

Gender (Dis) Placement in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

How do African literary texts project gender? Principally because human experience is gender distinct, male writers could possibly be 'writing' from the vantage position of the 'superior' gender, and the female writers, while not necessarily 'writing' from the position of the 'oppressed' gender, could possibly be more interested in writing about the experience of the female than the male writer is interested in the life of the male. That is, the works of most female writers are at their core, feminist oriented, while those of the men cannot be said to be masculinist. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, a comparative exploration of gender configuration in the novels shows that the novelist, though neither a 'masculinist' nor a feminist, still finds it difficult to locate significant roles for his female characters. The male protagonists are caught in the vortex of phallocentrism and are destroyed by its values. The female characters are either socially invisible or made lethargic by patriarchal oppression. What we have then, is a sort of gender displacement, a compromise which encourages gender complementarity but to which the author could not give a solid foundation.

Keywords: Gender, Masculine, Feminine, Patriarchy, Chinua Achebe

Introduction

According to Munns and Rajan (1995:486), 'gender studies are often implicitly coded as feminist.' This is because, while the experience of the womenfolk has always been the focus of much sociological discourse, few works have been attempted which interrogate the vectors of masculinity. Masculine experience is perceived as the mainstream, the norm. Indeed, feminists hold that; the history, philosophy, literature and the general ethics of the world are founded on unambiguous (albeit mostly unstated) patriarchal principles and ideals. Not a few of these observations have been negative side-comments in feminist tracts where the oppressive character of man is foregrounded.

Botha (2011) provides a somewhat jaundiced description of masculinity when he affirms that it:

manifests itself through our families, churches, schools, workplaces and our television telling us that 'do not show emotions other than anger and aggression', 'do not display vulnerabilities or fears', 'do not seek help in any shape or form', 'do not cry', 'do not refuse sex or remain faithful to one partner', since all of these actions will in some inexplicable ... way reduce ... manhood. (20)

Hartman (quoted by Munns and Rajan 1995) offers a similar perspective on patriarchy when she describes it as:

a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. (485-486)

Gilmore (quoted by Haralambos and Holborn 2004:143) also defines masculinity, albeit in a more objective way, as 'the approved way of being an adult male in any given society'. In his book, titled *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*, Gilmore deconstructs into three features of masculinity as found in several societies:

1. **Man the Impregnator:** In most societies, it is a kind of honour for a man to have several women lovers, as this only testifies to his virile potency. The most important masculine act, of course, is the ability to impregnate a woman. Failure to do this greatly betrays a failing of his 'masculinity'.
2. **Man the Provider:** This function naturally accompanies the first. The man is expected to provide for the woman and their offspring.
3. **Man the Protector:** The man is expected to protect his wife and children from external forces, which may be other men or general threats.

According to Gilmore, these prescribed functions are competitive and dangerous, and often times do lead to tragic consequences. In a larger sense, man's defence of his society is perceived as a defence of his family, and everything is to his benefit.

Compared with feminist theory, masculinist criticism is still young and definitely lacks the virile discourses that have come to characterise feminism as a concept and as a literary theory. What exists in texts like Joseph H. Pleck's *The Myth of Masculinity* (1981), Michael Roper and James Tosh's *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (1991), and Rachel Adams and David Sarran *The Masculinities Studies Reader* (2002), are introductory readings of the topic. The reasons for the late entry of men's studies into the world of textual discourses are manifold but could very well be subsumed into one. The history of the world, the philosophy, economics, politics, religion and indeed all its cultural appurtenances, advance phallogocentrism, according to feminists. While masculinists do not necessarily disclaim the prevalence or predominance of masculinity or its oppressive nature, what has become the focus of men's studies is the peculiar nature of masculinity and its varieties. In the words of Abrams (2007), masculinity stresses:

the variety of male roles, or "masculinities", the internal stresses within each concept of masculinity, and the degree to which patriarchal dominance tended to distort the characters of men as well as women. (113)

An examination of how patriarchy has evolved over the years with particular reference to racial and cultural dynamics also attracts the interests of masculinists. Like feminism which has continental and racial variants to attend to unique contextual differences, masculinism also necessitates an interrogation of contextual values. Michael Roper and James Tosh's *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (1991), David Leverenz's *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (1989) and James Eli Adam's *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995) are exemplifications of masculinist studies which are diachronic and synchronic in nature. These studies unearthed the singular determinants of masculinity in their respective societies (British and American) at various and particular periods in history and also the tensions and precarious nature of masculinity.

Masculinist studies in African literature is almost non-existent and what could be found only exists in feminist studies where, to emphasise writers' presentation of female characters, critics necessarily have to juxtapose this with that of presentation of male characters. Hence examination of masculinities in African literature is incidental and by the way.

In most countries, particularly third world countries, though decades of struggle by women's societies have led to transformations in policy and practice which have ameliorated women's lives, 'men still hold the power in most governments, earn the most money' (Van Der Gaag 2011:15). But, he also affirms that mainly because of the work of gender equality organizations, masculinity is gradually loosing some of its rigid, negative and oppressive characteristics, and is becoming more accommodating to feminist calls for gender equality.

