence, particularly when they perform collectively. He deserves credit for his artful handling of the complicated events that led to the women’s war, the best example to date of the solidarity of Igbo women. The novel reaffirms the assertion that Igbo women have practiced collective feminism since the dawn of history.

In *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, Echewa reaches into the deepest recesses of womanhood and unearths the rich treasures buried therein. How could he so accurately articulate “Woman’s Grief”? Echewa’s craftsmanship elevates the art of storytelling to loftier heights, permitting Nne-nne to revel in telling the stories. These stories opened up worlds unknown to Ajuzia, establishing that stories matter; they can be used to malign and destroy, but can be used to repair and build and empower. As hilarious as some of Nne-nne’s stories may seem, they are uplifting and empowering, a study in important life lessons. Nne-nne looms large in the novel, exuding an uncanny foresight that no other character in the novel, male or female, could match. Echewa hints at almost every aspect of male-female relationships - marital infidelity, widowhood, improvident husbands, rape, pregnancy, female circumcision, wife-beating, and property rights - and discusses them equitably. He subtly weaves into the discussion the inequities that Igbo women endure because their men are overly entitled. Ajuzia’s failure to understand the full implication of his abandonment of Stella is summed up in, “I didn’t realize that my long absence meant so much to you!” (301). But much later, having had time to take

stock of things, he seems to better understand the full import of what the native men and the colonial administrators said to the women during the women's war, "We didn't realize you were so profoundly aggrieved!" (301).

Although women have begun to be cast as characters of note in African literature, there is still a considerable dearth of female presence in the African novel and African affairs. Girls and women should be exposed to literature that extols and empowers them and gives them hope. In this regard, Echewa's novel is solid gold. Echewa has dared to endow the Igbo woman with a strong affirmation of her worth and capabilities that can repair her broken dignity and has captured the essence of the woman in all of its complexity. At the end of the novel, as Stella holds her own, growing from strength to unwavering strength, Ajuzia, in obvious wonder, pays homage to the depth of womanhood, affirming Nne-nne's summation that, "Like palm wine, a woman gets stronger with age. The woman in a woman comes out as she gets older" (4). Echewa's *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* gives hope to millions of Igbo and African women and women everywhere who have long longed for this validation.

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