Unlike masculinism, feminism (which some critics aver 'is not necessarily identical with women', Eagleton 2008:165) has never been short on avid discussants. To 'rabid' feminists, however, this statement will be false, or at worse a predictable masculine suppressive attempt at denying the incontestable. They propose that the history of the world and its literary history have always been patriarchal, that is, these have always been male-centred. Against this overwhelming phallogentric lead, feminists have had to contend. What has been initiated is a feminist-revisionist re-reading of history, literature, philosophy and sociology, such that will push to the fore the necessarily vital contributions of women to the world's history and growth.

Due to the multifaceted characteristics of feminism and the feminists' attempt to cover 'lost ground', it has taken on so much diverse colourations that its particulars cannot be easily delimited. However, a few definitions will be quoted here to attempt to focus on its specifics:

- A 'serious, coherent and universal philosophy that offers an alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures.' (French, 1985:442)
- The approach to social life, philosophy, and ethics that commits itself to correcting biases leading to the subordination of women or the disparagement of women's particular experience and of the voices women bring to discussion.' (Blackburn 2005:132)
- 'Attempts to win for women full rights and powers both in the context of class and in the dominant political system.' (Keohame et al. 1982:57)
- 'A vision of a world free not only from sexism, but also from racism, class-bias, ageism, heterosexual bias - from all the ideologies and institutions that have consciously or unconsciously oppressed some for the advantage of others.' (Boxer 1982:228)

Like most modern propositions, the variants of its definitive varieties do manifest intrinsic complexities and obvious paradoxes, but all are adequately and vigorously championed and advocated by adherents. Varied as these definitions may be (a philosophy, a political movement, a theory, and a vision), however, the particulars are congruously and necessarily analogous, for feminism is an expression of 'feminine psyche'.

The western woman's struggles for social, economic and political rights, initiated in the aftermath of the American Revolution (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799), actually gained momentum in the late 18th century with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and John Stuart Mills' *The Subjection of Women* (1869). These authors criticised the 'second class' position of women in the society and called for better education and employment opportunities for the female sex. Later the issue was taken up by suffragettes like Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (in the United States) and Emmeline Pankhurst (in Britain). This period was called the first wave. Having succeeded with some of the concerns demanded in the first wave, feminists turned to issues of a woman's right to determine her own identity and sexuality. The impetus came from civil right movements and anti-war protests in the United States of America. These issues were underscored in several texts that have since become classics of feminist literature - *The Second Sex* (1952) by Simone de Beauvoir, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan and *Sexual Politics* (1969) by Kate Millett - and drew particular attention to patriarchal coercions and oppression in areas of sexuality, marriage, employment, religion and politics.

Over the next decades feminism went through second and third waves. It is now at a stage called postfeminism. A major feature of feminism is that it has variants which focus on the peculiarities of female experience in different contexts. In Africa, for example, we have 'Womanism', 'stiwanism', and 'Motherism'. What distinguishes these from feminism is that feminism is confrontational and adversarial, while they are not. (Bestman 2012). Rather, they focus on and celebrate certain unique values which not only strengthen the female gender but also make her a necessary complement to the male.

Most male writers feel obliged to counter feminist criticism of masculine decoding of the female experience (Palmer 1983). They often respond to feminist disapprobation of their works as patriarchal templates which create a kind of range for entrenching phallogocentric domination. Feminists claim, in their protest, that in masculine fiction, while representative male characters are

vigorous, realistic, and complex, the female characters are complaisant, objectified and over-simplified moppets who not only lack the humanism of the male characters, but also come across to readers as simpletons. The fault, according to Wole Soyinka in an interview, is not the male writers' but the female writers':

Soyinka: ... I am aware of criticism; especially feminist criticism has been getting rabid among one or two individuals. There is no compromise for me on this subject. A woman's shape, a woman's reproductive capacity which is unique to the female sex just sets her apart from men. It does not mean that women are not equal to men intellectually, in capacities and so forth. But the figure of a woman - for me Nature is biology, obviously - just separates her: and I can never look at a woman in the same way as I can look at a man and when I reflect her in my writings she occupies that position ...

David: Yes, but I wish your women characters were a little more well-realised.

Soyinka: *But that is the role of women. I can't enter into the mind and body of a woman. No, let women write about themselves. Why should they ask me to do that?* (David 1995:212) (italics mine).

If there is some validity in Soyinka's intimation here, it is that, to avoid gender 'objectification', only the members of a particular gender can write convincingly and realistically about his/her own sex to satisfy the aesthetic perquisites of the target gender.

Readings of criticisms of literary works by male writers have often showed them focusing attention on the general, social and cultural dynamics that catenate their societies. Most seem, as it were, to be more concerned with exploring larger and more general themes than delving into subtleties of gender dialectics.

However, male writers' gender posits can still be gleaned from the gender configurations in the world of their novels. In the words of Tague (2001):

The creator owes an allegiance to the creation, through his or her *act* of creating and by virtue of the result. Regardless of disavowal, an act (either conscious or unconscious) of making real that which previously was latent and unknown adheres to its creator as property to an owner. (2)

And, indeed, 'writing the literary work is as much an exploration of the self and the world' (Venkatchalam 2007:4).

Things Fall Apart

Some critics (Ker 2003, Wattie 1979) of *Things Fall Apart* have foregrounded the village of Umuofia as the 'central character' of the novel. Nevertheless, Okonkwo bestrides the novel like a colossus, so much so that long after reading the novel one finds it hard to call to mind any other important character, male or female. The Umuofia society is indubitably patriarchal and patrilineal where:

extended family is formed by a custom whereby sons remain in their father's family group, bringing their wives to live with them, so that their children also belong to the group. (Radcliff-Brown 1950:5)

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents a picture of a society which, according to Emenyonu (1978: xvii) 'shows a vigorous society that encourages living sportmanship, diligence and integrity. But it is also an aggressive society, self-centred and excessively individualistic'. Words like 'aggressive', 'self-centred' and 'individualistic' form part of the vocabulary of patriarchy. It manifests principally in the socio-cultural, political and religious interactions of both sexes. There are no uncertainties or ambiguities about gender expectations here. Right from childhood a child is taught to develop instincts along gender lines: for men what is required is more than biological significance. A man is expected to be brave, strong, rational, and industrious. For a woman all she has to do is suppress her individuality and be malleable to patriarchal whims. Gender attitudinal expectations are so internal to the Umuofia cultural consciousness that gender jibes, insults and innuendos are often thrown at victims off-the-cuff. Victims, that is, who do not behave according to gender expectations.

Okonkwo, who epitomises and incorporates the 'extreme' attributes of masculinity, is respected across the nine villages that make up Umuofia. His wrestling prowess is redoubtable. As a warrior he is incomparable. His large yam-full barns are testatory to his farming ability. He has two titles to his

name, his having three wives means he is prosperous. Indeed, Okonkwo not only exemplifies the best of manhood, he loathes the absence of it in other men:

Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: 'This meeting is for men.' The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. (19)

The foundation of such an attitudinal aesthetics has its origin in the culture. 'Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered' (6). Despite his young age, but due to the sheer range of his accomplishments, Okonkwo is highly respected among his people. With two titles under his belt, he already ranks as one of the most important men in Umuofia.

But Okonkwo, in spite of his 'manly' qualities, he actually apprehends extreme qualities of his gender. Arguing along similar lines, Taiwo (2012) has this to say about Okonkwo's iconoclasm in his society:

Okonkwo himself was a bundle of contradictions. To start with, whatever the belief in the power of the gods and the influence of predestination on individual fortunes, he was reputed to be one person who made his chi say yes to his striving for success. This wilfulness ... extended to his violation of an important prohibition during the Week of Peace. (102)

His motivation for success involves a deliberate rejection of his father's legacy of failure, hence his drive for achievement not only suffices as a more satisfying replacement for his own children, it engenders in him a mindset that is irrepressively feat-driven. Because his ambition is fear-induced, it ineluctably leads to extremes of behaviour on his part. The consequences are ubiquitous. Even in his immediate family, 'Okonkwo is not a lovable man' (Povey 1971:100). He sees emotional display of affection, sadness or fear as a sign of weakness. That is why he could partake in the killing of Ikemefuna, so others present would not think him faint hearted.

Contrasted with other men, particularly his close friend Obirieká, Okonkwo's uncompromising attitude towards virtually every issue places him at a most disadvantaged position. Unlike Obirieká, who Taiwo (2012:102) affirms 'is such

an important barometre to measure the degree of heterodox belief, if not behaviour, in Umofia', Okonkwo is an untypical and unusual complex entity. Fixed in his beliefs and values, very much unyielding and steadfast in his trust in the reliability of tested age-old socio-cultural paradigms, his position becomes particularly untenable in a society that is witnessing unavoidable transformation (Taiwo 2012). Although his departure into exile is caused by an accidental occurrence that leads to the shooting to death of a young member of his clan, he is amazed to discover, on his return after a seven-year absence, that every facet of the socio-cultural life of the people has been undermined by strangers and local collaborators alike. He is more amazed, though, by the general nonchalance and the casualness with which the people have taken to the undermining of their culture. 'What has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight? (126), he asks his friend. In his refusal to yield to the overwhelming forces of change, to recognise that now personal values and relationships have overtaken communal values and relationships, he shares the tragic podium with other tragic iconoclasts like Oedipus, King Lear, and Othello. A tragic hero in the mold of this set, according to Aristotle:

will most affectively evoke both our pity and terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad, but a mixture of both ... Such a man is exhibited as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of his mistaken choice of an action, to which he is led by his hamartia - his 'error' or 'mistakes of judgement' (Abrams 2007:331-332)

Okonkwo's tragic flaw is his conservative stance in public and private matters. He rules his household with an iron fist. He brooks no challenge or contradiction from members of his family, and the slightest hint at opposition is instantly met with a stern response. Even in his household, 'Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it is the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength (20).

Despite Okonkwo's masculine attributes - dry rationality, common sense - which ought to have easily guided him into making the cultural transition along with other members of his community, his pathological hold on to communal mores, however, and his trust in their supreme benefits, makes such impossible. Surprisingly, it is his son, Nwoye, the one he particularly loathes for being more like a 'woman' that makes the easy transition. This is made easier since even before the advent of the Christian religion and the white man, he has always been uncomfortable with his father's belligerence, insensitivity to others, high-

handedness, and in particular cold-bloodedness exemplified in his (Okonkwo's) killing of Ikemefuna who has almost become a member of his family. Every time Nwoye encounters the tragic consequences of superstitions and norms 'something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow' (43). Hence, while his father and few citizens of Umuofia felt strongly about the new dispensation, Nwoye found 'method in the overwhelming madness' (128), a sort of inner release from the 'incubitic' oppression of cultural taboos and expectations.

Intoxicated with the psychological freedom offered by the new religion and its appurtenances (education, western style, for example), Nwoye sunders all relations with his father (and hence the culture he represents) and immerses himself in the white man's ways. His attitude can be juxtaposed with that of his father, who has to 'kill himself because he refuses to change and embody (the traditional and the modern cultural) experiences' (Serumaga 1969:76).

Because of the patriarchal paradigms that prevail in the Igbo society, it is not surprising that women have a lower place in the socio-political hierarchy of Umuofia. 'Between boys and girls the comparison is all in favour of the former, the latter only counting as a useful accessory in the life of a man' (Basden 1983:78). It is a kind of place where 'men ... consider ... submission to masculine superiority as the only possible attitude for a woman' (Firkel 1963:194). The general attitude towards women (and hence femininity) is that they apprehend attributes of effeminacy, dependence, self-abnegation, submissiveness and vacillation. That is why men who are perceived to possess these attributes are called 'women', which is pejorative. Indeed, a man who has no title is called 'agbala', meaning woman in Igbo. There are sustained references to these attributes whenever there are 'unmasculine' men to be admonished. The female personality is not viewed as a necessary balance to the male, but an inferior complementarity. When Okonkwo fails to make his son behave like 'a man', he describes him thus; 'I have done my best to make Nwoye into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him (147).

The most powerful woman in Umuofia is undeniably Chielo, who as an 'ordinary' woman sells in the market, but also functions as the priestess of the powerful god Agbala. It is only when she functions as the priestess of the god that she relates with the men, not as a woman but as the voice of a god. Hence she speaks with an authoritative or superior tone. All the other women are not so lucky. Ability to control the woman/women in a man's life is one of the chief attributes of masculinity, 'no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable

to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man' (37).

It is telling that the omniscient narrator has to emphasise the phrase in parentheses. A man might overlook the pranks of his children and take them as childish behaviour. But the women need a stronger hand; hence Okonkwo highhandedness in dealing with his wives. The problem of marital abuse does not arise, since, by paying the bride price of a woman to her parents they, the parents, have conceded the right to 'discipline' her to the husband.

It is significant however; that in a polygamous setting the first wife is accorded some form of respect. While this does not really translate into authority within the community, it does put the woman in an enviable position as a first among equals who is always specially treated and respected within the household:

Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her, so they stood waiting ... There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear. (14)

Even in Okonkwo's domain the first wife is accorded the respect due to her position. That is why it is 'the youngest (wife who) lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper' (9). Once in a while, by virtue of her position, albeit Okonkwo does not brook challenge to his authority, his first wife may contradict him and get away with it. The advantage of the first wife is further enhanced by the fact that she will be closest to the husband in age. Not only is she close to the husband in age, she also comes into his house when he is just about able to feed a family. By the time the other wives come he is now a more comfortable man with large farms and several yam barns.

These reasons consequently place the first wife in a sort of vantage position to confront the husband sometimes, that is, having, as it were, the panache and 'some authority' and the mindset of jousting with an 'equal' who one knows everything about.

Nevertheless, in Okonkwo's household his wife Ekwefi, though not his first wife, has the advantage of knowing him before the others, but he was not able to marry her because of his poor status as a young man. When her husband fails to

take up his responsibilities, she has simply left him for Okonkwo, who by then has a first wife. Not surprisingly even Okonkwo, for all his fiery disposition and domineering attitude, expects some form of haughtiness and stubbornness from her once in while. Hence, when he hears a loud knock on his door, he instinctively knows the only individual who could do that in his domain:

'Who is that? he growled. He knew it must be Ekwefi. Of his three wives Ekwefi was the only one who would have the audacity to bang his door' (54).

Yet even this little authority given to the 'few lucky' women does not in the least put them on the same footing with the men. In the face of overwhelming masculine solipsism and feminine invisibility, of so much social, political and cultural feminine powerlessness, it is obvious that aesthetic permutations by a literary artist will not suffice to elevate the status of women if the literary work reflects with integrity, the reality of the society, in this case Igbo society. According to Basden (1983):

How ... can (an Ibo) woman be expected to enter into the ideas, pursuits, and affairs of (Ibo) men? ... it would be pure waste of effort, as well as folly, to discuss serious matters with womenfolk. It follows, then, that the lives of Ibo men, generally speaking, run on lines quite distinct from those of the women. (80)

Can any woman in Umuofia then become as powerful as Okonkwo? The answer will definitely be in the negative, for the things that are socially accepted as elevating of the status of a person are beyond the reach of a woman - violence and bloodshed, a large farm, several yam barns, participation in cultic activities, and possession of titles. These require more than strength and confidence to achieve, since not all men are even able to achieve all - Okonkwo's father, for example - but women are forbidden from partaking in most of the activities which would have given some of them the necessary opportunity to prove their mettle.

Uchendu's remarks appropriately summarises the general cultural attitudes towards patriarchy:

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut.

A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. (97)

Hence the mother's home-place is less important since it is perceived as the last resort. It is a place no man goes to except he has failed in the 'masculine' world. To Okonkwo, his exile and sojourn in his mother's birthplace is an embarrassment he quickly forgets when he returns 'home'. Possibly, his subsequent reaction that leads to the catastrophe in the novel is born of a desire to regain the high position he held before he was exiled.

It would be misleading, nevertheless, to foreground Okonkwo as a typical Umuofian. Indeed, he is not. Though the Umuofia society nurtures different kinds of men and patriarchal paradigms prevail, other men, particularly Obierika, Ogbuefi Ezendu and Ogbuefi Ndulue, have all found it expedient to balance these values with a compassionate side that appears more feminine. It is significant that while Okonkwo seems genuinely baffled by their ability to be simultaneously brave and benevolent, they also could not comprehend his refusal or incapacity to see the necessity of finding a beneficial equilibrium between being brave and being compassionate, despite his 'greatness'. The absence of a 'feminine', soft side to Okonkwo's belligerence is emphasized throughout the novel, in his relationship with his son Nwoye, with his friend Obierika, and in several conversations he has with others on topics related to compassion, display of affection and fear. Ultimately, this uncompromising attitude makes his tragic end inevitable, and it would have ended the way it did, even without the coming of the white man or the introduction of Christianity (Taiwo 2012). It is, in a way, a predictable end for one who is unsympathetic and unempathetic. He believes so much in the infallibility of traditional norms, in particular the 'masculine' paradigms that are immersed in oppression, bloodshed and cold logic. His tragic end apparently testifies to the fact that every society needs to recognise the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine principles. The author, Achebe, has this to say about Okonkwo's particular weakness:

There is nothing else wrong with Okonkwo, except his failure to understand that the gentleness, the compassion that we associate with women, is even more important than the strength ... And that is what Okonkwo was not able to learn ... And Igbo culture is partly responsible because it makes a lot of strength and power and success - and Okonkwo heard this from his society. He heard it all the time (*Daily Sun*, quoted by Anyadike 2012:311-312).

Anthills of the Savannah

Twenty-nine years stood between Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Within the initial decade he published three more novels. However, in terms of gender delineation, no apparent distinction could be foregrounded between these and what exists in *Things Fall Apart*, where albeit both masculine and feminine genders are represented, the central male character is so developed that the whole story is his. The world of Ezeulu, Obi Okonkwo and Odili Samalu is still that of men, where the subordinate status of women is a given, where patriarchal dominance and feminine socio-political invisibility form a significant core of the cultural phenomena. Although Clara in *No Longer at Ease* and Elsie in *A Man of the People* are significant improvements on the female characters in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, for the first time in Chinua Achebe's novelistic oeuvre, a female character shares the centre stage with the males. This liberating awareness manifests in the character of Beatrice, whose emotional vitality and intellectual awareness is unique, not only amongst the female characters in Achebe's fiction, but in African masculine fiction. That is why Odebunmi *et al.* (2003:2) affirm that in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe not only 'explores the climate of misgovernance, opportunism and alienation which marks this phase (of military regimes in Africa) ... it also prescribes radical reformism'. It is obviously the first time women will be positively portrayed in Achebe's novels.

Anthills of the Savannah relates the story of how three friends morph into three important troika in a country named Kagan: Sam, the president; Chris, the Commissioner for Information; Ikem, the editor of the *National Gazette*. Individually, each of them is impressive in character, and so highly opinionated, one is initially surprised they could actually be friends. While others might be contented with duelling in the twilight social zones of the society, not these three, who, have, by the sheer power of their personality and industry, worked themselves to the forefront of Kagan's socio-political reckoning. Under the veneer of political aestheticism and despite individual weaknesses, each attempts in his own way, to initiate moral solidity and ethical responsibility in the populace; Sam, via his leadership style as president; Chris, as the country's Information Commissioner; Ikem as the editor of a newspaper. The interplay of their respective actions forms the basic structure of *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Sam, the president, is described by Chris as a most charming personality. Classmates in their secondary school days, under the very watchful eyes of his close friends and confidants, Sam blossoms from an average student who is fond of athletics into a Sandhurst trained soldier. His only perceptible character flaw is his theatrical sense, his aping of English virtues and styles, in both manner and language. While this might not be an enviable attribute in an African head of state, it is, according to Ikem, 'less dangerous than the joyless passion for power of many African tyrants' (50). The danger inherent in such a posture will eventually surprise Ikem and Chris, however, as Sam's grip on power deepens. Hence Ikem's initial assessment of Sam and excuse for his theatricals will come to haunt him and Chris later:

There is something else about Sam which makes him easy to take; his sense of theatre. He is basically an actor, and half of the things we are inclined to hold against him are no more than scenes from his repertory to which he may have no sense of moral commitment whatsoever. (50)

Paradoxically, it is this manifest display of lack of moral commitment, of objective disinterestedness, of an intrinsic penchant for distancing oneself from one's actions that breeds the tyrannical mind. Gradually, as Sam totters into tyranny and dictatorship, one can only wonder if everything is not theatre to him, if his sense of the histrionic has not broadened to involve bloodletting, not the least those of his friends.

Chris, the Commissioner for Information, apprehends some of the attributes of Sam and some of Ikem. Always attempting to avoid sentiments, his zestful gusto and exuberance carries over into a readiness to make every act a game, sort of. His attitude affects a compromising stance between the charming egotism and bourgeoisie aestheticism and sophistication of Sam and the plebeian modesty of Ikem. Chris himself explicates the connection he has with the other two and the kind of balance that inheres in his position, 'I have always been in the middle. Neither as bright as Ikem and not such a social success as Sam ...' (66).

Because of the centring temperaments emphasized by Chris in the above quote, he is, without doubt the fountainhead of the attitudes represented by him and his friends. Though they 'are all connected ... (and one) can not tell the story of any of ... (them) without implicating the others ... we are too close together (66), Chris is in a better position to strike a balance between the two and criticise

their positions. But this is not as easy to do as one would ordinarily expect. Not that he finds it difficult to identify the personal idiosyncrasies or general philosophical values of Sam and Ikem, the difficulty lies in Chris' awareness that his own personality amalgamates the differing views or values of his friends. Hence, to describe either of them is tantamount to describing certain attributes of himself. The exchange between him and Beatrice, quoted below, aptly foregrounds this proposition:

' ... That we first talk about ourselves'
'Who wants to hear anymore about you? You will end up
talking about other people, anyway' (68)

Chris is the one who never wants to offend, always seeking to be reasonable when dry rationality is not an option. His discomfort at answering questions concerning the nature of his friendship with Sam and Ikem also arises, in part, from his confusion as to the reasons for the subsequent disintegration of this relationship into near inimicality and antagonism. He could not fathom Sam's resentment, for, isn't he the head of state? Sam 'has all the success' (67) so 'why indeed should he resent any mortal? (67).

In the case of Ikem, Chris thinks his earthiness is a sham, a consequence of an unrealistic sentiment. Although Beatrice thinks this earthiness reflects a more realistic mindset than Chris' and Sam's, Chris knows better, for as it is, how can Ikem be more realistic when he 'has the example of Don Quixote and other fictional characters to guide him? (119).

Chris' description of himself as a man 'long despaired of fighting' (119) is very apt. His attraction to power and authority is so strong that even when he becomes aware of Sam's gradual transformation into a tyrant he finds it inconvenient to resign, citing several reasons for his continued stay in office as information commissioner, despite the mounting insults, veiled and direct, and the threats. It takes the disappearance and 'murder' of Ikem to stir some action into him and he vacates, not only his position as commissioner, but his house, and flees into the anonymity of exile.

Of the three friends, Ikem is the one who most grasps the reality and aberration of political oppression. His editorship of the *National Gazette* provides an avenue for him to not only nurture his revolutionary aesthetics and spread his ideology directly to the people, but also propagate his reformulatory drive for responsible citizenship. His political acuity might stem from an illogical

grasp of reality, according to Chris, but it does manifest his uncompromising stance in matters of corruption in public places, bureaucratic inefficiencies, oppressive and irresponsible leadership and the general dearth of purposeful direction that is the bane of Africa's socio-political reality. For him, the issue becomes excruciatingly personal not just because his friends have become part of the despotic nightmare, but also that before his very eyes these two have gradually become pliable to the enchantments of power.

His continual attempts at bucking their readings of the socio-political situation in Kagan completely go against the grain of political and social inevitability and historical determinism. If he is a tad amazed at how far Sam has become affected by the evil influence of power, he is more surprised at Chris' inertia and opposition to his own searing indictments in the *National Gazette* of public malaise, and in particular the turnaround in their friendship which he could only trace to their regular confrontations apropos the topic of his editorial pieces. This is what prompts him to affirm in one of his reflective moments - 'amazing what even one month in office can do to a man's mind' (38). All the same, he is never deterred from using his editorials as a mobilizing force for socio-cultural attitudinal change.

Due to the searing nature of his uncompromising editorials, he has gained unseen friends amongst the populace, and also engendered fear in the minds of public officials who are always afraid lest their departments come under the ferule in the next piece. His experience with the police man who collects his car documents shows that a sort of myth has developed round his personality. When he visits the Traffic Police office the next day, the response of the senior officer shows how he and others of his ilk think of Ikem.

'The pen is mightier than the sword. With one sentence of your sharp pen you can demolish anybody ... I respect your pen sir' (131). And when the hapless junior officer who had collected Ikem's documents the previous day is identified, the senior officer's admonitions summarize Ikem's editorial reputation in the country:

This man is Mr. Osodi, the Editor of the *National Gazette*. Everybody in the country knows him except you. So you carry your stupid nonsense and go and contravene a man of such calibre. Tomorrow now if he takes up his pen to lambaste the police you all go begin complain like monkey wey

im mother die ... Go and bring his particulars here one time,
stupid yam-head. (132)

Of course Chris does not see any reformulatory relevance in Ikem's crusading editorials. To him, they 'antagonise everybody ... (and are) counter productive' (38).

Ikem also lives what he preaches; modesty. A decrepit car is all he can afford. His girlfriend is even an uneducated illiterate fish seller. While this might all seem pretentious, it only further shows his earthiness, at least to Beatrice who thinks this an admirable trait in him.

It is not surprising that of the three friends Ikem is the first to be the victim of political disease soon to ravage the country. It is even less surprising that at the end of the novel the three friends fall victim to the corruption, violence and unpredictable end that often attends living dangerously in an African state.

That Beatrice Okoh has to contend with such strong male characters is not actually as significant as that her feminine voice manifests so strongly amidst the masculine perceptions that strive to overwhelm her minority opinion. Unlike her gender predecessors in previous novels of Achebe, she exhibits feminist values, not just in her relationship with Chris, but also with Ikem who she succeeds in transforming his political ideology to incorporate women as significant partners in any transformational drive.

In virtually all ramifications she cannot be found inferior to the men. A first class graduate of English from a British university, she embodies the ideals of the modern woman. Individualistic but emotionally dependent, intellectually sound but nevertheless unegoistical and unassuming, she can as well be comfortable anywhere and compliant and amenable, that is, as long as her dignity as a person is respected.

Although her childhood was dominated by the presence of a domineering father, Beatrice grows up determined to carve a niche for herself in a masculine dominated world, and not fit in with the general feminine stereotype:

I was determined from the very beginning to put my career first and, if need be, last. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinistic bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was

anything like Women Lib ... There was enough male chauvinism in my father's house to last me seven reincarnations. (88)

Though Beatrice is a creation in a novel by a male writer, she somewhat becomes a precursor for a later generation of female feminist protagonists, like Enitan in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. This new female principle contrasts sharply with the female protagonists in Buchi Emecheta's novels who continually whine about patriarchal oppression. It also differs significantly from both Flora Nwapa's heroines who are content to attempt new projections of womanhood without confronting the system and Mariama Ba's Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* who is a rancorous but sedentary character. However, in the personality and authorial consideration of Beatrice Okoh, she assumes a more significant position. She serves as a narrative voice articulating and projecting the author's vision of the role of women in the society. This is where she differs from her whining predecessors. She not only affirms her individual identity at every opportunity, she also ensures that she is not 'stereotyped', coerced or exploited as a woman. Self-assured and confident, strengthened by these composite attitudes and determined not to be bogged down by 'a whole baggage of ... foolishness' (88), she becomes sensitive to all shades of gender tyranny and will not hesitate to tell off any man who attempts to disparage her femininity. Not even Sam, the president, is free from her determination never to let others demean her.

To achieve her aim, however, will not be a walk in the park for her. The Kagan society preserves and generally upholds its values and ethics in a bourgeoisie patriarchy. As is typical in most societies both genders assume strict conventional sex roles long entrenched in the cultural cosmology. To attempt to effect a general cultural change is a gargantuan task, even to a woman of Beatrice Okoh's education and determination. Hence, on realising that of the three friends Ikem is the political intellectual, she takes it upon herself to correct the deficiency in his political ideology. Through her words and actions, Ikem cannot but be convinced that women 'have enough brains' (65), and short of being 'their own worst enemy' (37), they actually have a more formidable foe in masculine oppression and objectivisation of women. As he explains it, her 'gift of insight' (96) helps to purge him of his 'unclear' and 'reactionary' convictions and he here traces the oppression of women to its origins:

The original oppression of Woman was based on crude denigration. She caused Man to fail. So she became a scapegoat ... a culprit richly deserving of whatever suffering Man chose thereafter to heap on her. That is Woman in the Book of

Genesis. Out here, our ancestors, without the benefit of hearing about the Old Testament, made the very same story only in local colour ... (in the New Testament) the idea came to Man to turn his spouse into the very Mother of God, to pick her up from under his foot where she'd been since Creation and carry her reverently to a nice, corner pedestal ... (where) she will be just as irrelevant to the practical decisions of running the world as she was in her bad old days. Meanwhile our ancestors out here, unaware of the New Testament, were working out ... a parallel subterfuge of their own. *Nneka*, they said. Mother is supreme ... Then, as the world crashes around Man's ears, Woman in her supremacy will descend and sweep the shards together. (97-98)

Although Ikem is not able to actually assign a particular productive role to women in his political revolutionary scheme, he does recognise the need for women to be integrated into the real dynamics of political and social reformation, a sort of reformist agenda that is gender inclusive.

However, while Beatrice provides the intellectual angle of the feminine personality, Elewa, Ikem's uneducated girlfriend and fish seller at Gelegele market, symbolises another aspect of the female personality and its relevance too. She represents the force of the market women which albeit illiterate but by sheer force of numbers could be a potent force if harnessed. That Elewa conceives a child for Ikem (a girl, too) and names her 'Amaechina' (may the path never close) foregrounds her importance, something which is denied the more educated and socially superior Beatrice.

That the two women are the only ones left (though with some male hangers-on) to continue with the struggle against oppression is significant in two ways. It shows that Chinua Achebe has come to realise the relevance of women in the society and their contributions to communal growth. It is also significant and ironical that after the murder of the three friends and the ensuing chaos, the women gather together when all (men) have failed.

Conclusion

The world foregrounded in *Things Fall Apart* does not favour the women. In the society the women not only play slavish subordinate roles, they are traumatised and harassed by the oppressiveness of the masculine world. Though there are no rigidly formalised precepts about social perceptions of women, the general view of femininity is that of dependence, sentimental affectation and general impotence. Hence, in the world of Umuofia of which Okonkwo symbolises the extreme of manhood, to call a man 'a woman' is the height of insult. It is an

insult that not only engenders unparalleled embarrassment in the victim, but an insult that also simultaneously foregrounds and underscores to those present, the victim's inadequacy, his underachieving life, his personal deficit, and his inability to come up to scratch and measure up to society's expectations of his masculinity. Therefore, when Okonkwo scurrilously attacks a kinsman by calling him 'a woman', it is not the veracity of the statement that is questioned by the others present but its contextual appropriateness. Everybody knows that what he says is true; and that is, in the Umuofia community, 'achievement is revered' (6).

This subordination of femininity, or the exaltation of masculinity, forms the actual lineament of Okonkwo's situation. An acute awareness of this obviously has as much bearing on his drive for communal relevance and marital success at home. His experience not only underscores the significance placed on economic affluence and acquisition of titles, it also accentuates one man's drive for social significance. It is apparent that his approach to masculinity is in the extreme, but, that he is able to acquire such fame and prestige in so short a time is creditable to his fulfilment of all the requisites of success and societal approbation.

But the female principle, secondary as it is in the world of the novel, it also appears to have been given a place in the community of Umuofia. According to Killam (1976), Okonkwo is the archetype of the male principle, while the earth goddess embodies the female principle of religion. Despite the obvious superiority of the male principle, Okonkwo, its epitome, recognises the complementarity offered by Chielo, a woman who as a priestess can ride rough shod over the male citizens. Expounding on the connection between the male and the female principles, Achebe (1975) writes that:

Ibo society has always been materialistic. This may sound strange because Ibo life had at the same time a strong spiritual dimension - controlled by gods, ancestors, personal spirits or chi and magic. Success of the culture (lies in) ... the balance between the two, the material and the spiritual.
(159)

Ultimately, as Christianity (which supports patriarchy) replaces the traditional religion (which gives women some form of power) and materialism symbolised by more mercantile interests are introduced, the female principle gradually loses its integrity. One only needs to compare the role played by the masks in *Things*

Fall Apart and *Arrow of God* to that of the masquerades in *A Man of the People* (Killam 1976). In the former, the masks played a central function in the communities' religio-cultural experience, while in the later, the role has become that of entertainers, a caricaturic spectacle that titillates and excites only children.

But, neither does the Umuofia society favour extremely masculine men, which is typified by Okonkwo. It is apparent that without the coming of the white men, his end would still have been tragic. As Ezeulu educates his fiery and belligerent son Obika in *Arrow of God*, 'we often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins of where a brave man used to live' (11). Unfortunately, this summarises Okonkwo's life.

Is Chinua Achebe a masculinist? (And, by masculinity is meant a person who champions the course of the male gender.) Most definitely not. His presentation of men and women in Igboland at the turn of the 19th century apparently reflects the reality as corroborated by this quotation from Basden (1983):

(Ibo) women have but few rights in any circumstances, and can only hold such property as their lords permit. There is no grumbling against their lot; they accept the situation as their grandmothers did before them and, taking affairs philosophically, they manage to live fairly contentedly. (88)

Neither is Chinua Achebe a 'womanist', as Bestman (2012) tries to portray him. It is possible for him to be neither a sexist nor a 'womanist', but a realist, which is what he evidently is, as the quotation above emphasizes. However, whichever way one looks at it, one will have to realise that Okonkwo, the macho protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, dies ignobly, despite his efforts to leave a legacy of success and achievement, all in the attempt to prove his masculinity. It is an ironic quirk of fate that his resolve not to die ignominiously like his father ends in failure. Just as he rejected his father's legacy of a life of pleasure, his son Nwoye also rejects his own legacy of bloodshed and violence. Quite obviously, the death of Okonkwo's father is less tragic than his own. Even in death he surpasses his father in his 'mythical' proportions.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, notwithstanding Chinua Achebe's bid to give the female principle a new *locus standi*, it is a gambit that nearly fails because of his failure to locate a particular role for women. At the end of the novel, the men (Sam, Ikem and Chris) are consumed by the patriarchal values they affirm.

Naturally the women are left to pick up the pieces. Beatrice and Elewa, though occupying a unique position among the female characters in Achebe's fiction, are nevertheless hemmed in by several factors, the least of which is not their inability to carve a niche for themselves in a patriarchy but the amalgam of forces that confront them.

If in the coup all the erstwhile male oppressors have been replaced with another set of possible oppressors who are all male, and Beatrice and Elewa are created such that they are sedentary characters with 'nothing' to contribute to the society, is this not a sort of continuation of the traditional role of women as backbenchers in the society? Ikem might have recognised the relevance of female support in every communal drive towards development, but, by not giving them clear-cut and definite roles to play, he actually reduces the significance and recognition he gives to them. To all intents and purposes they still remain spectators. Although for the first time in Chinua Achebe's fiction women play a major part in the lives of the central male characters, as individuals these women have no defining roles but as girlfriends (not even wives) and playmates serving as struts for possible male chauvinists. Though one could nevertheless give the author credit for 'elevating' the status of women in his work, no matter how little, one would still have to express the wish that African male writers could do better.

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